

UDC 811.111'243:371.3

Original scientific paper

Received on 31 October 2012

Accepted for publication on 9 May 2013

Developmental Dynamics in Acquiring Existential *there* in L2 English

Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović

Stela Letica Krevelj

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Zagreb

jmihalje@ffzg.hr

sletica2@ffzg.hr

Prompted by the lack of research into acquisition of existential *there* by young learners of L2 English, in the study described below we looked into how Croatian learners acquire this grammatical construction, which is very relevant both from the theoretical perspective and for pragmatic reasons. We addressed the issue from a longitudinal perspective and took into consideration some individual and contextual factors that we found relevant for understanding acquisition of existential *there*. The study was carried out as part of the Croatian national research project entitled *Acquisition of English as a foreign language from an early age: Analysis of learner language*. Our findings suggest that there are patterns that young learners display during mastering this important construction. It seems that these acquisitional patterns may develop in dynamic ways and are influenced by a number of factors (such as L1, amount of exposure to English). We conclude that it is not only very important to expose learners as early as possible to the pragmatic use of *there* construction that does not involve only the immediate context, but also to the function of bringing existence of something to mind, as both pragmatic functions share the same conceptual representation. The insights we obtained can be useful to curriculum and material designers, as well as practicing teachers.

Introduction

Existential *there*, as a construction which is used to express existence or non-existence of something, has been the focus of interest of quite a number of linguists, who have considered it from different perspectives (e.g. semantic, syntactic, pragmatic). In literature this construction is also referred to as expletive *there* (e.g., Praninskas, 1975), introductory *there* (e.g., Hornby, 1975) or a *dummy subject* (e.g., Huddleston & Pullam, 2002; Thorne, 2008), depending on the specific linguistic aspect researchers focus on. It is often contrasted with the locative adjunct, or deictic *there* (Breivik, 1990; Huddleston, 2008). Crystal (2004) points out that *there* construction puts to the fore the whole clause as carrying new information, not individual parts of it. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999) highlight the fact that existential *there* does not necessarily need

to be used only to explicitly point to the existence or non-existence of an item, but may serve the pragmatic function of bringing something to mind. Other pragmatic functions have been considered as well, such as focusing on the occurrence/non-occurrence of something, preparing for what is to appear next in the sentence, or enabling the listener/reader to anticipate a list of things following *there* construction. Greenbaum & Quirk (1990) stress, among other things, that existential *there* is usually unstressed, determines concord, and can carry out the subject function in tag questions or yes-no questions. It is also interesting to note that existential *there* frequently appears in studies on language transfer considered from the generative perspective (e.g., Escutia Lopez, 2012; Lozano, 2002). Investigations of *there* constructions with regards to the verbs used led to distinguishing constructions with simple verbs (e.g. be, exist, have, need) and those with complex verbs (e.g. seem to be, tend to be, used to be).

Although quite a number of studies have been carried out on existential *there* constructions, there is a conspicuous lack of research investigating its acquisition. In terms of L1 acquisition Johnson (2001) considered the constructional grounding relation between deictic and existential constructions, and suggested three stages through which acquisition of existential *there* takes place: it starts with deictic *there* being used initially as well as in the final position in the sentence, continues with the stage in which the function of *there* is not clear cut, and ends with production of utterances that give clear evidence of mastery of existential *there*. Some consider this finding as a possible guideline for how existential *there* should be taught to L2 English learners.

There has been little research into acquisition of existential *there* by L2 learners. What characterises the few existing studies is that acquisition of existential *there* is considered by comparing L2 learners with native speakers of English, and is based on language corpora as data sources. Research carried out with Norwegian learners of L2 English (Johansson & Lysvåg, 1987; Hasselgård, Johansson & Lysvåg, 1998) showed that these learners frequently confused *it* for *there* as a dummy subject, and this confusion was attributed to language transfer, i.e. to the fact that in the Norwegian language the same word (*det*) denoted both dummy subjects. Basing their study on native and non-native English corpora of written language, Palacio-Martínez & Martínez-Insua (2006) analysed *there* constructions from the perspective of university students of English whose L1 was Spanish. Their comparative analyses of existential *there* constructions focused on frequency, complexity, polarity and pragmatic aspects. Compared to native English speakers, these non-native speakers of English were found to use *there* constructions more frequently, and their use of non-minimal *there* construction as well as relative clauses as the post-verbal extension were also higher. Differences in concord between the two sets of speakers were found to be non-significant, just like differences in polarity. The authors explained their findings by referring to L1 transfer, and to the fact that it is possible that L2 speakers may have learned existential *there* construction as prefabricated or formulaic language, i.e. as fixed expressions. They also took into consideration that *there* construction is introduced to L2 learners very early in the teaching of

L2 English. Still, when discussing obvious difficulties in using the construction these researchers stressed that maybe it takes a long time for L2 learners to master them fully. It is highly important, they pointed out, that teachers should keep all these insights in mind so that their students could develop awareness of all the relevant aspects of existential *there* construction.

