

Use of *Be*-Forms as Topic Markers in Interlanguage

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This paper investigated the *be*-insertion phenomenon in L2 English. L2 learners often insert *be*-forms before thematic verbs, creating nontargetlike forms (e.g. *She is love ice-cream*). Based on L2 data from learners of topic-prominent L1s, a group of researchers have claimed that such *be*-forms are topic markers transferred from the L1s. As L1 transfer cannot be supported without comparing different L2 groups, however, this study examined the explanatory adequacy of the Topic Marker Hypothesis by comparing the Korean and Russian EFL learners at different proficiency levels. Their oral production and grammaticality judgment suggests that regardless of the L1, *be*-forms could mark topics in the early stages of interlanguage, supporting full access to UG. Due to L1 transfer, however, *be*-insertion by the Korean group was more relevant to topic marking while that of the Russian group was more relevant to encoding agreement. These findings show complicated interplay between L1 transfer and UG.

Key words: *be*-insertion, topic marker, L1 transfer, UG

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1. INTRODUCTION

In L2 production, a *be*-form is often inserted before a thematic verb, as if it were a particle or a clitic (e.g. She *is* love ice-cream). It is commonly attested in the early stage of L2 English by learners from diverse L1s, such as Arabic (Mourssi, 2013), Bantu languages (Suzman, 1999), Chinese (Yang, 2014), Hmong (Huebner, 1983), Japanese (Shibata, 2006), Korean (Ahn, 2003, 2006; Kim, 2011), Russian (Ionin & Wexler, 2002), Spanish (Fleta, 2003; Mayo et al., 2005), and Turkish (Haznedar, 2007). The nontargetlike structure is also highly frequent. Kim (2011) showed that in writings of Korean learners with low proficiency, 32% of the production contained *be*-insertion. In Fleta (2003), which reported individual variation in the use of *be*-insertion, the rate of *be*-insertion ranged from 6% to 23% in the oral production elicited from four Spanish-Catalan bilingual learners. These high frequency rates suggest that the phenomenon may be systematic and thus can reflect interlanguage grammar.

The nontargetlike grammar, however, does not seem to be stabilized permanently. In previous studies, most learners who produced *be*-insertion were beginners or intermediate learners, and cross-sectional studies have shown that the frequency of *be*-insertion decreases as group proficiency increases. Yang (2014) examined writings of a wide age-range of learners—from 5th graders in primary schools to university freshmen. The results showed that at the lowest proficiency level, *be*-forms were inserted before 10% of finite verbs, but the rates of *be*-insertion decreased to 6%, 2.7% and to 0.7% as proficiency increased. Similarly, in writings of Korean EFL learners in Kim (2011), the rate of *be*-insertion decreased from 32.8% to 0.9% as proficiency increased. Considering that the rates of *be*-insertion approximated 0% in the production of more advanced learners, it seems possible to unlearn the nontargetlike use of *be*-forms as learners are exposed to more L2 input.

The unlearning process of *be*-insertion, however, may not exhibit a linear developmental pattern. In a longitudinal study by Hahn (2000), *be*-insertion started to be used productively at one stage, but then the use became rare for a period of time and increased again greatly. The U-shaped development of *be*-insertion in early stages suggests that learners may modify their initial hypothesis concerning *be*-forms, but the reformulation is still target-deviant and needs further modification to completely match L2 input.

The common target-divergent use of *be*-forms in interlanguage might initially be ascribed to difficulty in analyzing them. In English, *be*-forms do not have a concrete content meaning and are used in various constructions as copulas and auxiliaries. Despite the complicated properties, *be*-forms are highly frequent in English. Thus, learners are pressured to analyze them from the early stage but unlikely to understand their constructions and grasp the features associated with them, several of which are strictly functional, such as tense (T) and agreement (AGR). As such, learners might fail to analyze *be*-forms in a targetlike way and use them for functions not available in the target language.

Concerning the nontargetlike function of *be*-forms in interlanguage, there have been two dominant hypotheses: The first suggests that *be*-forms are topic markers transferred from the L1 (Ahn, 2003, 2006; Huebner, 1983; Shibata, 2006; Shin, 2001, among others) and the second argues that they are tense/agreement morphemes (Fleta, 2003; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Mayo et al., 2005; Yang, 2014, among others). These hypotheses have been developed by examining different learner populations. Most of the data supporting the former are from learners whose L1 has morphemes dedicated to topic marking, such as Korean and Japanese. Those supporting the latter, on the other hand, are mainly from learners whose L1 has a rich inflectional paradigm, such as Russian and Spanish.

Without comparing the two populations at one time, however, it can be difficult to evaluate the explanatory adequacy of these hypotheses. In particular, in order to support L1 transfer, as claimed in the Topic Marker Hypothesis, “inter-L1 differences” needs to be examined in addition to “intra-L1 group similarities and L1-interlanguage similarities” (Jarvis, 2000). Otherwise, it is uncertain whether any similarity between L1 and interlanguage should be explained by L1 transfer or L2 developmental properties.

As an initiative attempt to fill the gap, this study focused on the Topic Marker Hypothesis and compared production and grammaticality judgments of *be*-insertion by Korean and Russian EFL learners. According to the Topic Marker Hypothesis claimed in previous studies, only the performances of the Korean group should be affected by topicality of the phrases preceding *be*-insertion as only these learners can relate *be*-forms to topic markers in the L1. Contrary to the prediction, however, the results of both L2 groups suggested that *be*-forms could function as topic markers in interlanguage, especially at early stages, but the extent to which *be*-forms were associated with topic marking differed between groups. These findings call for a revision from previous research, suggesting that the source of the L2 phenomenon may not be either L1 transfer or UG but both.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Huebner (1983), *be*-forms inserted before thematic verbs have often been regarded as topic markers transferred from the L1 (Ahn, 2003, 2006; Shin, 2001, among many others). As subjects are often topics at the same time, researchers supporting the Topic Marker Hypothesis claim that L2 learners can confuse subjects and topics and misanalyze *be*-forms that follow subjects as topic markers that follow topics. According to this view, as topics are not limited to subjects, *be*-insertion should be allowed after a wider range of phrases, given that they are topics.

Supporting the idea, Shibata (2006), who analyzed writings of Japanese university students found several cases of *be*-insertion after nonsubject topics, as in (1). In these

sentences, both *Nago* and *that* are not subjects but topics and *be*-forms are inserted after them as if they mark the preceding topics.

- (1) a. Nago is still Typhoon stay ...
 b. That is my mother made. (Shibata, 2006)

In addition, the inserted *be*-forms often link topic phrases and clauses, as in (2-3). The initial phrases, *Today* and *She* are topics rather than subjects as they are not governed by the thematic verbs *come* and *went*, respectively. The rest of the sentences after these topics and *be*-forms, on the other hand, are complete clauses and contain information about the topics, e.g. *my friend come from Kobe*; *everything went well*.

