

Evaluating a Methodology for Assessing Subject Misidentification in L3 Spanish:

Evidence From Japanese Learners
with English as an L2

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ABSTRACT

In Spanish, constructions with preverbal clitics display an OV-like surface order. Such preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs) include transitive, pronominal/reflexive, and *gustar*-type patterns. Their acquisition involves several factors, including null subjects, verbal agreement, and nontransparent mappings between semantic roles and grammatical subjecthood. When reading these constructions, L1 Japanese learners of Spanish may misidentify preverbal clitics as grammatical subjects. This is puzzling because Japanese is an OV language and therefore appears, at least superficially, to be compatible with the word order of Spanish PCCs. Why, then, do such errors occur? One possibility is that an SVO schema associated with learners' previously acquired L2 English influences their processing of L3 Spanish. To explore this issue within an Input Processing framework, the present pilot study examined subject misidentification in Spanish PCCs among L1 Japanese learners. Eight A2-level learners completed a text-based Subject Identification Task and a post-task questionnaire; two B2-level learners were included as reference participants. The descriptive results showed lower accuracy for PCCs than for baseline SVO and VO constructions, with the lowest accuracy observed in *gustar*-type constructions. Questionnaire responses indicated that

learners reported using verbal morphology, but this strategy was not always reflected in their task performance. The responses also pointed to the possible involvement of both L1 Japanese and L2 English. The results are preliminary. Even so, pairing the Subject Identification Task with the post-task questionnaire helped identify patterns of subject misidentification that can be examined more closely in a larger follow-up study.

Keywords: input processing, subject misidentification, preverbal clitic constructions, cross-linguistic influence, L3 Spanish acquisition

1. Introduction

1.1. Preverbal Clitic Constructions (PCCs) in Spanish

In linguistic typology, the classification of basic constituent order, such as VO and OV, has often been discussed as a factor relevant to sentence processing. In contemporary typological terms, English is generally classified as a VO language, whereas Japanese is classified as an OV language⁽¹⁾. In the Japanese higher education context examined in this study, learners of Spanish have typically studied English as a chronologically prior foreign language. Spanish is therefore treated here as their L3. Spanish typically follows a VO order in transitive clauses. However, in finite declarative clauses containing unstressed object personal pronouns, the object clitic appears before the verb. In this paper, constructions in which a clitic precedes the verb are referred to as preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs).

- (1) a. *Amo a María.*
 love-1SG DOM Maria-ACC
 'I love Maria.'
- b. *La amo.*
 her-ACC love-1SG
 'I love her.'

Example (1a) is a transitive construction. Unlike a typical English SVO sentence, however, the subject pronoun is not overtly expressed. Spanish allows null subjects because the person and number of the subject are indicated by verbal inflection; in this case, the ending -o marks the first-person singular in the present indicative. In this paper, sentences such as (1a) are referred to as VO constructions. In addition, specific animate direct objects are introduced by the marker *a*. When the object *María* in (1a) is pronominalized, it is expressed by a preverbal clitic, as in (1b), yielding an OV-like sequence, where the unstressed pronoun is obligatorily placed to the left of the verb.

Since Japanese is an OV language, this direction of word order might at first appear easy for L1 Japanese learners to process. However, the similarity between Japanese OV order and Spanish PCCs is only partial. In Japanese, objects are independent words and are accompanied by explicit case-marking particles, such as *wo* (accusative marker) and *ni* (dative marker). In Spanish, by contrast, clitics are unstressed dependent elements attached to the verbal domain, and learners must identify their grammatical role on the basis of morphological form and syntactic context. Thus, although PCCs display an OV-like order, learners may not readily recognize the preverbal clitic as an object. This point is central to the present study, because the placement and interpretation of preverbal clitics may create difficulties in sentence comprehension. Moreover, PCCs vary in their syntactic and semantic configurations, which may further affect how learners interpret them.

- (2) *Me gustan los perros.*

DAT-1SG like-3PL the dogs-NOM

‘I like dogs.’

- (3) *Me enamoro de María.*

REFL-1SG fall in love-1SG with Maria-OBL

‘I fall in love with Maria.’

Example (2) illustrates a *gustar*-type construction, a type of PCC that is generally expressed in the order Dative Clitic > V > S. The experiencer of the emotion, *me* ‘to me,’ is placed to the left of the verb as a clitic, whereas the stimulus that causes the emotion, *los perros* ‘dogs,’ appears after the verb as the grammatical subject. Accordingly, the verb *gustar* agrees in person and number with the stimulus subject, rather than with the dative experiencer. This construction therefore involves a mapping of syntactic and semantic roles that differs substantially not only from English, which follows SVO order, but also from Japanese, the learners’ L1⁽²⁾.

Example (3), by contrast, is a reflexive/pronominal verb construction, which is syntactically represented as Reflexive Clitic > V > OBL. In this case, the transitive verb *enamorar* ‘to make someone fall in love’ is intransitivized by the reflexive clitic. The experiencer is expressed by the reflexive clitic *me* ‘myself,’ and the stimulus that triggers the emotion is expressed as an oblique complement introduced by *de*. As a result, the person and number of the verb agree with the experiencer.