A review of literature reveals that there is practically no research into mastering existential *there* constructions by young L2 English learners. The same is true about using oral language as a data source. What is also missing is a longitudinal perspective in studying the acquisition of *there* constructions that would offer evidence of developmental stages that L2 learners go through. Our study is an attempt to obtain some insight into young L2 English learners' acquisition of this important and frequent construction. We believe that knowing about the processes that young learners go through while mastering *there* construction is very relevant both from the theoretical perspective and for pragmatic reasons. Early learning of L2 English has spread to practically all corners of the world, but not enough is known about appropriate approaches to teaching young learners (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). Basing teaching approaches on research-based evidence could contribute to turning early L2 learning into a more successful endeavour.

Context of the study

The study was carried out with L1 Croatian young learners of L2 English. The Croatian context is characterised by a long tradition of early learning of foreign languages. For decades the foreign language has been the compulsory part of the Croatian primary curriculum. The starting age used to be Grade 5, then Grade 4 to be lowered to Grade 1 in 2003. Although four foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian) were offered and their popularity kept changing over time, since recently the most popular language has been English. Currently, people in Croatia are exposed to English extensively through the media (e.g. TV programmes are not dubbed but are subtitled), and English expressions can be heard or seen (e.g. in shopping malls) on a daily basis. Many tourists and business people visit the country, thus many Croatian users of L2 English often have ample opportunity to use English.

The present study is part of the Croatian national research project entitled *Acquisition of English as a foreign language from an early age: Analysis of learner language*, and was sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport. Project investigations were carried out longitudinally and took place between 2007 and 2010. The overall aim of the project was to look into L2 English development of Croatian young learners taking into account their affective dispositions as well as a number of contextual aspects that can impact L2 development.

Research aims

Existential *there* construction is of particular interest in investigating Croatian young learners' development of L2 English. It is introduced very early, i.e. already

in the first year of learning, but young learners do not seem to find it easy to master it fast.

Given that Croatian is a language that makes no use of dummy subjects existential *there is /there are* do not have an equivalent form. The existential functions in Croatian are expressed with other verbs, of which most common are translation equivalents of verbs 'to be' and 'to have' (Kordić, 2002). Furthermore, English is a subject-prominent language while Croatian is a topic-prominent language. This difference is clearly related to the word order in existential sentences in Croatian and English. Corpus studies on the use of existential *there* by native speakers of English suggest that there is no clear preference for the position of adverbials in existential sentences (either clause-initial or final position) (Palacios-Martínez & Martínez-Insua, 2006), while in the Croatian language adverbials in existential sentences are more often placed in clause-initial than in final position (Kordić, 2002), showing native speakers' tendency to set the contextual situation before introducing the topic in the sentence.

In the present study we wished to answer the following research questions:

- Is there evidence of possible patterns in young learners' acquisition of *existential there* in L2 English?
- What may the patterns be related to?
- What may be the relevant teaching implications?

Methodology

The sample consisted of 10 fifth graders (age 10/11) who were in their second year of learning English when the project started. They were drawn from three primary schools, two located in a big city and one in a large town in Croatia. Their oral production in L2 English was measured during four years (in Grades 5, 6, 7 and 8). At the end of each school year they were administered an elicited oral production task. It involved picture description and an interview based on the topics related to the pictures.

Grade 5 task involved two pictures. The first one depicted a family house, and participants could see its different rooms with furniture and various objects (e.g. a computer, a TV set, a bath tub, a kitchen table, toys). In one room there was a boy playing a computer game, and in another a woman was sitting on the sofa and reading a book. The second picture showed a park where children and adults were walking, eating ice-cream and looking at animals (e.g. a lion, a giraffe, a bear). After describing the first picture participants were asked about where they lived, who with, what their place looked like, and what one could see there. After participants described the second picture they were asked about a park near where they lived, if and when they went to the park, and what the park looked like.