- (2) Today is my friend come from Kobe.
 (3) She was everything went well while. (Shibata, 2006)

These sentences can be analyzed as a topic-comment structure, the most unmarked structure in topic prominent languages. They become more targetlike if an English topic-marking expression ‘as for XP’ takes the place of the topics and *be*-forms, as in (4-5).

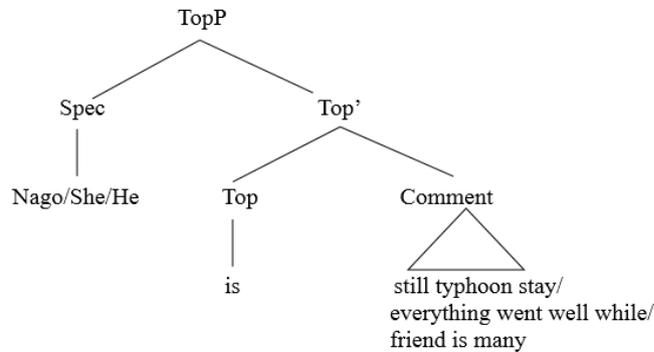
- (4) As for today, my friend come from Kobe.
 (5) As for her, everything went well ...

Similar sentences have also been attested in L2 data from Korean learners. In Shin (2001), double insertion of *be*-forms, as in (6), was used in 38.28% of the total production by the beginner group. In Kim (2011), the ‘topic-*be*-overt/covert thematic subject-V’ structure, as in (7), was used in 8.1% of the production at the lowest level. As the initial phrases *He* and *Japan* are topics and the clauses following *be*-forms are their comments, these sentences can also become more targetlike by substituting the topics and *be*-forms with the topic marking expression ‘as for XP’.

- (6) He is friend is many.
 (7) Japan is (I) went.

The underlying representation of these topic-comment sentences with *be*-insertion can be represented as in (8). In the structure, topics are in [Spec, TopP] position, and a *be*-form is generated in the head of the TopP, checking the [+topic] feature. The comment is linked with this *be*-form and it can be a clause or a phrase as long as it contains information about the topic.

(8)



According to the Topic Marker Hypothesis, which assumes that the source of the nontargetlike analysis is L1 transfer, this representation is available only to learners of certain L1s; only when there are dedicated topic morphemes in the L1, they can be transferred and mapped onto *be*-forms in interlanguage¹. In this regard, I will compare topicalization in English, Korean, and Russian and make predictions for the Korean and Russian groups.

Li and Thompson (1976) distinguished Topic-Prominent (TP) languages from Subject-Prominent (SP) languages. In TP languages, topicalization is more grammaticalized, as manifest by frequent use of topic-comment structures and more robust dropping of arguments based on the discourse. In SP languages, on the other hand, basic sentences are mainly affected by grammatical relations. This distinction seems to suggest that the degree of grammaticalization of topics corresponds to the degree of topic-prominence, but topic marking is not a phenomenon peculiar to topic-prominent languages. Gundel and Fretheim (2004) claimed that topic and focus are features universally encoded across languages although there are variations in the manner and extent to which they are linguistically encoded (e.g. through syntax, prosody, morphology, or combination of these).

In English, sentence stress is the only means that consistently encodes topics, particularly contrastive topics (Schmerling, 1975). According to Gundel (1978), primary sentence stress always falls on the focus, and sometimes, a secondary accent falls on a new or contrastive topic.

¹ The Topic Marker Hypothesis examined in this study is a version that relates the *be*-insertion phenomenon to L1 transfer based on the majority of previous studies that have supported this hypothesis (e.g. Ahn, 2006; Heubner, 1987; Shibata, 2006; Shin, 2001). Note, however, that there is an alternative view that regards the use as a universal L2 phenomenon, which I will discuss in Section 5.

In Russian, the most unmarked means to encode the topic-comment relation is scrambling. Phrases can be scrambled freely to represent topic-comment relations (Sekerina, 1997). Such scrambling is more robust and free compared to marked fronting of topics in English. Unlike in English, fronting of multiple phrases is allowed, as in (9). Scrambling is also common in embedded clauses, as in (10), and the fronting does not block *wh*-movement, as in (11).

- (9) Marshe₁ sobaku₂ Ivan podaril t₁ t₂.
 Masha.DAT dog.ACC Ivan.NOM gave as a present
 ‘It was to Masha that Ivan gave a dog.’
- (10) Ja znaju, to Mashe₁ sobaku₂ Ivan podaril t₁ t₂.
 I know that Masha.DAT dog.ACC Ivan.NOM gave as a present
 ‘I know that to Masha Ivan gave a dog.’
- (11) Sobaku₂ komu₁ Ivan podaril t₁ t₂?
 Dog.ACC who.DAT Ivan.NOM gave as a present
 ‘To whom did Ivan give a dog?’ (Sekerina, 1997)

In Korean, on the other hand, topics are commonly marked by adding the topic marker *-nun* (or its allomorph *-un*). In the topic-comment structure in (12), the topic phrase *inshaeki* ‘printer’ is linked with a comment clause. The topic is followed by the topic marker *-nun*, while the nontopic subject *hankuk saram* ‘Korean person’ in the comment is followed by the nominative case marker *-i*. As topics are not limited to subjects, the topic marker *-nun* can also be attached to objects or PPs that are topics, as in (13) and (14), respectively.

- (12) Inshaeki -nun hankuk saram -i palmyonghaessta
 Printer-TOP Korean person-NOM invented
 ‘As for the printer, a Korean invented it.’ (Lee, 1999)
- (13) Suhak-un Jon-i calhanta.
 Math-TOP John-NOM do well
 ‘As for math, John is good at it’
- (14) Toyoil-ey-nun saram-i manhta.
 Saturday-TEMP-TOP people-NOM many
 ‘As for Saturday, there are a lot of people.’

According to the comparison, due to L1 transfer, Russian learners are likely to rely on scrambling to encode topic-comment relations in their L2 English. In other words, *be*-insertion by the Russian group should not be relevant to topic marking. In the framework of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2008), on the other hand, in Korean, the [+topic] feature is mapped onto the topic marker *-un/nun*. As Korean learners transfer the

L1 form-feature mapping to interlanguage, they may look for morphemes to associate with the [+topic] feature. One of the most accessible candidates in the target language might be *be*-forms because they are highly frequent while the meaning is opaque and there are also formal similarities between *be*-forms and the topic marker *-un/nun*. For example, an auxiliary-*be* can be used in a progressive clause, as in (16). The *be*-form is base-generated in V, taking the VP *reading a book* as its complement, and raises to I to check phi-features and tense.

(16) [_{IP} He'_i [_{VP} t_i [_{VP} reading a book]]].