Learners may face two main challenges in acquiring these constructions. The first concerns the morphological syncretism among three types of unstressed clitics: accusative, dative, and reflexive. In Spanish, accusative, dative, and reflexive clitics share the same forms in the first and second persons: first-person singular *me* ‘me,’ second-person singular *te* ‘you,’ first-person plural *nos* ‘us,’ and second-person plural *os* ‘you [plural].’ They differ only in the third person: accusative *lo*, *la*, *los*, and *las* ‘him, her, them’; dative *le* and *les* ‘to him, to her, to them’; and reflexive *se* ‘himself, herself, themselves’⁽³⁾. Learners are therefore required to parse the syntactic role of each pronoun from the surrounding context each time it appears.

Moreover, depending on proficiency level, learners may be affected by formal similarities between clitics and other grammatical forms. For example, the first-person plural subject pronoun and object clitic are partially similar in form, as in *nosotros* versus *nos* ‘we versus us.’ The third-person singular and plural accusative clitics are also formally identical to the definite articles. In

addition, the first-person singular object clitic *me* is formally identical to the English object pronoun ‘me’, which may trigger lexical or syntactic cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from the learners’ L2 English. This possibility deserves particular attention in the present study.

The second challenge concerns the null-subject property of Spanish. As noted above, because person and number are marked by verbal inflection, explicit subject pronouns are often omitted. The combination of preverbal clitics, null subjects, and verbal agreement may lead learners to misidentify subjects during input processing. Indeed, production errors can be observed as a possible reflection of learners’ failure to establish appropriate form–meaning connections at the input stage, or of an incomplete interlanguage system.

(4) **Me gusto música.*

[DAT-1SG] like-1SG music

‘I like music.’

(Maldonado, 2008, p. 178) (underlining added)

Example (4) presents a learner error reported by Maldonado (2008). In this sentence, the learner appears to have interpreted the dative clitic *me*, which is characteristic of *gustar*-type constructions, as if it were the grammatical subject. The verb is then marked in the first-person singular form *gusto*. This error may reflect an SVO-based mapping in which the preverbal element is associated with the subject role. García (2014), in an error analysis of pronoun misuse among English-speaking university learners of Spanish from the first to the fourth semester, reported that pronouns showed a higher error rate than verbs and other grammatical categories.

The issue becomes especially important in the case of the learners examined in the present study. If Japanese is an OV language, why do L1 Japanese learners nevertheless show difficulty in interpreting Spanish PCCs, which also display an OV-like order? One possibility is that learners rely not only on

their L1 Japanese but also on an SVO-based processing schema associated with their prior learning of English as an L2.

In the context of Spanish education in Japanese higher education, Saito (2017) is the most directly relevant predecessor to the present study. Saito examined beginner L1 Japanese learners' comprehension of Spanish sentence structures by asking them to identify subjects, verbs, and complements and to underline object noun phrases. The study found that approximately 30% of learners failed to identify objects correctly. However, Saito's study did not examine PCCs, including *gustar*-type constructions, even though such constructions are also introduced at the beginner level. Nor did it investigate the processing criteria learners used when identifying subjects.

Against this background, the present study addresses two issues. The first is to describe how L1 Japanese learners of L3 Spanish identify subjects when reading sentences containing different types of PCCs. The second is to explore the cognitive processes that may underlie subject misidentification in these constructions. The following section reviews the theoretical frameworks relevant to this second issue.

1.2. Input Processing (and L2 Syntactic Interference)

Input Processing (IP), developed by VanPatten, is a theoretical model within second language acquisition research that focuses specifically on how learners process input during comprehension (VanPatten, 1996, 2020). It examines how learners make form-meaning connections when they read or hear language and why they may misinterpret particular grammatical structures. In this sense, IP is not intended to account for all aspects of second language acquisition, such as production or the long-term restructuring of linguistic knowledge. Rather, it provides a framework for examining the initial processing of input during comprehension.

Within the IP framework, learners are assumed to be primarily driven to extract meaning from input. However, comprehension in the early stages of acquisition is cognitively demanding and places a burden on working mem-

ory. Because learners have limited processing capacity, they may rely on particular parsing strategies when assigning grammatical and semantic roles in a sentence. One of the most widely discussed principles concerning word order and sentence interpretation is the First-Noun Principle (FNP). According to this principle, learners tend to process the first noun or pronoun they encounter in a sentence as the subject or agent. Under this principle, learners who encounter OVS or OV structures may misinterpret “who did what to whom” by assigning the subject role to an object element.

At the same time, VanPatten also discusses the possibility of an L1 Transfer Principle as an alternative to a universal account of the FNP. According to this view, learners begin acquisition by using parsing procedures associated with their L1. From this perspective, native speakers of a language with relatively fixed SVO word order, such as English, may experience difficulty when processing Spanish structures that diverge from SVO order, because their L1 offers limited support for parsing flexible or noncanonical word orders in declarative clauses.

Tight (2012) provides an important study of how L1 English learners interpret Spanish sentence structures in relation to the FNP. Tight examined L1 English learners of Spanish in their first, third, and fifth semesters of university study. The target sentences contained a single animate noun, functioning as the subject, and an ambitransitive verb, that is, a verb that can but need not take an object. These sentences were presented in both SV and VS orders, and participants selected one of two English translations to indicate their interpretation.

If the FNP alone applied to these sentences, learners would be expected to assign the subject role to the first and only noun in the sentence, regardless of whether it appeared before or after the verb. However, Tight’s results did not follow this prediction. Across all proficiency levels, learners performed significantly better on SV sentences than on VS sentences. More specifically, they tended to interpret an animate noun as the subject when it appeared before the verb, but as the object when it appeared after the verb.