In Grade 6 the oral task also consisted of picture description and an interview related to the pictures. Four pictures used in the task depicted the same settings as the two pictures in Grade 5. However, they were more detailed in terms of the

number of objects and people depicted in them. The first two pictures depicted particular rooms in the house (living room and dining room) with various family members eating dinner, watching TV, taking a nap, and studying. The other two pictures, which introduced the topic of free time, showed people around a lake in the countryside fishing, walking, sitting on a bench, and a scene at a beach where people were sunbathing, swimming and enjoying their drinks. After describing the first two pictures the participants were asked about where they lived, who with, what their place looked like and about their eating habits. After participants described the pictures depicting the countryside and a beach they were asked about a park near where they lived, if and when they went to the park, what the park looked like, whether they went on holiday during summer, where and who with.

Grade 7 task required participants to look at a picture of a house that included four smaller pictures, each depicting a room in the house: the bathroom, the living room, a bedroom, and the hall. In each of the rooms there were one or two members of the family doing something. Participants were asked to describe everything they could see. This was followed by questions asking about whether participants would like to live in such a house, and what they liked or disliked about it. Participants were also required to describe their favourite room at home, and to say where they had their meals, who in the family cooked meals, and what they themselves were able to cook.

In Grade 8 participants were asked to describe a picture of a disorderly kitchen, in which the father was washing the dishes, the children were running around or playing, and the mother was outside hanging the washing. Then they were asked to compare that kitchen to their own at home, to say if they would like to have the kitchen like the one in the picture, and to describe their ideal kitchen.

Information about participants' affective dispositions to learning English and about characteristics of their out-of-school context was collected by means of an oral learner interview and parents questionnaire. These instruments were taken from the *Early Language Learning in Europe* (ELLiE) study (Enever, 2011). The learner interview elicited information about whether English was among participants' favourite school subjects, what their attitudes were to teaching and learning English, and how they perceived themselves as English language learners in comparison to their classmates. In terms of contextual information data were gathered about whether and how participants were exposed to English in the home, on their travels, and particularly during summer holidays.

Participants' proficiency level was determined on the bases of their performances on the oral tasks analysed in this paper and the written tasks administered at the end of each year.

Each time, participants were administered the oral tasks and the interview individually, in a separate room in their school. Their production (both picture descriptions and interviews) was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Parents questionnaires were filled in by parents at home.

The concordance feature of the *Antconc 3.2.1* program for Windows was used to capture all of the instances of *there* in the transcribed picture description tasks.

The concordance output was then subjected to qualitative analysis in order to isolate existential from deictic *there*. However, existential and deictic *there* used in clause initial position sometimes differ only in the amount of stress, so further distinction between the two was made through the evaluation of the audio recordings. All instances of *there* constructions were coded and grouped following linguistic categories established in studies to date and described in literature.

Findings

Group results

Table 1: Frequency of existential *there* construction in participants' oral production in each grade

| Participants | Grades | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Grade 5 | Grade 6 | Grade 7 | Grade 8 |
| Participant 1 | 2 | 4 | 11 | 3 |
| Participant 2 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| Participant 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| Participant 4 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| Participant 5 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| Participant 6 | 20 | 6 | 14 | 18 |
| Participant 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Participant 8 | 5 | 5 | 23 | 8 |
| Participant 9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Participant 10 | 2 | 4 | 11 | 5 |
| Total number of occurrences | 30 | 31 | 68 | 48 |

The occurrences listed in Table 1 refer only to the *list* function of existential *there* as no other pragmatic functions of this construction were observed in the corpus. This is not surprising for two reasons. The first reason is that the oral production analysed was elicited by means of the picture description type of task in which *list there* is a commonly used structure in English, and the other reason is that up to a certain grade level no other pragmatic functions of the structure had been introduced through participants formal instruction in the English language.

Participants in this study were introduced to existential *there* in their first year of learning English, which was Grade 4. *There is/there are* were introduced as expressions used to list things that children could see in the classroom, house, park etc.

As can be seen from Table 1, from grade to grade progressively more and more participants used existential *there*: while in Grade 5 only 5 participants made use of *there is/there are* in their descriptions, in Grade 6 the number of

such participants increased to 7, and to 8 in Grades 7 and 8. This suggests that existential *there* use increased with proficiency. A high variability, however, characterised the frequency of use of existential *there* in participants' oral production over the four years. The frequencies ranged from 0 to as many as 23 per production of individual participants. One learner (Participant 7) never used existential *there*, while some used 20 or more (Participants 6 and 8). With four participants (Participants 1, 2, 8 and 10) the frequency was highest in Grade 7, three (Participants 3, 4 and 9) produced most of their existential *there* constructions in Grade 8, two (Participants 6 and 9) displayed the highest frequency in Grade 5 (for Participant 1, though, the occurrence was the same in Grade 5 and Grade 8). At the whole group level the highest number of *there* constructions was found in Grade 7, followed by the frequency in Grade 8, while in Grades 5 and 6 the frequencies were lower and almost the same (30 and 31, respectively).