For Korean learners, however, the phi-features encoded by the *be*-form are not salient information at first, as agreement is not explicitly instantiated in their L1. In addition, the verbal meaning comes from the non-finite thematic verb *reading* rather than the auxiliary-*be*. Thus, before acquiring the cues distinguishing finite and nonfinite verbs, they might analyze *reading* as a finite verb and the auxiliary-*be* as a nonverbal element. Then based on L2 input in which *be*-forms are contracted and thus are closer to subjects, they are likely to confuse subjects and topics and analyze *be*-forms as topic markers.

According to this view, Korean learners may analyze the underlying representation of the English sentence in (16) as in (17) based on the L1 syntactic representation in (18). In the interlanguage structure, the contracted *is* is analyzed as a topic marker base-generated in the head of the TopP and the topic subject raises to the [Spec, TopP] position.

(17) [_{TopP} He'_i's [_{IP} t_i, INFL [_{PredP} read(ing) a book]]]

(18) [_{TopP} Ku_i-nun [_{IP} t_i [_{PredP} chayk-ul po]-n-ta]]].

He-TOP book-ACC read-PRES-Decl

To summarize, the Topic Marker Hypothesis claims that learners from topic-marking L1s analyze *be*-forms, whose functions in the target language are difficult to grasp, as topic markers transferred from the L1. Supporting the claim, in L2 data from Korean and Japanese learners (e.g., Shin, 2001; Shibata, 2006), *be*-forms are often inserted after topic nonsubjects and they can sometimes link topics and their sentential comments. Under this view, comparison of topicalization in English, Russian, and Korean suggests that Russian learners should not relate *be*-forms to topic marking as they might rely on scrambling rather than morphemes to encode topic-comment relations. Korean learners, on the other hand, are highly likely to map *be*-forms onto the topic marker *-un/nun* in the L1 as their verbal properties are not so salient while the sentences in which they are used can be analyzed as topic-comment structures containing topic markers, as in the L1.

3. METHOD

This study forms a part of a bigger project which aims to examine two main hypotheses concerning functions of *be*-insertion in previous research: the Topic Marker Hypothesis and the Tense/Agreement Morpheme Hypothesis. In the project, an oral elicited production task and an aural acceptability judgment task (AJT) were used to test whether *be*-forms could mark topics or encode tense/agreement. As this study focuses only on the Topic Marker Hypothesis, however, only the items relevant to topic marking will be presented in this paper.

3.1. Participants

As L2 groups, 46 Korean and 45 Russian EFL learners participated in this study. Among them, 4 Korean and 10 Russian participants partially completed the tasks, leaving some parts unfinished. Their results, however, were not excluded in order to increase the confidence of statistical estimates with a larger sample size (Maas & Hox, 2005). None of them had lived in English-speaking countries longer than 3 months. A third of the Korean learners were working in a workplace where English was not necessary after graduating from their universities, and the other Koreans were undergraduate students in two national universities in Gyeongsang province in South Korea. Among the Russian learners, on the other hand, 11% were working after graduating from universities, and the rest of them were undergraduate students in two universities in the Ural region in Russia.

In a C-test, the Korean group scored 11.6 and the Russian group scored 11 on average out of 50. Based on questionnaire responses and C-test scores, their proficiency is estimated as beginners to low-intermediate, but as the proficiency test was not standardized, it might be difficult to precisely compare these groups with L2 groups in other studies. For supplementary analyses of the AJT results, the L2 groups were also subdivided into three proficiency levels. The cut-scores for Level 2 and Level 3 were 7 and 20 out of 50, respectively. These cut-scores allowed more statistical models to be run on the data. Table 1 summarizes the information about L2 groups.

TABLE 1
L2 Participants: Total Number, C-Test Score, and Age

	Production		Acceptability Judgment Task							
	KR	RS	KR				RS			
			Lev1	Lev2	Lev3	Total	Lev1	Lev2	Lev3	Total
Number	46	41	15	20	7	42	17	13	9	39
<i>M</i> C-test score (s.d.)	12.7 (7.8)	13 (12.4)	3.1 (1.9)	12.7 (4.1)	24.3 (3.4)	11.4 (7.9)	1.8 (2.0)	13.1 (4.3)	30.2 (8.5)	13.2 (13)
<i>M</i> age	25.9	18.5	24.8				18.9			

Note. KR = Korean; RS = Russian; *M* = mean; s.d. = standard deviation; Lev = level

The one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) that compared the C-test scores of the L2 groups showed that the scores did not differ significantly according to the L1. A two-way ANOVA was also performed on the C-test scores of the learners who completed the AJT in order to examine the effects of L1 and proficiency level. A simple main effect analysis showed that the C-test scores differed significantly across levels ($F(2, 80) = 178.910, p = .0001$). A post-hoc Tukey test showed that Level 2 scored significantly higher than Level 1, but significantly lower than Level 3. There was, however, also a significant interaction of L1*Proficiency on the C-test scores ($F(2, 80) = 3.75, p = .028$). While the two L2 groups were comparable at Levels 1 and 2, at Level 3, Russian group scored significantly higher than the Korean group. This result suggests that any differences between Level 3 groups should be ascribed to differences in either L1 or proficiency, or a combination of both factors.

In addition to the L2 groups, 14 native speakers of English participated in this study as a control group. They were American undergraduate students, born and raised in the United States. None of them had learned Russian, Korean, or other topic-prominent languages. On the C-test, they scored 47.7 out of 50 on average (range, 44-50).

3.2. Procedure

Using Qualtrics, a software for online surveys, participants completed a background questionnaire, a production task, an AJT, and a C-test. As the stimuli of the production task were less informative than those of the AJT, this sequence could minimize priming effect from the previous task. On average, each of the two nonexperimental tasks—a questionnaire and a C-test—took 10 minutes, and the production task and AJT took 30 minutes and 25 minutes, respectively. Including two other AJTs not reported in this study, all the experiments took 2 hours in total and each participant was compensated \$15 in their currency for their participation.

3.3. Tasks

Previous studies have mostly relied on free production despite several limitations. For example, participants can avoid target forms and thus, their lack of production cannot clearly show whether the form is disallowed or simply not preferred. Moreover, due to great flexibility in quantity and range of production across individuals, it is difficult to compare the results based on the same standards. To circumvent these problems, two relatively controlled tasks—an elicited production task and an aural AJT—were used in this study.

In the production task, there were 34 experimental items. Each item started with a table containing information about three characters and a written question asking for particular information from the table. These questions were in participants' L1s. To elicit intended

answers, the first parts of the answers were given and participants answered in full sentences. Then, by pressing a spacebar, they moved on to the next item. To minimize use of explicit knowledge, only 1 minute was given for each item and after the time, the screen automatically changed to the next item, which prevented participants from returning to previous items. Figure 1 presents a sample item.