In other words, many learners parsed VS structures as if they were VO structures.

This finding suggests that learners were not relying solely on the numerical order of nouns in a sentence, as a simple interpretation of the FNP would predict. Rather, their interpretation appears to have been guided by the position of the noun relative to the verb. Tight relates this pattern to an SVO-based processing strategy: learners may take the verb as a central reference point and assign the subject role to a preverbal noun and the object role to a postverbal noun. Thus, Tight's study does not simply reject the FNP; rather, it suggests that the FNP may need to be refined, particularly in cases where a sentence contains only one noun.

The relevance of Tight's study to the present research lies in its demonstration that L1 English learners may impose an SVO-based schema when interpreting Spanish structures whose word order differs from English. This point is important because it suggests that learners' sentence interpretation may be shaped not only by the linear position of a noun or pronoun, but also by broader expectations about the relation between preverbal and postverbal elements.

A related issue is raised by Bran (2015), who examined the use of explicit and null subject pronouns by Romanian learners of Spanish. Although both Romanian and Spanish allow null subjects, Bran observed inappropriate uses of explicit subject pronouns, especially among less advanced learners, and suggested that these errors may reflect interference from other foreign languages learned by the students, such as English or French, where overt subjects are normally required. Although Bran's study focused on written production rather than sentence comprehension, it provides a useful parallel for the present study. It suggests that cross-linguistic influence in Spanish acquisition cannot always be explained solely by the relationship between the learner's L1 and Spanish; previously learned foreign languages may also affect how learners represent or use subject-related structures.

The question addressed in the present study concerns L1 Japanese learn-

ers. The PCCs examined here display an OV-like surface order, and Japanese, the learners' L1, is also an OV language. If learners relied only on L1-based parsing procedures, one might expect Japanese learners to have relatively little difficulty with the directionality of PCCs. Nevertheless, learners may still misidentify subjects in these constructions.

One possible explanation is that Japanese learners of L3 Spanish do not rely exclusively on their L1 Japanese when processing Spanish input. They may also draw on a previously learned L2, namely English, whose SVO schema has been strongly reinforced through formal education in Japan. The present study therefore examines whether an SVO-based processing schema associated with L2 English may influence the input processing of L3 Spanish. This hypothesis extends the discussion of the FNP and L1 transfer to an L3 context by asking whether a previously learned foreign language can also shape parsing preferences during comprehension.

This section has reviewed IP as a framework for explaining how learners parse sentences and extract meaning from input. IP does not provide a comprehensive account of all processes involved in second language acquisition. Rather, it focuses on the initial stage of input processing, in which learners establish form-meaning connections and interpret grammatical relations during comprehension. For this reason, IP provides an appropriate theoretical basis for the present study, which investigates why L1 Japanese learners may experience difficulty with Spanish PCCs despite the apparent similarity between Japanese OV order and the OV-like order of PCCs, and whether an L2 English SVO schema may contribute to this difficulty.

1.3. The Present Study

As reviewed in the preceding sections, Spanish preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs) may pose difficulties for learners because they combine preverbal object clitics, null subjects, verbal agreement, and variable mappings between syntactic and semantic roles. From the perspective of Input Processing (IP), such constructions are relevant because learners may rely on

processing strategies when assigning grammatical roles during comprehension. Previous research has shown that L1 English learners of Spanish may interpret noncanonical Spanish word orders through an SVO-based processing strategy. The present study extends this issue to L3 Spanish learners whose L1 is Japanese, an OV language, and whose L2 is English, an SVO language. It therefore asks whether Japanese learners' difficulty with Spanish PCCs can be examined not only in relation to L1 Japanese but also in relation to possible syntactic influence from L2 English.

The purpose of this study is not to establish a definitive account of L2 English syntactic interference, but rather to evaluate the feasibility and preliminary validity of a methodology designed to investigate this issue. As a small-scale pilot study, it collected data from L1 Japanese learners of L3 Spanish ($N = 8$) and two control participants ($N = 2$). The study examines whether the test items and questionnaire can capture learners' patterns of subject misidentification and provide evidence about the processing criteria they use when interpreting PCCs. Specifically, the study addresses the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: Do L1 Japanese learners of L3 Spanish misidentify subjects when processing PCCs, including accusative clitic constructions, *gustar*-type constructions, and pronominal verb constructions?

Research Question 2: To what extent do the Subject Identification Task and the post-task questionnaire function as exploratory instruments for identifying learners' error patterns and the processing criteria that may underlie those errors?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology of the pilot study, including the participant profile, the selection and control of the materials, the target constructions, vocabulary selection, and the data collection procedures. Section 3 presents the results of

the Subject Identification Task and the questionnaire. Section 4 discusses the findings in relation to subject misidentification, input processing, and possible L2 syntactic influence. Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the main findings and outlining directions for future research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were eight L1 Japanese learners of Spanish who were classified as approximately CEFR A2 level and two L1 Japanese learners of Spanish who were classified as approximately CEFR B2 level. The two B2 learners served as reference participants rather than as a statistically comparable control group. All participants had previously studied English as their second language (L2), and Spanish was treated as their third language (L3) in the present study.