As already pointed out, in participants' L1 (Croatian) existential *there is/there are* do not have an equivalent form. Hence, in order to introduce the existence of something, participants often resorted to the use of verbs 'to have' and 'to be' which are the translation equivalents of forms used to express existential meanings in Croatian. Also, certain amount of individual variability in the frequency of *there* constructions can be accounted for by the use of other forms such as *I can see*, and *I can recognize*. Additionally, in the final year some participants became sensitive to the forms used as prompts by the interviewer, and used *there is/are* and *I can see/recognize* forms interchangeably.

In terms of polarity, quantitative data showed clear preference for positive *there* constructions, which was expected due to the type of task, but there were a few examples of negative *there* constructions as well. Mistakes in concord were often observed. They were mostly found in examples with uncountable nouns as the notional subject, but also in other examples, which may suggest that the structure was sometimes used as a prefabricated chunk.

These quantitative data suggest that existential *there is* a construction that takes time to be internalized both in terms of its pragmatic list function, and the subject-verb agreement concord it requires once used in a sentence.

A more comprehensive and in-depth view of the use of *there* constructions by our participants is offered below. Qualitative analyses that follow will be based on data of three selected participants' oral production and a number of relevant individual and contextual variables that may help explain their performances.

We believe that a detailed analysis of *there* constructions used in terms of their complexity, polarity, concord, and function would contribute to our understanding of the developmental dynamics of acquisition of existential *there* by younger EFL learners.

Three case studies

We have selected three participants whose use of *there* constructions differed from each other and, from a developmental perspective, displayed interesting variability.

Participant 1

Individual learner characteristics and contextual information

Participant 1 was a female learner with an average level of proficiency compared to her peers. She liked English during all the four years but often preferred other subjects: maths in Grade 5, chemistry and physics in Grade 6, and biology and chemistry in Grade 8. She explicitly listed English as a favourite subject in Grade 6, but that year she claimed that she liked practically all school subjects. In contrast to many of her peers, she regularly expressed her preferences for classroom activities in terms of the learning element they contained. She preferred classroom formats that implied a possibility for cooperation among learners: in her opinion it meant being able to communicate in English with peers as well as helping each other with English. Her self-concept was generally positive. Up to Grade 8 she perceived herself to be better than others in class: she claimed she understood new things faster than her classmates. In Grade 8 she said she was just as good as most of the others and better than some, who sometimes asked her for help with difficult tasks. Participant 1 had high family support for her learning of English: her parents were happy with her progress and her sister helped her when necessary up to Grade 8, when the participant claimed she did not need help any more. She had access to English DVD learning materials, a dictionary, films and other programmes in English, the Internet, and increasingly used all of these over the four years.

From the oral task in Grade 5 it was clear that the participant struggled with picture descriptions as she simply listed the people and objects she could name, providing little coherent speech. However, her competence improved already in Grade 6, and further progress by Grade 8 is more than obvious. She showed progress both in terms of vocabulary and syntactic complexity. In written tasks in Grades 6, 7, and 8 she offered coherent pieces of writing which mostly reflected morpho-syntactic errors typical of the proficiency level and her performance was judged as average when compared to her peers.

Analysis of Participant 1 oral production

In Grade 5 the participant showed a great variability in the ways she tried to talk about the existence of the objects she could name in the picture description task. Even though she used the existential *there* construction twice, there was substantial evidence that she was not confident about introducing the objects using *there* construction. She used *it* as a dummy subject ('*it's two trees*'), and the personal pronoun *they* ('*they are one family there*') instead of *there* in clause-initial position. Whenever she used the adverbial in the clause-initial position *there is/are* construction was omitted. The two occurrences of *there* constructions were used in clause-initial position, and both were followed by plural form of 'to be' ('**There are many peoples**'; '**There are things in the kitchen**'). While it is not possible to claim that *there are* form was used as a chunk, the following observation may point to that possibility: the same notional subject used in *there are* construction ('*peoples*') was later preceded by the singular form of 'to be' in the example where *there* construction was omitted ('*In the one picture is three peoples*').