FIGURE 1
Production: A Sample Item

(in L1) The table below shows the lunch menu Nick's family members usually have from Friday to Monday every week. Based on the information, answer the question in English.

(Korean Version) 다음은 닉(Nick)의 가족이 매주 금요일부터 월요일까지 먹는 점심 메뉴입니다. 질문에 영어로 답하세요.
(Russian Version) В таблице представлено меню на обед для семьи Ника на **каждую неделю** с пятницы по понедельник. Используя информацию в таблице, ответьте на вопрос на английском языке.

	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Nick	 Bananas	 Bread	 Pasta	 Steak
Nick's parents	 Bread	 Steak	 Sandwiches	 Apples

Q (in L1): Do you think anyone in the family cooks every Monday? Why do you think so?
(Korean Version) 이 가족 중 매주 월요일에 요리를 하는 사람이 있나요? 왜 그렇게 생각하나요?
(Russian Version) Вы думаете эта семья готовит по понедельникам? Почему Вы так думаете?

A: [I think so/ I don't think so] because _____
(Intended A: Nick eats steak on Mondays. (To eat steak, you have to cook it.))

With such tables (numbered 1 to 12) and questions, three types of answers were elicited: those starting with 1) nontopic subjects, 2) topic subjects, and 3) topic objects, respectively. Among the answers, those starting with topic phrases were conjoined sentences. The preceding questions asked two pieces of information and yielded contrastive topics in the answers. The conjoined sentences could prevent topics from being dropped although they might be traceable in the context.

Topicality of the initial phrases was defined based on their givenness feature as in Krifka (2008): "A feature X of an expression α is a Givenness feature iff X indicates whether the denotation of α is present in the CG [common ground] or not, and/or indicates the degree to which it is present in the immediate CG." (p. 262). For example, in the Nontopic Subject item in (19), the question cannot bring the subject in the answer, *Alex*, to the common ground.

In the Topic items in (20-21), on the other hand, the questions ask for information about the initial phrases in the answers and bring them to the common ground.

(19) Nontopic Subject item

Q: Do you think the family's house is quiet every Thursday?

A: I don't think so, because _____.

(Intended A: Alex plays the drums on Thursdays)

(20) Topic Subject item

Q: What do Alex and his parents do every Sunday?

A: Alex _____, and his parents _____.

(Intended A: Alex plays the violin and his parents watch movies.)

(21) Topic Object item

Q: When does Alex play the piano and the drums?

A: The piano _____, and the drums _____.

(Intended A: The piano, he plays every Friday, and the drums, he plays every Thursday.)

If a participant completed the production task as intended, 12 Nontopic Subject clauses and 24 Topic Subject clauses (12 answers × 2 clauses) could be elicited from the tables numbered 1 to 12, and 20 Topic Object clauses (10 answers × 2 clauses) could be elicited from the tables numbered 1 to 10.

In the AJT, on the other hand, participants read a question for each item. By pressing a button, they listened to the answer and chose a response among three options: whether the answer was *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, or they could not decide. The option *cannot decide* was added to prevent participants from choosing random answers out of uncertainty. When the results were analyzed, the responses that chose *cannot decide* were excluded and the judgments were treated as a dichotomous/binary variable.

As experimental items, there were 24 Subject items and 8 PP items. The Subject items were in four types, contrasting in terms of subject topicality and presence/absence of *be*-insertion, as in (22). Similar to the operationalization of topicality in the production task, the topic/nontopic distinction in this AJT was also manipulated by preceding questions. As in the sample items below, Topic Subject questions asked for new information concerning the subjects of the answers, while Nontopic Subject questions did not, and thus, they were newly introduced in the answers.

(22) Topic Subject Q: What do your mom and dad do during the weekends?

Nontopic Subject Q: Why can't you sleep well at night?

A: (Because) My mom [is play/plays] the guitar and my dad [is sing/sings] songs.

The PP items were in two types, which contrasted in terms of presence/absence of *be*-insertion, as in (23). Topicality of PPs could not be manipulated as it is not common to place nontopic PPs in the clause-initial position and thus, all the PPs in the PP items had to be topics.

(23) PP Q: What do your brothers usually do in the living room, and in the yard?

A: In the living room [is/∅], they often watch a movie, and in the yard [is /∅], they usually play basketball.

With the two tasks, this study aims to answer two questions:

1. Do the Korean and Russian L2 groups mark topics with *be*-forms in production?
2. Do the Korean and Russian L2 groups accept *be*-forms when the use is compatible with topic marking?

The Topic Marker Hypothesis predicts that in the production task, only the Korean group should mark topics with *be*-forms. *Be*-insertion by the Korean group should be limited to topic subjects and topic objects. *Be*-insertion by the Russian group, on the other hand, should not be influenced by topicality of the preceding subjects and *be*-insertion should not be allowed after topic objects. In the AJT, the Korean group should accept *be*-insertion at a higher rate when the preceding subjects are topics than nontopics, and *be*-insertion should also be accepted after topic PPs. In contrast, the Russian group should either accept or reject *be*-insertion after subjects regardless of topicality of the subjects and reject *be*-insertion after topic PPs.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Production Task

None of the control group produced *be*-insertion in production, supporting the view that the structure is not allowed in the target language. The Korean group, on the other hand, inserted *be*-forms in 2.9% of the clauses containing active thematic verbs (52 out of 1,784 clauses) and the Russian inserted them in 1.2% of such clauses (23 out of 1,990 clauses). As the data were elicited from 46 Korean and 41 Russian learners, on average, each Korean learner produced *be*-insertion in 1.1 out of 38.8 clauses and each Russian learner produced it in 0.6 out of 48.5 clauses. The result of an independent samples t-test indicates that the Korean group produced *be*-insertion at a significantly higher rate than the Russian group ($p < .05$, $t = 4.53$).

As a first step to answer whether the L2 groups marked topics with *be*-forms or not, proportions of *be*-insertion were compared between Topic and Nontopic Subject answers. As Table 2 shows, according to the aggregated group results, the Korean group inserted *be*-forms in 4% of the Topic Subject answers, while they did so in only 1.8% of the Nontopic Subject answers. The odds ratio suggests that they were 2.2 times more likely to insert *be*-forms when the subjects were topics than nontopics. Proportions of *be*-insertion by the Russian group, on the other hand, did not differ greatly depending on whether the preceding subjects were topics or not.

TABLE 2
Production: Effect of Topicality in Subject Answers of L2 Groups

	Korean Group		Russian Group	
	Topic Subj	Nontopic Subj	Topic Subj	Nontopic Subj
<i>P of Be</i> -insertion	4% (41/1037)	1.8% (9/489)	1.4% (14/1012)	1.2% (5/424)
Odds Ratio (reference: topic S)	2.2 [(41*480)/(9*996)]		1.3 [(14*419)/(5*908)]	

When only the production of the learners who produced *be*-insertion was analyzed, however, *be*-insertion by both L2 groups seemed to be affected by subject topicality. As Table 3 shows, both Korean and Russian learners who produced *be*-insertion inserted *be*-forms at a higher rate when the subjects were topics than nontopics.