The A2 learners were undergraduate students, aged 19 to 24, who were studying Spanish as a second foreign language in the same department at a university in Japan. They had completed the same one-year introductory Spanish course and had used the same textbook, *Gramática castellana nivel elemental* [Elementary Spanish Grammar] (Morimoto, 2024). Thus, the grammatical items and target constructions examined in the present study had already been covered through explicit classroom instruction⁽⁴⁾.

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from courses taught by the researcher. Data collection was conducted outside regular class hours, and all participants provided informed consent. Participation was not linked to course grades or evaluation.

2.2. Materials

The study consisted of two components: a Subject Identification Task and a post-task questionnaire. This section describes the materials used to construct the Subject Identification Task. The questionnaire is described in Section 2.3.2.

2.2.1. Target Constructions

The Subject Identification Task included five types of constructions. These constructions were selected in order to examine how learners identify grammatical subjects in sentences that differ in word order, subject expression, and clitic placement. The five construction types were divided into two broad categories: baseline constructions and preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs).

The first category consisted of two baseline constructions. These items were included to assess learners' subject identification in sentence types that do not involve preverbal clitics. The first baseline type was the canonical **SVO construction**, as in *Juan lee el libro* 'Juan reads the book.' This construction was included as a baseline because it contains an overt subject and follows a word order compatible with English SVO structure. Learners who rely on an SVO-based processing schema would therefore be expected to identify the subject relatively easily in this construction.

The second baseline type was the **VO construction** with a null subject, as in *Lee el libro* 'He/She reads the book.' This construction lacks an overt subject, and the subject must be identified through verbal inflection. These items were included to examine whether learners could infer the null subject from the verb form or whether they would misidentify the postverbal object as the subject.

The second category consisted of three types of PCCs, which are the main focus of the present study. These constructions contain an unstressed clitic before the finite verb. If learners rely on a first-noun strategy or an SVO-based processing schema, they may misidentify the preverbal clitic or a postverbal noun phrase as the subject. The three PCC types were included to examine whether subject misidentification differs depending on the syntactic and semantic configuration of the construction.

The first PCC type was the **transitive PCC**, in which an accusative or dative clitic precedes a transitive verb, as in *Me invitó Juan a la fiesta* 'Juan invited me to the party.' This construction may appear in an OV or OVS-like

order. These items were designed to examine whether learners would assign the subject role to the preverbal clitic, as predicted by a broad interpretation of the First-Noun Principle, or whether they would interpret the postverbal noun phrase according to its position relative to the verb, as suggested by Tight's (2012) findings on SV and VS structures.

The second PCC type was the ***gustar*-type construction**, as in *Me gustan los perros* 'I like dogs.' This construction typically appears in the order dative clitic > verb > subject. The experiencer is expressed by a preverbal dative clitic, whereas the stimulus appears after the verb as the grammatical subject. These items were included because they require learners to distinguish between the semantic experiencer and the syntactic subject. They also make it possible to examine whether learners misidentify the dative clitic *me* as the subject.

The third PCC type was the **reflexive/pronominal verb construction**, as in *Me enamoro de María* 'I fall in love with María.' In this construction, the preverbal clitic is not an independent object in the same way as an accusative clitic in a transitive PCC. Rather, it forms part of the pronominal verb construction. These items were included to examine whether learners would be affected by the surface similarity between pronominal verb constructions and other PCCs.

The following section describes the vocabulary and grammatical controls used in the construction of the test items and response options.

2.2.2. Vocabulary Selection

All lexical items used in the test sentences, including verbs and nouns, were selected from vocabulary that had appeared in units already covered in the first-year Spanish textbook used by the participants, *Gramática castellana nivel elemental* [Elementary Spanish Grammar] (Morimoto, 2024). This selection was made to reduce the possibility that unfamiliar vocabulary would interfere with learners' performance on the Subject Identification Task.

This control was also consistent with the assumptions of Input Process-

ing (IP). In the IP framework, learners are assumed to be primarily driven to extract meaning from input, and early-stage comprehension may place considerable demands on cognitive processing and working memory (VanPatten, 2020). If a test sentence contains unfamiliar words or expressions, learners may need to devote processing resources to lexical retrieval rather than to the grammatical relationships that are central to the task. Because the present study focuses on subject identification and syntactic parsing, it was important to minimize lexical difficulty as much as possible.

For this reason, the vocabulary used in the test items was limited to basic words that were expected to be familiar to the participants on the basis of their previous coursework. Most items corresponded broadly to beginner-level vocabulary. No glosses or Japanese translations were provided during the task, so that participants would process the Spanish sentences directly rather than rely on translation cues.

The verb forms used in the test items were also controlled. Only finite verb forms that had already been covered in the participants' first-year instruction were used: the present indicative, the preterite, and the imperfect. More complex or less familiar forms, such as the subjunctive or conditional, were excluded. This was done to reduce additional morphological processing demands and to ensure that learners' responses would more directly reflect their ability to identify the subject from word order, clitic placement, and verbal agreement.

Although individual knowledge of each lexical item was not independently tested, the use of previously taught vocabulary and familiar verb forms was intended to reduce lexical and morphological confounds. The following section describes the procedure used to administer the Subject Identification Task and the post-task questionnaire.

2.3. Procedure

Before collecting data from the A2 learners, the survey was first administered to two B2-level learners of Spanish. This preliminary administration

was used to check the functionality of the Qualtrics system, the clarity of the instructions and test items, the appropriateness of the vocabulary level, and the approximate time required to complete the survey. Because no substantive changes were made to the target items after this check, the responses from these two B2 learners were retained as reference data for interpreting the A2 learners' performance. They were not treated as a statistically comparable control group.

