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## Argument Omission in Portuguese as a Second Language

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# Argument Omission in Portuguese as a Second Language

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This research was conducted by Dr. Joyce Bruhn de Garavito and the students of her Second Language Acquisition course at the University of Western Ontario.

# Argument Omission in Portuguese as a Second Language

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## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine whether version, motivation, and transfer are affected by the proficiency of Portuguese as second language by first language English speakers.

For the purpose of this research, two major theories will be introduced to account for a person's ability to learn a second language. The first is known as Full Transfer Full Access theory. This theory states that the learner of the second language will experience a complete and total transfer from the first language as the initial state. Additionally, in learning the second language, the learner will have full access to their Universal Grammar. The transfer from the first language to the second language may be positive, as when the parameters of both the languages are the same and the learner is aided by their knowledge of the first language, or negative, as when the parameters of the two languages differ and the learner is hindered by their knowledge of the first language (Leung, 2005). The second theory is known as the Critical Hypothesis theory. This theory states that there is a window of time in which a person can learn a language, and if the language is not learned before this time, the learner will no longer have access to their universal grammar, and will have to use alternative processes to learn the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Our hypothesis was that there would be negative transfer from the first language, English, to the second language, Portuguese, in this experiment, as a result of different grammatical settings. We also predicted that more advanced learners would have less evidence transfer than beginner learners as a result of more experience with the language. In conducting this research, we found evidence of transfer, showing support of the Full Transfer Full Access theory.

Our intention in testing proficiency against motivation was to determine whether instrumental or integrative motivation was positively correlated with proficiency in the second language. Integrative motivation is defined as learning a language as a result of a desire to integrate into the culture, whereas instrumental motivation is defined as learning a language as a means to an end (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). We predicted that proficiency would be positively correlated with integrative motivation as a result of the learner's personal investment in learning the language.

Version is a term that we created as an all-encompassing term to describe the three types of version: introversion, extroversion, and ambiversion. Introversion is defined as a classification for people who are energized by spending time alone. When learning a second language in a classroom setting, introverted people would likely tend to listen attentively, ruminate over concepts, and think before speaking. Extroversion is defined as a classification for people who are energized by spending time with other people. When learning a second language in a classroom setting, extroverted people would tend to participate in class, ask for help, and work with other classmates. Ambiversion is defined as the classification for people who fall in the middle of the spectrum. We predicted that proficiency would be positively correlated with extroversion, because extroverted learners are more likely to have more practice with using the language in social settings.

In order to test the effects of transfer, motivation, and version, the proficiency of second language learners was tested. Specifically, we tested comprehension of subject and object drop rules in Portuguese. Unlike English, Portuguese is a pro-drop language, meaning that the object and subject can be dropped in sentence in which there is no topic shift. Figure 1 demonstrates subject and object drop in English and Portuguese. If there had been topic shift, however, both subject and object pronouns would be obligatory in both English and Portuguese (Rothman, 2009; Sorace, Serratrice, Filiaci, & Baldo, 2009).

<p><b>English</b> (Non Pro-Drop Language) <u>Object Position</u> Sarah read the book, but Max did not read <b>it</b>.</p> <p><u>Subject Position</u> Peter was angry because <b>he</b> missed the bus.</p>	<p><b>Portuguese</b> (Pro-Drop Language) <u>Object Position</u> Sarah leu o livro, mas Max Sarah read the book but Max não leu. not read (it)</p> <p><u>Subject Position</u> Peter estara brabo porque Peter was angry because (he) perdeu o ônibus. missed the bus</p>
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Figure (1)

## 1. Methodology

Participants included beginner and intermediate level Portuguese classes at the University of Western Ontario. These classes were used to divide the participants according to level of proficiency with Portuguese. There were 15 participants in the beginner group, and 7 participants in the intermediate group, making a total of 22 participants. While it can be confirmed that all of the participants were proficient in English, it was unknown how many other languages the participants spoke, and what language was their native or heritage language.

An Appropriateness Judgment Task was administered to both groups of participants. The test contained 40 questions, each asking the participant to indicate whether the given Portuguese sentence was appropriate or not appropriate. An option entitled “I don’t know” was given to decrease the amount of random guesses. Participants were asked to answer each question quickly, and to not change answers retrospectively, in order to test their most instinctive conclusions. Figure 2 shows an example of this type of question.

A picture task was also administered to both groups of participants. Participants were asked to look at the provided picture, which was accompanied by a question pertaining to the picture, and a set of possible answers to each question. They were then asked to indicate whether each

Sarah leu o livro, mas Max não leu. Sarah read the book but Max not read		
Sim	Nao	Nao sei
yes	no	I don't know

Figure (2)

O urso cheira a flor? The bear smells the flower?			
Sim, cheira. Yes smells	Yes	Sim	Nao Eu nao sei No I don't know
Sim, o urso a cheira. Yes the bear smells it		Sim	Nao Eu nao sei Yes No I don't know
Sim, a flor cheira bem. Yes the flower smells good	Sim	Nao	Eu nao sei Yes No I don't know

Figure (3)

sentence was appropriate. Each test item contained sentences with a different combination of subject and object drop. Figure 3 shows an example of this type of test item. In this example, the first answer would be appropriate in Portuguese because it contains subject and object drop. The second answer would also be appropriate because it has an object clitic. The third answer is a distracter; it is not relevant to given picture.