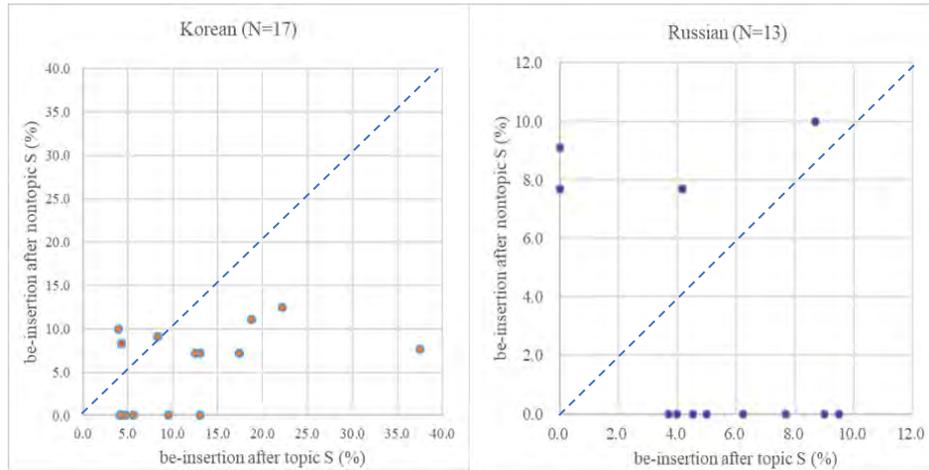
TABLE 3
Production: Effect of Topicality in Subject Answers of Learners Who Produced *Be*-insertion

	Korean Learners	Russian Learners
	Producing <i>Be</i> -insertion	Producing <i>Be</i> -insertion
After Topic Subjects	11.1%	4.7%
After Nontopic Subjects	4.7%	3.2%

Such concentration of *be*-insertion after topic subjects was also supported at the individual level. In Figure 2, each dot represents a learner who produced *be*-insertion. Those under a dashed reference line produced *be*-insertion at a higher rate after topic subjects than nontopic subjects, those above the line did the opposite, and those on the line produced *be*-insertion at the same rate after topic and nontopic subjects. The distance from the reference line represents the gap in proportion depending on subject topicality, but it should be noted that the distance should not be compared directly between groups as the axes range 0–40% in the Korean graph and 0–12% in the Russian graph. In both groups, a greater number of learners who produced *be*-insertion tended to concentrate *be*-insertion after topic subjects. This individual-level analysis also supports the view that *be*-insertion was more frequent after

topic subjects than nontopic subjects. At the same time, it is noteworthy that this trend was more evident in the production of the Korean group than that of the Russian group.

FIGURE 2
Production: Individual Variance of *Be*-Insertion in Topic/Nontopic Answers



In addition to the Subject answers, *be*-insertion in Topic Object answers was also analyzed. As *be*-forms preceding subjects may indicate that they are above the IP, *be*-insertion between topic objects and subjects can strongly support that the inserted *be*-forms are used as topic markers rather than inflectional morphemes. Contrary to the prediction for the Topic Marker Hypothesis, however, in the production data, there were only six instances of *be*-insertion after topic objects. The examples produced by a Korean participant and a Russian participant are presented in (24) and (25), respectively.

- (24) a. (Q in L1: When do Jane and Peter study history and languages?)
 A: History is every Tuesday they learn, and languages is Monday they learn.
 b. (Q in L1: When did Ben learn French and boxing last year?)
 A: Ben is learned French and boxing is last winter he's learn.
- (25) (Q in L1: When does Linda wear a sweater and jeans?)
 A: A sweater wear Sunday, jeans are wear Saturday

The low frequency of *be*-insertion after topic objects might be explained by a low number of object fronting in the elicited production. Table 4 shows types of answers elicited for the Topic Object items.

TABLE 4
Production: Types of Answers Elicited from Topic Object Items

	OSV	SVO	Passive	O-be-AP	No SV	Etc.	SUM
Korean	67 (7%)	121 (13%)	374 (42%)	109 (12%)	157 (17%)	70 (8%)	898 (100%)
Russian	172 (19%)	203 (23%)	278 (31%)	23 (3%)	44 (5%)	179 (20%)	896 (100%)
Control	0	136 (45%)	128 (43%)	0	36 (12%)	0	300 (100%)

Complete sentences with object fronting, which the Topic Object items intended to elicit, comprised only 7% of the Korean data and 19% of the Russian data, suggesting that participants were reluctant to break the canonical order. As the number of clauses with object fronting was low, *be*-insertion after topicalized objects could not be frequent, accordingly. Instead of object fronting, participants used alternative structures, as the examples below show.

(26) a. Given format

Q: When do Sara's brothers play tennis and ping pong?

A: Tennis _____, ping pong _____.

b. SVO word order: They play tennis on Sunday and (they) play ping pong on Friday.

c. Passives: Tennis is played on Sunday and ping pong is played on Friday.

d. O-be-AP: Tennis is every Sunday and ping pong is every Friday.

e. No SV (gapping): Tennis, every Sunday and ping pong, every Friday.

Interestingly, among the alternative structures, the 'O-*be*-AP' structure was used only by L2 groups, especially frequently by the Korean group. This result suggests that the structure might have a nontargetlike representation, underlyingly, although the superficial form may look targetlike.

The most unmarked answer in Korean to the Topic Object question in (26) is presented in (27). The topic marker *-un/nun* links topics and their comments, which are not necessarily verbal as the verbs can be elided. If this L1 structure had been transferred, the *be*-forms in the 'O-*be*-AP' structure may be used as topic markers linking topics and their comments in the interlanguage, as in (28). In an interview with a randomly chosen Korean participant, he confirmed that he used the *be*-forms linking objects and APs as the equivalents of the topic markers *-un/nun* in their L1.

(27) Tennis-nun hwayoil, boxing-un suyoil-ey (ha-e)yo.

-TOP Tuesday, -TOP Wednesday-at (do)-Decl.

'As for tennis, (they play) on Tuesdays, and as for boxing, (they play) on Wednesdays'

(28) Interlanguage: Topic – *be* – (nonverbal) Comment

Table 4 showed that the Korean group used the ‘O-*be*-XP’ structure in 12% of their Topic Object answers and the Russian group in 4% of their answers. Assuming that these ‘O-*be*-AP’ answers represent a topic-comment structure, these results support the claim that *be*-forms functioned as topic markers in the interlanguage of both L2 groups.