In Grade 6 *there* construction was used four times. Again, those were examples of list *there* used exclusively in clause-initial position, and the same tendency to omit *there* construction in adverbial-initial position was noticed as well. Also the tendency to introduce the existential sentence with the personal pronoun *they* was found, but this time the sentence was rephrased ('*they are... two buildings are there*'). The obvious difference in the use of *there* construction in Grade 6 compared to one in Grade 5 is that it was always followed by singular form of 'to be' even when it required the plural form ('*there's one picture*'; '*there's two bottles*'). There is evidence that in SVO sentences in this task production Participant 1 had no problem with the concord between the subject and verb 'to be'.

In Grade 7 Participant 1 used *there* constructions more extensively. The most obvious difference from earlier production is that there was concord between *there is* and *there are* forms and the notional subject. The only example of non-concord seems to be the result of L1 influence: the notional subject was a plurale tantum noun in the participant's L1 and required a verb in plural ('*There are a door*'). Additionally, one example of negative *there* construction was found in Grade 7 ('*There isn't any mess*').

No differences in Grade 8 were found in terms of the pattern of use of *there* construction. Only three occurrences of list *there* construction were observed, and in two of these there was no concord between the verb and notional subject ('*there are a lot of stuff*'). In the first example the non-concord may have been the result of L1 influence: the notional subject is an uncountable noun in English and a countable noun in the Croatian language. In the second example, where the participant clearly had the intention of mentioning other objects found in the kitchen, it is obvious that she was not aware that in *there* constructions, when introducing several notional subjects within the same clause, only the first notional subject agrees with the verb followed by *there* construction.

In conclusion we could say that *there is/are* form had been used by Participant 1 as chunks until Grade 7 when concord with *there* constructions was found. Throughout the four tasks, only list *there* constructions were used and exclusively in clause-initial position, while always omitted when an adverbial was in clause-initial position.

Participant 3

Individual learner characteristics and contextual information

Participant 3 was a male learner with a proficiency level lower than most of his peers. He never listed English among favourite subjects and on occasions even explicitly said he did not like it because he kept getting low grades (Grade 7), or because he did not feel like studying it (Grade 8). In Grades 5 and 6 the classroom activities he claimed he liked implied playing and singing, and it was only from Grade 7 on that he listed activities that had an explicit learning element (e.g. learning new words, reading). He insisted on the value of being able to speak English ('*More new words, more speaking*'). He disliked tests in English and, by Grade 8, writing became a disliked activity too. This participant

preferred group work as a classroom teaching arrangement: in his opinion, it allowed good opportunity for speaking English, and better students could help less good students. Parents supported the participant's learning of English. In Grade 5 his sister helped him with English, but he claimed he did not need any more help from Grade 6 on. At home he had a picture dictionary, several books in English, as well as access to the Internet. He listened to music in English (rap songs in Grade 8) on a daily basis, played computer games and read cartoon strips in English. Like his classmates Participant 3 could speak English to a foreign girl (a native speaker of English) who attended the same class. His first out-of-school use of English, in Grade 6, made him feel embarrassed because he could not speak fluently. This changed in Grade 7, when he reported feeling nice, and in Grade 8, when he felt 'normal'.

Participant 3 did not entertain a very positive self-concept as a learner of English over the four years. In Grade 5 he thought he was worse than his classmates, while in Grade 6 he claimed he was worse than only some of his classmates. In Grade 7 he reported that he was less good than others because he was not attentive enough during English classes. In Grade 8 he claimed he learned English the same as others and could even outperform them if he started studying seriously: but he did not feel like studying English, he was more interested in other curricular areas.

From the oral task in Grade 5 it was clear that the participant was confident in describing actions depicted in the task and the syntactic structures he used were appropriate but not always correct. Even though his production in terms of competence was similar to performance of his peers, and expected at this proficiency level, his performance in Grades 6, 7, and 8 did not show great progress neither in terms of vocabulary richness nor syntactic complexity. He consistently used the same syntactic structures to describe the pictures and named almost the same objects across all four tasks. Based on the performance on the written tasks in Grades 6, 7, and 8, the participant was also assessed as having overall lower proficiency when compared to his peers. He seemed to be able to produce most of the vocabulary required by the task, but he struggled with the use of different tenses both in terms of their form and function.

Analysis of Participant 3 oral production

In Grades 5 and 6 there were no occurrences of existential *there* in the participant's production. In order to introduce the objects visible in the picture the participant used only declarative sentences such as '*people are, err, in a shower*'; '*she's baby*', and in Grade 6 we also found one example of *I can see* form. To the interviewer's question about the park prompted by *there* construction ('*Is there any grass there*') the participant expressed the existence with the verb 'to have' ('*I think I have a grass*'), which is a translation equivalent of the form used in the Croatian language.

