The acquisition of passive in L2 Italian: evidence from comprehension and production

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Whereas many crosslinguistic studies have been conducted to explore the acquisition of passive in L1, experimental data from second language acquisition of this syntactic structure has not been systematically collected so far.

The present study investigates the acquisition of passive in L2 Italian through a comprehension and an elicited production task carried out with a group of L2 learners and a control group of Italian-speaking adults. In the experimental group the participants were aged 18-22, they had different levels of proficiency in Italian and different L1s (mostly English and Spanish).

The production of passive has been tested using a picture description task (adapted from Manetti 2012) by asking L2 learners to describe transitive actions under three experimental conditions: a neutral question (*Che cosa succede?* What is happening?), an agent-oriented question *(Che cosa fa l'agente?* What is Xagent doing?) and a patient-oriented question (*Che cosa succede al paziente? What happened to Xpatient?*). A picture-matching task has been used to investigate the comprehension of passive voice.

Results show that L2 learners comprehend passive voice more than they produce it. As a matter of fact, participants with an elementary level of Italian avoid the production of passive. They tend to rely on SVO-active sentences and structures with a clitic object pronoun, in line with Manetti (2012) whose results showed that Italian-speaking children only produced clitic dislocations in a context in which a passive voice was appropriate (and resorted to by adults; see also Volpato et al. 2012).
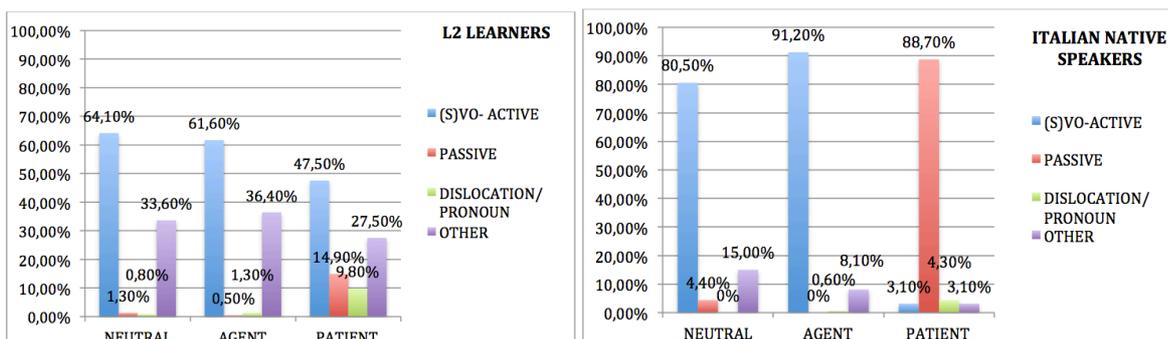
Results from the comprehension study

Graph 1: % of correct responses for the L2 learners and Italian native speakers.
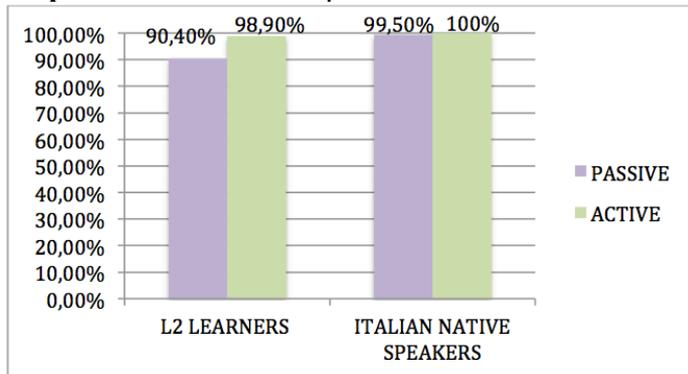
Results from the production study

Graphs 2-3: % of L2 learners' and Italian native speakers' productions after each question type.

The fact that even English speaking learners use cliticization, which represents a stumbling block in language acquisition, suggests on the one hand that L2 grammar makes this process available earlier than passive, on the other hand that a different kind of complexity may be involved in these syntactic structures.

However, advanced learners produced several passive structures reporting a linguistic behavior similar to the one of native speakers, who exclusively preferred the production of the passive voice. Productions from both L2 learners and native speakers have also been analyzed qualitatively, paying particularly attention to the use of the subject (whether is overt or null) in response to the agent-oriented question. Compared to the Italian native speakers productions, many of which presented a ProVO structure, results reveal that L2 learners tend to express the subject producing answers with a SVO structure.

Results from the qualitative analysis of the production study
Graph 4: % of SVO vs. ProVO responses after the agent-oriented question.
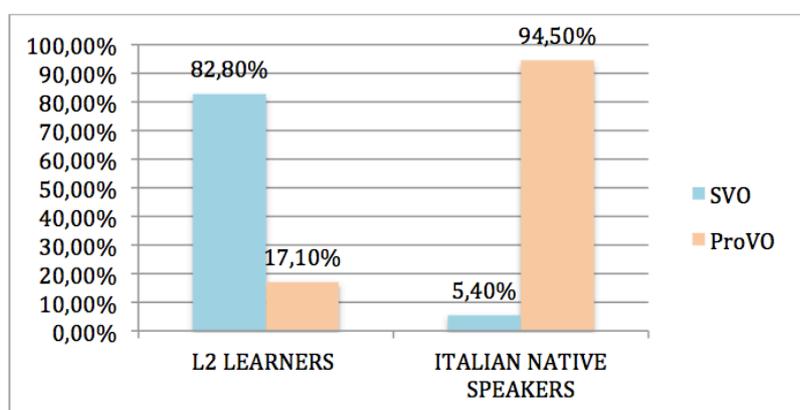
This research provides some new evidence in the domain of the acquisition of passive voice giving indirect data on the acquisition of the pro-drop parameter and enriching the database of results for what concerns the L2 population. Moreover, this is a starting point for further studies to be conducted also using different types of experimental methods. A syntactic priming technique currently under study may reveal priming effects after passive primes thus shedding light on the L2 learners' competence of passive.

Keywords: passive; L2 acquisition; syntax; comprehension; production

References

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