To test version, participants were given a series of statements and asked to select a number from 1-5, depending on how strongly they agreed with the statement. One represented strongly disagree, and five represented strongly agree. An example of an extroverted-based question is “I like to describe myself as friendly, talkative and enthusiastic”. Here, it can be assumed that a highly extroverted person would select 5. An example of an introverted-based question is “I quickly feel drained when I’m in a large group of people”. Here, it can be assumed that an extremely introverted person would select 5. When recording the results the numbers were reversed for introverted weighed questions so that our overall scale was from 10 to 50, where introverted people would have results which fell between 10 and 25, extroverted people would have results which fell between 35 and 50, and ambiverted people would be the minority of participants whose results fell in the middle range. Unfortunately, this questionnaire was unsuccessful in categorizing participants in terms of version, because the large majority of participants scored in the middle range, classifying them as ambiverts. For this reason, version was not further correlated against proficiency in Portuguese.

Similarly, we created questions which we believed would categorize our participants as either primarily integratively motivated, such as the person who would answer strongly agree to a question like “I want to learn Portuguese for my own personal interest”, and those who were more instrumentally motivated, like those who would strongly agree with “I took this course to fulfill a requirement”. However, the majority our participants again fell in the middle of our scale so their level of instrumental motivation or integrative motivation was correlated with their overall performance in Portuguese.

## 2. Results

Figure 4 illustrates the correct responses by participants on the appropriate judgment task. The first set of bars represents a sentence with topic shift and an appropriate pronoun. Both groups seem to understand that there must be a subject pronoun used when there is

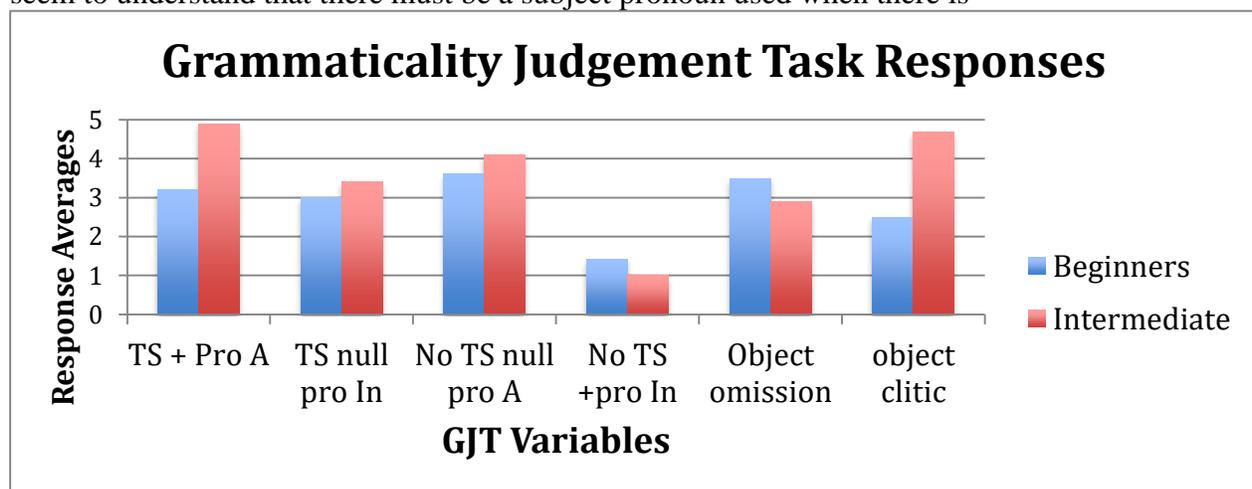
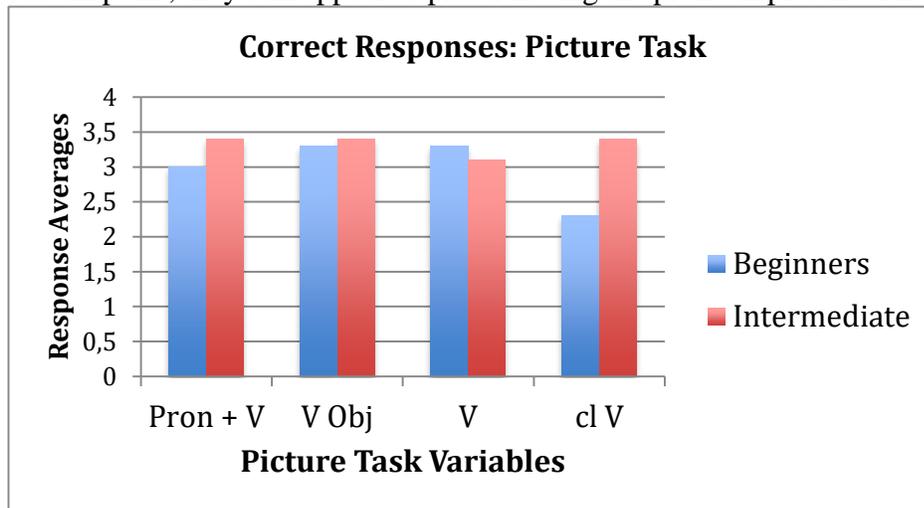