In Grade 7 an example of an attempt to use *there* construction was found, which was abandoned and a declarative sentence was used instead ('*there is ...one*

man is sitting and reading a newspaper'). The existence of objects in the pictures was once again introduced using the verb 'to have' ('*living room have a TV*') but most often with *I see* form after which he simply listed all the things he could name. The only *there* construction used was a deictic *there* ('*because there is a computer*').

The use of *there* constructions was found in Grade 8. He used existential *there* on five occasions and they were all in clause-initial position and all followed by singular form of the verb 'to be'. The wrong concord in the examples with *there* constructions, as opposed to other SVO constructions with the verb 'to be', may suggest that *there is/s a* was used as a chunk ('**there is** a kids'; '**there's** a one child')

In conclusion, up to Grade 8 the participant showed clear influence of L1 transfer in terms of forms he used to express the existence of something in the tasks. He used *there* construction only in grade 8 and there are reasons to believe that it was used as a chunk; it was always used in clause-initial position followed by a singular form of verb 'to be'.

Participant 6

Individual learner characteristics and contextual information

Participant 6 was a male learner with a proficiency level much higher than most of his peers. Participant 6 never included English among favourite subjects: he claimed he was bored during his English classes because his level of knowledge was much higher than anyone else's and he kept getting all As. The subjects he liked best included classical languages (Latin and Greek) and history. In Grade 7 he reported liking Croatian classes but stressed that he disliked grammar. He entertained the same negative attitudes to learning grammar in English: he found grammar learning boring. His favourite activities in his English classes included reading interesting stories and cartoon strips from the textbook they used. What he disliked was that the material they covered was too simple for him, his sixth grade teacher's English was not too good, and from Grade 7 on his class was rather unruly and not much English was learned. He believed English could best be learned in a classroom where it was quiet enough to concentrate and where interaction among learners was possible. In Grades 5 and 6 he got help from his father, but from Grade 7 on he did not ask for help or discuss his progress in English with family members. Everyone in his family could speak English well, even his grandparents. His father had a whole library of science fiction books at home and Participant 6 sometimes read some. His exposure to English also came from watching programmes in English, listening to music and using the Internet. His experience with using English with foreigners was extensive and he felt good communicating with them.

This participant kept a highly positive self-concept over the four years: each year he claimed that he was better in English than his classmates.

His production on both oral and written tasks throughout the four years showed high levels of competence which clearly exceeded the one of his peers. In the oral tasks his production was fluent, correct and picture descriptions were

rich in details from the start (Grade 5) but became even richer by Grade 8. From the additional questions asked by the interviewer after the picture description task it was obvious that he was able to carry even more complex conversation and that his proficiency exceeded the one required by the task.

The participant's written production was equally successful. It contained only some minor spelling mistakes and errors in sequence of tenses in Grades 7 and 8.

Analysis of Participant 6 oral production

This is the participant who had the greatest number of occurrences of *there is/are* throughout the four years, and the only participant who extensively used *there is/are* form already in Grade 5. Even though he continued using the forms through Grade 8, contrary to our expectations in terms of dynamics of occurrence and tendency found across the ten participants in the study, the number of occurrences of the form in his production decreased compared to the number in Grade 5.

In Grade 5 the participant extensively used *there* construction to express existence of something in the pictures used in the task (*'There are cupboards'; 'There is a clock'*). We found one example of *there* construction which followed the adverbial clause (*'In the lake there are two people in the canoe'*), but all other occurrences of *there* were in the clause-initial position while the adverbials, when introduced, were placed in the clause-final position. Additionally, we found two examples of *there* constructions with post-verbal extension (*'there's a person having a shower'; 'there's a guy having a bath in the bath tub'*). Another example in which the participant used both existential and deictic *there* in the same clause can be taken as evidence that the participant was able to differentiate between the two functions of *there* constructions (*'there's another house there'*). Overall, all the occurrences found were positive *there* constructions and were used correctly in terms of concord between the verb and the notional subject in the sentence.

From the frequency of occurrence of *there* constructions displayed in Table 1 it is clear that the participant used the construction less frequently in Grade 6. However, in terms of the characteristics of use of the construction in Grade 5 we found no differences in Grade 6. The only noticeable difference was that the participant sometimes used *there* construction after the adverbial in the clause-initial position and sometimes did not (*'on this picture there is a river and a bridge'; 'on this picture Ø one person is sleeping in the couch'*).