4.2. Acceptability Judgment Task

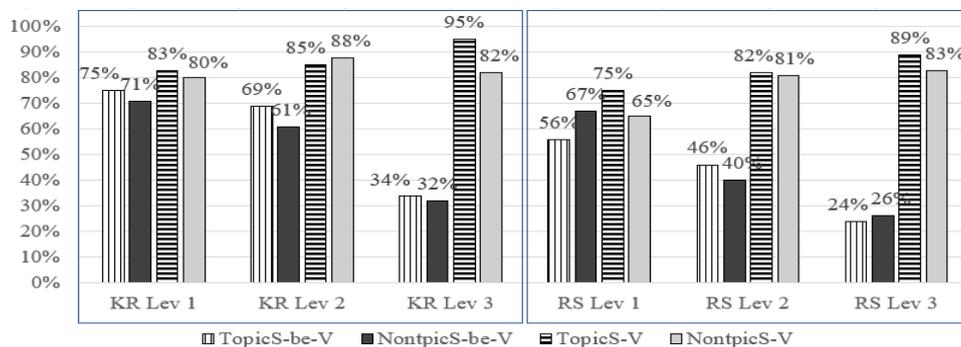
Ensuring task validity, the control group performed as expected in the Acceptability Judgment Task. As Table 5 shows, they almost categorically rejected *be*-insertion items and accepted their targetlike counterparts.

TABLE 5
Acceptability Judgement Task: Results of the Control Group

	Subject Items		PP Items
	Topic S	Nontopic S	
<i>Be</i> -insertion	0%	3.6%	3.7%
Targetlike	91.7%	92.9%	100%

L2 groups, on the other hand, could not distinguish *be*-insertion items from targetlike items, especially at lower levels. Figure 3 shows judgments of L2 groups for the Subject items. The Korean group accepted *be*-insertion items and targetlike items as similar rates at Levels 1 and 2, but they tended to reject *be*-insertion items at Level 3. The Russian group also did not distinguish *be*-insertion items from targetlike items at Level 1 but they tended to reject them at Levels 2 and 3. Among *be*-insertion items, only Korean and Russian Level 2 groups seemed to accept those with topic subjects at higher rates than those with nontopic subjects.

FIGURE 3
Acceptability Judgement Task: L2 Group Results of the Subject Items

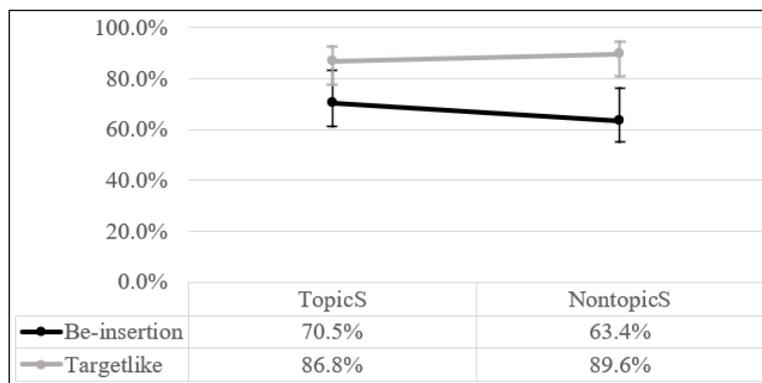


Note. KR = Korean; RS = Russian; Lev = level

To find out factors that significantly affected the dichotomous responses between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, a generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) for binary data in SPSS was used with fixed effects of Proficiency (c-test score), Topicality (topic subject, nontopic subject), and *Be*-insertion (*be*-insertion, targetlike), and random effects of Subject and Question number. Firstly, the model run on judgments of the Korean group returned a significant main effect of *Be*-insertion ($F(1,918) = 64.467; p = .0001$), indicating that their acceptance rates of *be*-insertion items were significantly lower than those of targetlike items. There was also a significant interaction of *Be*-insertion*Proficiency ($F(1,918) = 10.919; p = .0001$), which indicates that as proficiency increased, they could distinguish better the nontargetlike *be*-insertion items from their targetlike counterparts.

The interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion and the interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion*Proficiency, however, were not significant in the results of the Korean group. These results indicate that at any level, their acceptance rates of *be*-insertion were not affected by subject topicality. As Proficiency was converted into a categorical variable (Level 1, 2, 3), however, there was a notable interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion*Proficiency in the estimated means of the acceptance rates. If the 95% Confidential Intervals (CIs) of acceptance rates for two item types overlap, this indicates that the two item types were not distinguishable. If they do not overlap, this indicates that one item type was accepted significantly more than the other item type. According to the analysis, Figure 4 indicates that Level 2 learners judged *be*-insertion and targetlike items significantly differently only after nontopic subjects. In other words, they regarded *be*-insertion targetlike when the preceding subjects were topics and they were sensitive only to *be*-insertion after nontopic subjects.

FIGURE 4
Acceptability Judgements of the Korean Group:
Interaction of *Be*-Insertion*Topicality on the Subject Items at Level 2



Subject topicality, however, did not affect acceptance rates of *be*-insertion at other levels. Regardless of whether the preceding subjects were topics or nontopics, Level 1 learners invariably did not distinguish *be*-insertion items from targetlike items and Level 3 learners invariably distinguished them.

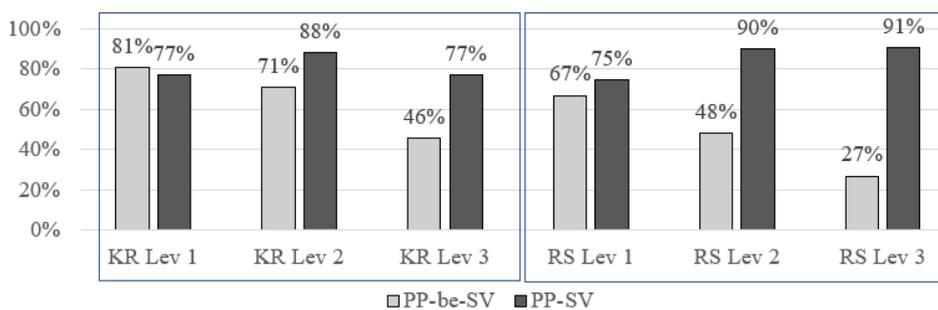
In addition to the 95% CI, the repeated-measures ANOVA separately run on the acceptance rate of each level in the Korean group also returned significant interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion only at Level 2 ($F(1,19) = 5.334, p = .032$, partial $\eta^2 = .219$). These results support the view that Level 2 learners accepted *be*-insertion only after topic subjects.

On the other hand, the GLMM run on judgments of the Russian group for the Subject items also returned a significant main effect of *Be*-insertion ($F(1,866) = 4.717; p = .03$) and a significant interaction of *Be*-insertion*Proficiency ($F(1,866) = 32.9937; p = .001$). These results indicate that the Russian group could distinguish *be*-insertion items from targetlike items and their sensitivity to the nontargetlike *be*-insertion enhanced as proficiency increased. The interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion and the interaction of Topicality**Be*-insertion*Proficiency, however, were not significant, regardless of whether Proficiency was treated as a continuous variable or a categorical variable.