The data collection consisted of the Subject Identification Task and a post-task questionnaire. Both components were programmed and administered using Qualtrics. Participants accessed the survey by scanning a QR code with their personal smartphones.

The session proceeded in the following order. First, participants received an overview of the study, including its purpose and estimated duration, which was approximately 35 to 45 minutes. Informed consent was then obtained. During this initial briefing, the researcher orally confirmed that all participants were native speakers of Japanese. The consent form stated that (a) participation and task performance would not affect course grades or academic evaluation, (b) participants could withdraw at any point without penalty, (c) the collected data would be used only for the present research, and (d) the data would be anonymized so that individual participants could not be identified.

Second, the researcher explained the task procedures using a whiteboard demonstration. Third, participants completed the text-based Subject Identification Task on their smartphones, followed immediately by the post-task questionnaire. The researcher remained present during the session to address technical problems if they occurred, but did not provide feedback on the content of the task items while participants were responding.

Finally, after data collection was completed, a debriefing was offered to participants who were interested. During the debriefing, the researcher explained the purpose of the task items and the linguistic mechanisms underlying the target constructions.

The following sections describe the content and structure of the Subject Identification Task (Section 2.3.1) and the post-task questionnaire (Section 2.3.2).

2.3.1. Subject Identification Task

The Subject Identification Task was designed as a relatively short multiple-choice task consisting of 30 items. Because the present study was a small-scale pilot study, the number of items was kept limited in order to reduce participant fatigue and to examine whether the task format and item design were suitable for the intended research purpose.

The task included both target items and filler items. Filler items were added to reduce the transparency of the task and to prevent participants from focusing exclusively on subject identification and clitic placement. The target items consisted of five construction types: four SVO constructions, five VO constructions with null subjects, five transitive PCCs, five pronominal verb PCCs, and five *gustar*-type PCCs. Six filler items were also included. To reduce possible order effects, such as participants becoming accustomed to a particular construction type, all items were presented in a randomized order for each participant using the randomization function in Qualtrics.

The task was administered as a text-based reading task on participants' smartphones. In each item, participants saw a single Spanish sentence and selected the appropriate answer from four options. The instructions were presented on the Qualtrics screen and were also explained orally by the researcher. Participants were instructed to answer as intuitively and quickly as possible, without spending too much time consciously analyzing the grammar of each sentence. This instruction was intended to encourage relatively immediate sentence interpretation, although the task was not timed and response times were not recorded.

The Qualtrics interface was configured to facilitate smooth progression through the task. Items were divided across several screens, with approximately four to seven items per screen. Participants proceeded through the

task by selecting an answer, and the survey was configured so that they could not return to previous screens. This setting was used to discourage later revision of earlier responses.

For each target item, participants were asked to identify the grammatical subject of the Spanish sentence. The term “grammatical subject” was used rather than simply “subject” in order to reduce possible confusion between the syntactic subject and semantic roles, especially in *gustar*-type constructions. Each item contained one correct answer and three distractors. The distractors were not selected randomly; rather, they were designed to correspond to possible misinterpretation patterns, such as interpreting a sentence-initial clitic as the subject, misidentifying a postverbal noun phrase, or incorrectly projecting a null subject.

Example (5) shows a target item involving a *gustar*-type PCC. The correct answer is option 4, *la cabeza* ‘the head.’ The English translations in parentheses are provided here only for explanatory purposes; no Japanese or English translations, glosses, or annotations were provided to participants during the actual task.

- (5) Please choose the grammatical subject of the following sentence:

Me dolía la cabeza. (‘I had a headache.’)

1. *nosotros* (we) 2. *yo* (I) 3. *él/ella* (he/she) 4. *la cabeza* (the head)

Filler items asked questions unrelated to subject identification. These items were included to reduce participants’ awareness of the specific focus of the task. Example (6) shows a filler item concerning a weather expression.

- (6) Please choose the word that expresses weather or climate in the following sentence:

Hoy hace mucho calor. (‘It’s very hot today.’)

1. *hoy* (today) 2. *calor* (heat) 3. *hace* (verb referring to the weather)
4. *mucho* (much)

For scoring, each target item was coded dichotomously: correct responses were assigned a score of 1, and incorrect responses were assigned a score of 0. Responses to filler items were excluded from the analysis.

2.3.2. Questionnaire

After completing the Subject Identification Task, participants answered a post-task questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect self-reported information about the strategies participants used during the task, their possible reliance on other languages, and their perceptions of the task itself. It consisted of three sections and included multiple-choice items, six-point Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions.

The first section, Q1 and Q2, asked about participants' self-reported strategies and the degree of uncertainty they experienced while completing the task. In Q1, participants selected the factor they considered most important when identifying the grammatical subject: (a) word position, (b) word meaning, (c) verb ending, or (d) other. This item was included to examine whether participants reported relying primarily on word order, meaning, or verbal morphology when making their judgments. Q2 asked how often participants felt uncertain during the task, using a four-point scale.

The second section, Q3 to Q10, focused on participants' self-reported reading processes and possible cross-linguistic influence (CLI) during Spanish sentence comprehension. Q3 to Q9 were rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 6 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The items were grouped according to the following constructs.