The difference in the frequencies of occurrence of *there* constructions in Grades 5 and 6 could be explained by the fact that the additional prompts made by the interviewer during the task were more geared towards the activity depicted in the pictures as it was obvious that the participant's proficiency in Grade 6 exceeded the one necessary to describe the picture in the task. However, interestingly enough, when introducing people in the pictures the participant did not use *there* constructions, but he used them whenever he tried to introduce the objects visible in the picture (*'on this picture there is a river and a bridge, and two people... holding hands. Then, these two people fishing. There's a plane, a cloud, two birds, a house on a hill and some trees'*).

Given that in Grade 5 the participant was introducing both animate and inanimate objects in the picture using *there* construction (*'there are cupboards'*; *'there's a person having a shower'*) we may assume that the above pattern may just reflect the participant's focus on the activities performed by the people in the pictures where people, as opposed to other objects, were treated as determinate.

In Grade 7 besides extensive use of list *there* construction introducing both animate and inanimate objects, the participant used additionally the *I can see* form and the verb 'to have'. While the form 'I can see' was used only once as a response to the interviewer's question (*'What can you see?'*), the 'to have' form was used on a few occasions and along with *there* form within the same picture description (*'It [bathroom] has a toilet, a sink, a bathtub... '... 'On the sink there are two toothbrushes.'*). Furthermore, in Grade 7 we found an example of a wrong concord between the verb and notional subject in the case where the notional subject was an uncountable noun (*'in the cupboard there are some medicine'*).

In Grade 8 the participant used *there* construction extensively, and no 'to have' forms were found. The only noticeable difference is in the more extensive use of *there* construction after the adverbial, even though both verb 'to be' and *there* constructions were found after the adverbial in clause-initial position. Again in Grade 8 we found examples of *there* constructions with post-verbal extension when referring to the people depicted in the picture description task (*'there's a girl trying to get on the top of the refrigerator'*). There were three instances of wrong concord (*'There's some glasses'*; *'There is three drawers'*; *'There's some plants'*) which were not found previously in this participant's production. Since *there* construction was used correctly in terms of concord of the verb 'to be' and notional subject in previous tasks, and in other examples within this task, this finding seems rather surprising. However, non-concord within *there* constructions, or more specifically, the use of singular verb with plural notional subject is possible in less formal English (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985), and seems to be relatively common in speech (Martínez Insúa, 2002). This may be a potential explanation for the participant's non-concord use of *there* constructions due to his extensive exposure to the English language through music and travel.

In conclusion, there is no obvious progress from Grade 5 to Grade 8 in terms of use of *there* constructions. Already in Grade 5 the participant used list *there* construction confidently and correctly, and only list function of *there* was used across the four years. However, with the increase in proficiency *there* forms were less often used exclusively in clause-initial position. In terms of complexity, only simple, and only positive *there* constructions were used, and those were always followed by the verb 'to be' in the present tense. Furthermore, incidental acquisition of English, which can be evidenced from the participant's use of colloquial English in both written and oral tasks, may have influenced the participant's tendency for non-concord use of *there* constructions in Grade 8.

Conclusion

Regarding our first research question, which concerns patterns in young learners' acquisition of *existential there* in L2 English, our findings suggest that there may indeed be some patterns that they go through on the way to mastering this important construction. It seems that first *there* construction may be used as a chunk, and only with the increase in proficiency it is fully internalized and incorporated in the sentence in terms of the subject-verb agreement it requires. Acquisition of subject-verb agreement in *there* constructions seems to lag behind the acquisition of concord in other SVO sentences.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the level of proficiency achieved the use of structure seems to be fossilized at the level of first pragmatic encounter.

As far as our second research question is concerned, it seems that acquisitional patterns may develop in dynamic ways influenced by a number of factors. The first obvious factor is the participants' L1. Looking at our data from a contrastive perspective, we may assume that the non-existence of dummy subjects in Croatian might have delayed the acquisition of *there* construction and its subject-verb agreement in the sentence, but our evidence also suggests that there is variability in how much time it may take young learners to master *there* construction completely.

Furthermore, in Croatian there is an already mentioned tendency to place the adverbials before the topic in the sentence, but *there* constructions were used by our participants exclusively in clause-initial position, whereby the adverbials were placed in clause-final position. However, we believe that such behaviour can be explained by both their tendency to use it as a chunk, determined by the context in which it was first introduced in the teaching materials, as well as the L1 influence. Even though in English *existential there* may be omitted when an adverbial is in clause-initial position it is interesting that *there* constructions were always omitted (except on two occasions by Participant 6) when the participants started the sentences with location adverbials. The translation equivalents of verbs used to express existential meaning in their L1 were used instead.