Judgments of *be*-forms as topic markers were also analyzed based on the results of the PP items. Figure 5 shows the mean acceptance rates of the PP items according to L1s and levels. Except for Korean Level 1 group, participants accepted *be*-insertion items less than targetlike items, and the gap between these item types increased as proficiency increased. Moreover, across levels, the Russian group accepted *be*-insertion items less than the Korean group, indicating that they were more sensitive to the nontargetlike *be*-insertion from earlier stages.

FIGURE 5

Acceptability Judgement Task: L2 Group Results of the PP Items



Note. KR = Korean; RS = Russian; Lev = level

A GLLM for binary data in SPSS was used to analyze judgments of the Korean group with fixed effects of Proficiency (c-test score) and *Be*-insertion (*be*-insertion, targetlike), and random effects of Subject and Question number. The model returned a significant interaction

of *Be*-insertion*Proficiency ($F(1,324) = 4.562; p = .032$), indicating that nontargetlike *be*-insertion after PPs could be distinguished better from their targetlike counterparts as proficiency increased. As the proficiency was converted into a categorical variable (Level 1, 2, 3), however, the effect of *be*-insertion was not significant at any level due to great variance within each level. The gap in estimated means between *be*-insertion items and targetlike items, however, increased from 3.6% at Level 1 to 18.7% at Level 2 and 31.2% at Level 3. These results indicate that the Korean groups tended to accept *be*-insertion after topic PPs at lower levels, but as proficiency increased, such nontargetlike use started to be rejected.

The same model run on judgments of the Russian group also returned a significant interaction of *Be*-insertion*Proficiency ($F(1,326) = 15.748; p = .0001$), indicating that they were more sensitive to *be*-insertion after topic PPs as proficiency increased. When Proficiency was converted into a categorical variable (Level 1, 2, 3), the gap in estimated means of acceptance rates between *be*-insertion and targetlike items also increased from 13.4% at Level 1 to 40.6% at Level 2 and 61% at Level 3. As only the gaps at Level 2 and 3 were statistically significant, these results indicate that Russian groups became sensitive to the nontargetlike *be*-insertion after PPs from Level 2.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, I will answer each of the research questions based on the findings presented in Section 4 and discuss whether they support the Topic Marker Hypothesis. The first question examines whether the Korean and Russian L2 groups may mark topics with *be*-forms in production. In production, both L2 groups seemed to mark topics with *be*-forms, although the use was not attested in the production of every participant. Supporting the claim that *be*-insertion is relevant to topic marking, both L2 groups inserted *be*-forms at higher rates after topic subjects than nontopic subjects. On average, Korean participants who produced *be*-insertion inserted *be*-forms in 11.1% of Topic Subject answers and in 4.7% of Nontopic Subject answers. Russian participants who produced *be*-insertion inserted *be*-forms in 4.7% of Topic Subject answers and in 3.2% of Nontopic Subject answers. Individual-level analyses also supported the view as most participants who produced *be*-insertion concentrated the use after topic subjects than nontopic subjects.

Be-forms, however, were not commonly inserted after topicalized objects. The low frequency of such *be*-insertion was ascribed to participants' avoidance of object fronting rather than avoidance of *be*-insertion after topic nonsubjects. While participants were reluctant to topicalize objects by fronting them from complete clauses, they frequently produced the 'O-*be*-AP' structure whose underlying structure could be represented as 'Topic-*be*-Nonverbal Comment'. Although the form may look like a targetlike construction

containing a copula, it was never used by the control group. The Korean and Russian groups, on the other hand, used the structure in 12% and 4% of their Topic Object answers, respectively. In addition, the *be*-forms linking objects and APs can be mapped onto the topic marker *-un/nun* in Korean, which is commonly used in the ‘Topic-*un/nun* (nonverbal) Comment’ structure. The similarity between *be*-forms and the topic marker *-un/nun* suggests that the nontargetlike use of *be*-forms by the Korean group was affected by the L1. In contrast, topic marking with *be*-forms in the interlanguage of the Russian group cannot be explained by the L1 and thus, requires a different explanation. I will return to this issue after answering the second research question.

The second research question pertains to whether the two L2 groups may accept *be*-forms when the use is compatible with topic marking. The judgments of the Level 1 learners in both L2 groups showed that they accepted *be*-insertion after topic subjects and topic PPs, suggesting that they accepted *be*-forms as they marked topics. Topic marking, however, did not seem to be the only function of *be*-forms, as they also accepted *be*-insertion after nontopic subjects. Korean Level 2 learners, on the other hand, accepted *be*-insertion as much as the targetlike counterpart only after topic subjects and topic PPs. These results strongly suggest that *be*-forms were accepted as topic markers. As proficiency increased, both L2 groups rejected all kinds of *be*-insertion after topic/nontopic subjects and topic PPs, indicating that *be*-forms no longer functioned as topic markers in the interlanguage.

In this study, the production and grammaticality judgments of the Korean group at Levels 1 and 2 suggest that *be*-forms could function as topic markers in early stages of interlanguage. Contrary to the prediction for the Topic Marker Hypothesis presented in Section 3, however, the Russian group also used *be*-forms to mark topics, especially at lower levels. As the use was neither L1-like nor L2-like, the result of the Russian group suggests that the interlanguage grammar became available through UG, rather than by L1 transfer. This alternative account sounds plausible as Topic is a feature universally encoded across languages (Gundel & Fretheim, 2004). As it has great discourse value, interlanguage tends to be topic-prominent at early stages, regardless of the L1 (Fuller & Gundel, 1987). In this regard, in analyzing *be*-forms whose meanings and use are difficult to understand, L2 learners from any L1 may be inclined to relate them with topic marking.

Such learner analysis, however, can be reinforced or easily reconstructed depending on the L1. As Korean is topic prominent and has a morpheme dedicated to topic marking, in the interlanguage of the Korean group, there was a stronger association between *be*-forms and topic marking. There was a stronger tendency to concentrate *be*-insertion after topic subjects as manifested by greater effect of subject topicality on the proportion of *be*-insertion in production. In addition, due to transfer of the ‘Topic-*un/nun* (nonverbal) Comment’ structure from the L1, they produced the ‘O-*be*-AP’ structure more frequently.

As proficiency increased, the developmental paths also differed according to the L1.