Items Q3 to Q6 concerned possible influence from L2 English. These items asked whether participants mentally translated Spanish sentences into English, whether they tended to perceive Spanish word order as similar to English SVO order, whether they felt that PCCs were unnatural or difficult to process, and whether English words were activated during reading. These items were included to explore the possibility that an SVO-based schema associated with L2 English influenced participants' interpretation of Spanish

sentences.

Items Q7 and Q8 concerned possible influence from L1 Japanese. These items asked whether participants mentally translated Spanish sentences into Japanese and whether they tended to interpret the sentence-initial element as if it were followed by the Japanese topic marker *wa*. For example, a sentence-initial clitic such as *me* might be interpreted through a Japanese topic-like frame. These items were included to examine whether Japanese-based interpretive patterns were reported during the task.

Item Q9 concerned animacy-based interpretation. This item asked whether participants tended to identify human nouns as subjects. It was included to explore whether learners relied on semantic cues related to animacy when assigning the subject role.

Item Q10 asked about participants' confidence in their responses, using a six-point scale ranging from 6 (very confident) to 1 (not confident at all). This item was included as supplementary information for interpreting task performance. For example, confidence ratings may help distinguish errors accompanied by uncertainty from errors made with relatively high confidence, although they do not by themselves determine the source of the error.

The third section, Q11 to Q15b, was included because the present study was a pilot study and aimed to evaluate the task design. These items asked about participants' perceptions of the overall difficulty of the task, vocabulary level, number of items, fatigue, and clarity of the instructions. They were also used to examine whether the task produced possible ceiling or floor effects.

In Q15, participants were asked whether they had noticed the focus of the task during the survey, such as its emphasis on sentence structure or the presence of filler items. Q15b provided an open-ended space for participants to describe what they had noticed. These items were included to assess the transparency of the task and to determine whether participants may have consciously used metalinguistic knowledge while responding.

The following section describes how the objective scores from the Subject Identification Task and the subjective responses from the post-task

questionnaire were analyzed.

2.4. Data Analysis

This section describes how the collected data were processed and analyzed. For the Subject Identification Task, the six filler items were excluded from the analysis, and only the 24 target items were analyzed. Each response was coded dichotomously: correct responses were assigned a score of 1, and incorrect responses were assigned a score of 0. Accuracy scores were then calculated for each participant and for each construction type. The specific distractors selected in incorrect responses were not included in the overall quantitative summary in this section. Instead, these error patterns were examined qualitatively in the Discussion section.

The present study was designed as a small-scale pilot study to examine the feasibility and preliminary usefulness of the proposed methodology. Because the sample size of the A2 learners was limited ($n = 8$), inferential statistical analyses, such as generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs), were not conducted. With a sample of this size, such models would likely produce unstable estimates and would not provide a reliable basis for hypothesis testing. The analysis therefore focused on descriptive patterns rather than inferential claims.

Specifically, mean accuracy rates were calculated for each of the five target construction types: SVO constructions, VO constructions with null subjects, transitive PCCs, pronominal verb PCCs, and *gustar*-type PCCs. These descriptive results were presented visually using bar graphs in order to identify broad patterns in learners' subject identification performance. The responses from the two B2-level reference participants were also summarized descriptively and used only as reference data for interpreting the A2 learners' performance. They were not treated as a statistically comparable control group.

The post-task questionnaire responses were also analyzed descriptively. For the Likert-scale items, means and response distributions were calculated

for items related to possible L2 English influence, possible L1 Japanese influence, animacy-based interpretation, and confidence. Open-ended responses were reviewed qualitatively. These subjective data were used as supplementary information for interpreting the task results, particularly in relation to learners' self-reported strategies and possible sources of misidentification.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the results should not be interpreted as providing conclusive evidence for or against the proposed hypothesis. Rather, the analysis was intended to determine whether the Subject Identification Task and post-task questionnaire can capture patterns that warrant further investigation. If the methodology proves useful in this pilot study, a larger-scale follow-up study with a sufficient sample size will be conducted, allowing for inferential statistical analysis, including GLMMs where appropriate.

The following section presents the results of the Subject Identification Task and the post-task questionnaire.

3. Results

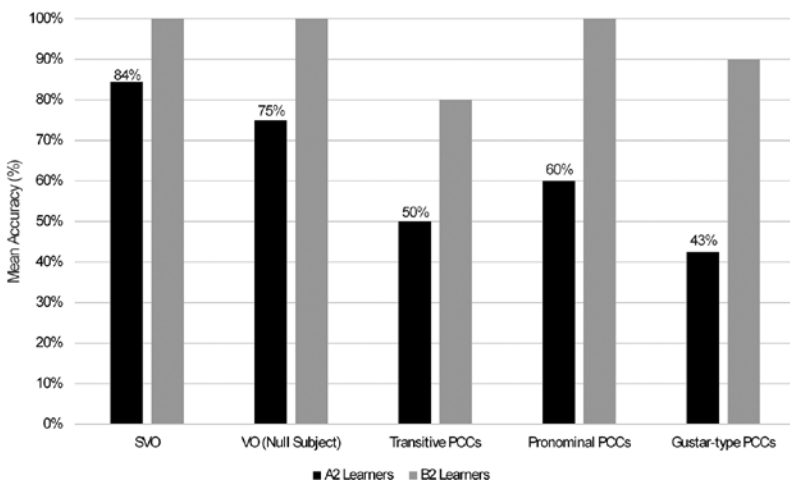
3.1. Accuracy on the Subject Identification Task

Figure 1 presents the mean accuracy rates of the A2 learners ($n = 8$) and the B2 reference participants ($n = 2$) across the five target construction types.