Figure (4)

contrast in the sentence. However, the results illustrate that the intermediate group has almost perfectly acquired this skill. The second set of bars represents a sentence with topic shift and an inappropriate pronoun. Both groups appropriately reject the absence of a pronoun with topic shift. However, for the intermediate group, their rejection of the inappropriate absence of a pronoun is not as strong as their acceptance of a pronoun. They are better at recognizing appropriate sentence form than in recognizing inappropriate forms, a finding not unique to this study. The third set of bars represents a sentence with no topic shift and an appropriate null pronoun. An example of this type of sentence is “he is angry because missed the bus”. Both groups show an understanding of when the pronoun can be dropped in Portuguese when there is no topic shift. This represents evidence of full access, as this is not a quality English pronouns have. The fourth set of bars represents a sentence with no topic shift and the inappropriate presence of a pronoun. An example of this type of sentence is “he is angry because he missed the bus”. Both groups do very poorly in this section. They are failing to reject the possibility that the pronoun is inappropriate when there is no topic shift. This is evidence of transfer from L1, as this would be appropriate in English. The fifth set of bars represents a sentence that has object pronoun omission. Although the intermediate group seems to accept this possibility up to a certain point, they still appear to prefer having the pronoun present. The beginner group appears



to perform better than intermediates in this area, but it is not clear whether or not they could actually recognize what was missing in the sentence. Their performance may be due to lack of understanding. The sixth set of bars represents a sentence with an object clitic.

Figure (5) An example of this

type of sentence is “John threw it”. Once again, the intermediate group performed very well in this area. It can be assumed that similar to object pronoun omission, that the beginner group may not have recognized what was clitic was doing, and were ultimately guessing.

Figure 5 illustrates the correct responses by participants on the picture task. Each bar represents a different combination of subject and/or object drop. The first bar represents object drop, for example, “he smelled” with no object. The second bar represents subject drop, for example, “smelled the flower”, with no subject. The third bar represents subject and object drop, for example, “smelled”. These three sections are not particularly interesting, both groups are performing well, in most cases, the intermediate group is performing slightly better than the beginner group. This is fully expected. The last bar is more interesting. This bar represents the use of the object clitic, for example, “smelled it”. Here, we can see that the beginners are struggling with accepting the object clitic. This may be because in Portuguese, clitics are small words and can be difficult to distinguish. We believe that our beginners merely skipped over the clitics, not full taking them in. This result was found in both of our tests, and is definitely an interesting finding.

### 3. Discussion

In examining this evidence, we see evidence of L1 English transfer; however, we also see evidence of access to UG through appropriate acquisition of null subject and object pronoun. This supports the theory of Full Transfer Full Access.

In conclusion, this study was a great introduction for our class to learn about the process and all the nuances involved in conducting research; while we recognize that we had some limitations, we all found it to be a great learning opportunity, and we believe that these results point to an interesting phenomenon that can now be further studied.

In conducting further research, it would be beneficial to test a larger number of participants in order to yield more accurate results. In order to improve our methodology with regards to motivation and version test, there are a couple ways that the scale could be altered. One option is to use a scale out of 10 (as opposed to 5), which would accomplish two things: it would prohibit people from selecting a number right in the middle and it would yield more accurate results, as there will be more numbers to choose from. Another way to improve the scale would be to do the opposite—to have the participants either agree or disagree with each statement, making results less ambiguous. This way, again, participants would not be able to select an option in the middle and we would avoid the issue we had, which is that most participants scored in the middle. The last way to improve the questionnaire is to ask more overt questions about how the participants would classify themselves, for example: “Do you consider yourself to be extroverted or introverted?” In further research, it would also be important to conduct a language profile for each participant so that the researchers can have an understanding of how many languages each participant speaks, whether English is their L1, or even if Portuguese is their L1. Setting. Another way of conducting further research would be to test participants in a more social setting, to give them an opportunity to speak in a more pragmatically appropriate way, as opposed to testing them in an institutional setting, in which they may have felt pressure to provide answers that are grammatically correct, but not necessarily pragmatically appropriate.

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