Korean learners started to limit use of *be*-forms to topic marking. At Level 2, they concretized the function of *be*-forms and accepted them only after topics and rejected them after nontopics. Russian Level 2 learners, on the other hand, did not use *be*-forms as topic markers anymore. Instead, a closer examination of their production suggests that they used them as agreement morphemes. They tended to limit *be*-insertion to plural subjects; the proportion of *be*-insertion was only 0.78% after singular subjects while it was 2.5% after plural subjects. In terms of odds ratio, they were 3.22 times more likely to insert *be*-forms after plural subjects than singular subjects. These results suggest that a main function of *be*-forms in their interlanguage was encoding plural agreement.

Such use of *be*-forms by the Russian group can be explained by L1 transfer. As Table 6 shows, Russian has a rich inflectional morphology, overtly marking both singular and plural agreements.

TABLE 6
Verbal Paradigm of Russian (Verb: obeda-t' [Imperfective] 'to have lunch')

	Present			Past		
	1st	2nd	3rd	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
Singular	obedaj-u	obedaj-eš'	obedaj-et	obeda-l	obeda-l-a	obeda-l-o
Plural	obedaj-em	obejaj-ete	obedaj-ut		obeda-l-i	

Note. Data from Gagarina, Armon-Lotem, and Gupol (2007)

If this rich inflectional paradigm is transferred to interlanguage, Russian learners may search for morphemes encoding these agreement values. Such L1 transfer might expedite acquisition of the 3.s.g. morpheme *-e/s* to encode singular agreement but reinforce reliance on plural *be*-forms to encode plural agreement, as otherwise, it cannot be encoded overtly.

Supporting the view, it was commonly attested in conjoined sentences elicited from Russian learners that a singular subject in one clause was followed by an inflected verb and a plural subject in the other clause was followed by a plural *be*-form, as in (29).

(29) Linda wears school uniform ..., and her parents are wear suits.

In addition, the idea that *be*-forms function as agreement morphemes is compatible with the findings of both L2 groups that could not be explained by the Topic Marker Hypothesis. Not so frequent, but in production, *be*-forms were inserted after nontopic subjects and in the AJT, Level 1 groups accepted *be*-insertion after nontopic subjects, as well as topic subjects.

Considering that use of *be*-forms as topic markers was also supported, the analysis presented above concerning use of *be*-forms as agreement morphemes suggests that *be*-forms might have more than one functions in interlanguage. In other words, functions of *be*-forms might include both topic marking and encoding agreement. Then participants may

accept *be*-forms after subjects as agreement morphemes (and topic markers, if the subjects were topics) and those after topic PPs as topic markers.

The results of Level 3 groups, on the other hand, can be explained by Full Access approaches to UG. Both L2 groups rejected *be*-insertion at Level 3, showing that the form was no longer allowed in the interlanguage. As UG does not necessarily predict nativelike L2 attainment (White, 2007), however, one of the nontargetlike uses of *be*-forms seemed relatively difficult to unlearn. In the production of the Korean group across all levels, the ‘O-*be*-AP’ structure was used more frequently by a greater number of learners than *be*-insertion after subjects (e.g. *S-be-V*). The longer retainment of the former suggests that the interlanguage that is nontargetlike only in the underlying representation is difficult to reconstruct as it is systematic in its own way and the use can be reinforced by L2 input.

6. CONCLUSION

Between the two dominant hypotheses concerning the function of *be*-insertion in L2 English—the Topic Marker Hypothesis and the T/AGR Morpheme Hypothesis, this study focused on the former and examined use of *be*-forms as topic markers in the interlanguage of Korean and Russian EFL learners. The production and grammaticality judgments of both L2 groups support the claim that *be*-forms function as topic markers in early stages of interlanguage. They inserted *be*-forms more frequently after topic subjects than nontopic subjects and unlike the control group, they also used *be*-forms to link topic objects and their nonverbal comments. In the AJT, they accepted *be*-insertion at a significantly higher rate after topic subjects than nontopic subjects and also accepted *be*-insertion after topicalized PPs.

There are also findings, on the other hand, that call for revisions from previous research. Firstly, the Topic Marker Hypothesis has claimed that the nontargetlike use of *be*-forms as topic markers is ascribed only to L1 transfer, but the results of the Russian group suggest that such use becomes available through UG, and thus, topic marking with *be*-forms might be available in interlanguage regardless of the L1. Secondly, previous studies have regarded the Topic Marker Hypothesis and the T/AGR Morpheme Hypothesis as mutually exclusive, claiming that *be*-forms function either as topic markers or tense/agreement morphemes. In the results of both L2 groups, however, *be*-forms could be inserted after nontopic subjects and topicalized nonsubjects. The former case suggests that *be*-forms were used as T/AGR morphemes and the latter case suggests that they were used as topic markers. These mixed results yield a conclusion that *be*-forms might have more than one functions in interlanguage, and thus, the two hypotheses concerning the function of *be*-insertion are compatible with each other.

With the findings, this study can offer insights concerning roles of L1 transfer and UG in second language acquisition. Comparison of L2 groups at Level 1 suggests that there are interlanguage rules that learners from any L1 are inclined to formulate by accessing UG, but whether they are retained for a long time or immediately reconstructed depends on the L1. In addition, rejection of *be*-insertion at Level 3 suggests that with more exposure to L2 input, interlanguage, which is UG-constrained, gradually converges on the target grammar. Despite constant access to UG, however, nativelike attainment of *be*-forms might not be guaranteed, considering that topic marking with *be*-forms in the ‘O-*be*-AP’ structure was retained by the Korean group until Level 3. As the interlanguage is closely related to the L1 and there is a lack of discrepancy between the interlanguage and the L2 in the surface form, the nontargetlike underlying representation is less likely to be reconstructed.

While this study is primarily focused on the function of *be*-insertion regardless of the learning contexts, as the L2 groups were EFL learners who had acquired English through instruction, the results may also have pedagogical implications. To begin with, in classroom English, especially at the beginner’s level, it might be helpful to expose learners to more diverse structures, rather than heavily relying on copula *be*. While *be*-forms are high frequency words in English, the proportion tends to be even higher with a limited range of use in classroom settings: among *be*-forms with various functions, only copula *be* is widely used to introduce people or explain concepts. As copulas are not required in the present tense in Russian and when the complements are APs or PPs in Korean, however, the excessively frequent use of copula *be* may enhance learners’ tendency to misanalyze *be*-forms whose meaning is inherently vague. In addition, this study suggests that regardless of the L1, early interlanguage tends to be affected more by discourse rather than grammatical concepts so it seems necessary to draw learners’ attention to grammatical morphemes through interventions, such as input flood or input enhancement. Lastly, as the results of the Korean group showed greater use of *be*-forms as topic markers due to L1 transfer, for Korean learners, it might also be helpful to show how topics and focuses are expressed in English: Topics and focuses are not commonly marked explicitly but if they should, topic marking expressions are used, such as *as for*, *when it comes to*, or It-that cleft sentences, rather than *be*-insertion.

Applicable levels: Tertiary

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