For the A2 learners, mean accuracy was 84% for the SVO constructions and 75% for the VO constructions with null subjects. Accuracy was lower for the three PCC types: 60% for pronominal verb PCCs, 50% for transitive PCCs, and 43% for *gustar*-type PCCs.

The B2 reference participants showed higher accuracy across all construction types. Their mean accuracy was 100% for the SVO constructions, 100% for the VO constructions with null subjects, 80% for transitive PCCs, 100% for pronominal verb PCCs, and 90% for *gustar*-type PCCs.

Descriptively, the A2 learners showed higher accuracy on the two baseline constructions than on the PCCs. Among the PCCs, the lowest mean

Figure 1 *Mean Accuracy Rates Across Target Constructions by Learner Group*

Note. PCCs = preverbal clitic constructions.

accuracy was observed for *gustar*-type constructions. The B2 reference participants showed higher accuracy than the A2 learners in all construction types, although these data are treated as descriptive reference data because of the small number of B2 participants.

3.2. Self-Reported Strategies and Task Perceptions

This section presents the results of the post-task questionnaire. The questionnaire collected self-reported information about the cues participants used during the Subject Identification Task, the degree of hesitation they experienced, and their perceptions of possible language-related influences during Spanish sentence comprehension.

Regarding the primary cues used for subject identification (Q1), Figure 2 shows that the A2 learners' responses were divided between two options. Five participants (63%) selected "verb ending," indicating that they reported relying primarily on verbal morphology. Three participants (37%) selected "word position," indicating that they reported relying on linear word order.

Figure 2 *Self-reported Cues for Subject Identification*

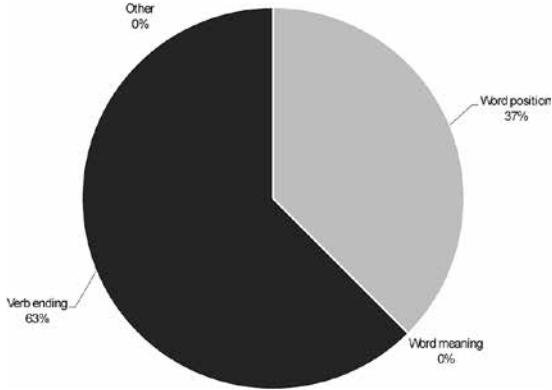
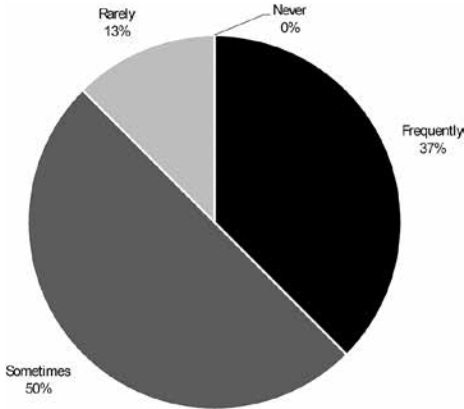


Figure 3 *Self-Reported Frequency of Hesitation During the Task*



No participants selected “word meaning” or “other.”

Figure 3 presents the frequency of hesitation reported during the task (Q2). Four participants (50%) reported that they “sometimes” hesitated when choosing their answers, and three participants (37%) reported that they hesitated “frequently.” One participant (13%) selected “rarely,” and no participants selected “never.”

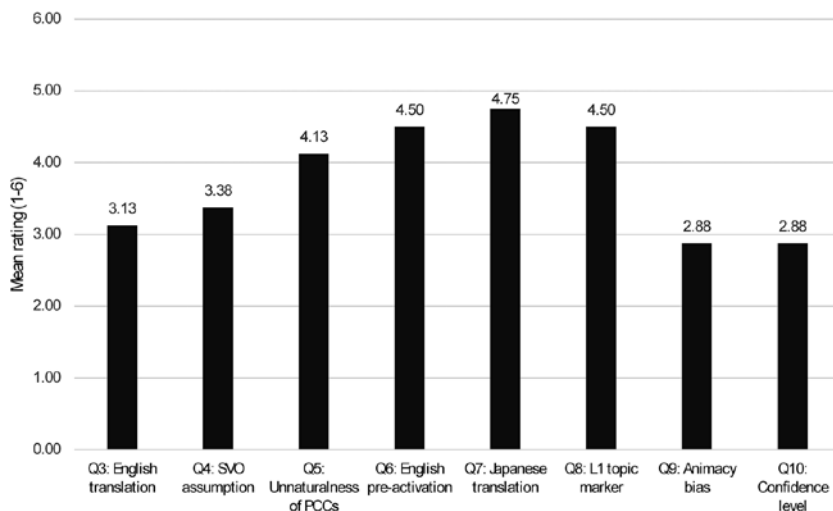
Figure 4 *Mean Ratings for Post-Task Questionnaire Items (Q3–Q10)*

Figure 4 summarizes the mean ratings for the six-point Likert-scale items (Q3–Q10). These items concerned participants’ self-reported translation tendencies, perceived similarity or difficulty of Spanish word order, possible activation of English or Japanese, animacy-based interpretation, and confidence in their responses. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with each statement.