According to our qualitative data the length of time it takes to internalize *there* construction may be related to the amount of exposure to the structure that learners get through input. The motivation for learning English as a school subject did not seem to be the crucial factor in the acquisition of *there* constructions. Two of our participants reported low motivation for learning English at school, but one of them achieved the quickest mastery of *there* construction while the other showed incomplete acquisition of *there* construction. However, the degree of our participants' out-of-class exposure to the English language seems to be related to the level of mastery of *there* constructions.

In answer to our third question we would like to stress the need to make learners aware that *there* construction may be used in various rather than only in clause-initial position. Such awareness may accelerate the acquisition of *there* construction and help learners to pass the developmental stage in which *there* construction is used as a chunk. It seems that it is very important to expose

learners as early as possible to the pragmatic use of *there* construction that does not involve only the immediate context (such as picture description), but also to the function of bringing existence of something to mind, as both pragmatic functions share the same conceptual representation. Additionally, the same goal might be achieved through drawing explicitly on the existing knowledge of *list there* function when other functions of *there* constructions are encountered through input. The same suggestions may be useful for textbook writers and educators involved in English as a foreign language curriculum design.

References:

- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman.
- Breivik, L.E. (1990). *Existential there: A diachronic and synchronic study*. Studia Anglistica Norvegica. Bergen: Department of English, Bergen University.
- Crystal, D. (2004). *Making sense of grammar*. London: Pearson Longman.
- Escutia Lopez, M. (2012). Expletives and Unaccusative Predicates in L2A, *Higher Education of Social Science*, 2 (3), 1-14.
- Greenbaum, S. & Quirk, R. (1990). *A student's grammar of English language*. London: Longman.
- Hasselgård, H., Johansson, S. & Lysvåg, P. (1998). *English grammar: theory and use*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Hornby, S. (1975). *Guide to patterns and usage in English*. Oxford: OUP.
- Huddleston, R. (2008). *Introduction to the grammar of English*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Huddleston, R. & Pullam, G. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Johansson, S. & Lysvåg, P. (1987). *Understanding English grammar*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Johnson, C. (2001). Constructional grounding: on the relation between deictic and existential *there*-constructions in acquisition. In A. Cienki, B. Luka & M.B. Smith, M.B. (Eds.), *Conceptual and discourse factors in linguistic structure* (pp. 123-136). Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Kordić, S. (2002). *Riječi na granici punoznačnosti*. Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada.
- Lozano, C. (2002). Knowledge of expletive and pronominal subjects by learners of Spanish. *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics*, 135/36, 37-60.
- Martínez Insúa, A.E. (2002). On the Nature of the Verb in Present Day English (Existential) *There*-Constructions. Formal and Communicative Implications. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 15, 133-152.
- Nikolov, M. & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2011). All shades of every color: an overview of early teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31: 95-119.
- Palacios-Martínez, I. & Martínez-Insua, A. (2006). Connecting linguistic description and language teaching: native and learner use of existential *there*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(2), 213-231.

- Praninskas, J. (1975). *Rapid review of English Grammar*. London: Longman.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Thorne, S. (2008). *Mastering advanced English language*. Palgrave Macmillan.

DINAMIKA OVLADAVANJA STRUKTUROM *THERE IS/* *THERE ARE* U ENGLISKOME KAO INOME JEZIKU

Iako se gramatička struktura *there* u engleskom jeziku smatra iznimno važnom, vrlo je malo istraživanja dosad provedeno koja bi ponudila dublji uvid u proces njezina usvajanja. Nedostak takvih spoznaja posebno je uočljiv kad je riječ o usvajanju engleskog kao inog jezika kod mlađih učenika. U ovom smo radu pokušali ispitati usvajanje konstrukcije *there* kod hrvatske djece koja ovladavaju engleskim kao inim jezikom, a pritom smo u obzir uzeli relevantna osobna učenička obilježja i karakteristike konteksta u kojem su učili. Istraživanje je provedeno u sklopu nacionalnog znanstvenog projekta *Usvajanje engleskoga jezika u ranoj dobi: analiza učenikova međujezika*. Naši nalazi pokazuju da ovladavanje tom jezičnom strukturom karakterizira dinamični razvoj tijekom kojeg se izdvajaju utjecaji faktora poput J1 ili izloženost engleskom jeziku. Uvidi do kojih smo došli mogu biti korisni kreatorima nastavnih programa i materijala te nastavnicima praktičarima.

Key words: existential *there*, acquisition patterns, young learners of L2 English, longitudinal perspective

Ključne riječi: struktura *there is/there are*, obrasci ovladavanja jezikom, mlađi učenici engleskoga kao inoga jezika, longitudinalno istraživanje