Among the items related to Japanese, “Japanese translation” received the highest mean rating ($M = 4.75$). The item concerning the possible insertion of an L1 Japanese topic marker, such as mentally interpreting a sentence-initial element with *wa*, also received a relatively high mean rating ($M = 4.50$).

Among the items related to English, “English pre-activation” received a mean rating of 4.50, and “unnaturalness of PCCs” received a mean rating of 4.13. The mean ratings for “SVO assumption” ($M = 3.38$) and “English translation” ($M = 3.13$) were lower than those for English pre-activation and perceived unnaturalness of PCCs.

For the remaining items, the mean rating for “animacy bias” was 2.88,

suggesting that participants did not report a strong tendency to identify human nouns as grammatical subjects. The mean rating for “confidence level” was also 2.88. This relatively low confidence rating is consistent with the hesitation responses reported in Q2.

4. Discussion

4.1. Subject Misidentification in PCCs and Possible L2 English Influence

The present study examined whether L1 Japanese learners of L3 Spanish show patterns of subject misidentification when processing preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs), and whether these patterns may be related to an SVO-based processing schema associated with L2 English. Because this study was designed as a small-scale pilot study, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive and exploratory rather than as conclusive evidence of L2 syntactic interference.

The results of the Subject Identification Task showed a difference between the baseline constructions and the PCCs. The A2 learners showed relatively high accuracy on the SVO constructions (84%) and the VO constructions with null subjects (75%). By contrast, their accuracy was lower on the PCCs: 60% for pronominal verb PCCs, 50% for transitive PCCs, and 43% for *gustar*-type PCCs. This pattern suggests that the presence of a preverbal clitic, together with noncanonical mappings between form, position, and grammatical role, made subject identification more difficult for these learners.

This tendency can be discussed in relation to the First-Noun Principle (FNP) in Input Processing theory (VanPatten, 1996, 2020). The FNP predicts that learners may assign the subject or agent role to the first noun or pronoun they encounter in a sentence. For Spanish PCCs, this predicts that a preverbal object clitic may be interpreted as subject-like, especially when learners do not fully process the agreement relation between the verb and the grammatical subject. However, the present data also suggest that the learners’ errors cannot be reduced to a simple first-position effect.

A representative example is the item *Les interesaban las novelas latino-*

americanas ‘They were interested in Latin American novels.’ In this sentence, the grammatical subject is *las novelas* ‘the novels,’ because the verb *interesaban* agrees with the plural stimulus subject. However, only 25% of the A2 learners selected *las novelas* as the grammatical subject. One participant (13%) selected the preverbal dative clitic *les*, whereas five participants (63%) selected *ellas*, an unstated subject pronoun corresponding to the semantic experiencer. No participant selected *latinoamericanas*.

This distribution is important because it does not show only a direct selection of the sentence-initial clitic. Rather, the most frequent response was an unexpressed subject pronoun associated with the experiencer. This pattern suggests that many learners may have interpreted the sentence through an experiencer-as-subject mapping, similar to the English structure *They were interested in...*, rather than through the Spanish agreement relation between *interesaban* and *las novelas*. In this sense, the result is compatible with the possibility that an SVO-based processing schema influenced their interpretation. At the same time, the data do not allow us to determine whether this influence came specifically from L2 English, from a more general word-order strategy, or from the semantic salience of the experiencer. The questionnaire data discussed in the following section provide additional evidence for considering these possibilities.

The findings also relate to Tight’s (2012) discussion of the First-Noun Principle. Tight found that L1 English learners of Spanish did not simply assign subjecthood to the first noun in all cases. In VS sentences with a single animate noun, learners often interpreted the postverbal noun as an object, suggesting that their interpretation was guided by the noun’s position relative to the verb rather than by its numerical order in the sentence. The present study differs from Tight’s in both the learner population and the target constructions, but the results point in a similar direction: learners’ sentence interpretation may be shaped not only by the first element in the string, but also by a broader expectation that preverbal elements are subject-like and postverbal elements are object-like.

This point is especially relevant for L1 Japanese learners. Since Japanese is an OV language, one might expect Japanese learners to have some advantage in processing Spanish PCCs, which also contain preverbal object elements. The lower accuracy observed for PCCs in the A2 group suggests that surface similarity in OV order is not sufficient to guarantee accurate subject identification. Unlike Japanese objects, Spanish clitics are phonologically weak elements whose grammatical function must be interpreted through clitic form, verbal agreement, and syntactic configuration. Thus, the learners may not have been able to use their L1 Japanese parsing routines straightforwardly when processing Spanish PCCs.

This interpretation is consistent with Bran's (2015) discussion of subject-related errors in Spanish learning. Bran showed that Romanian learners of Spanish sometimes overused explicit subject pronouns even though both Romanian and Spanish allow null subjects, and suggested that this pattern may reflect interference from other foreign languages, such as English or French. Although Bran's study focused on written production rather than sentence comprehension, it provides a useful parallel for the present study: L1 similarity with Spanish does not necessarily prevent the influence of previously learned foreign languages on Spanish subject-related structures.

The comparison with the B2 reference participants should also be interpreted cautiously. The B2 participants showed higher accuracy than the A2 learners across all construction types, including the PCCs. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that more advanced learners are better able to use verbal agreement and construction-specific knowledge when identifying grammatical subjects. However, because only two B2 participants were included, these data should not be taken as evidence for a developmental trajectory. They provide only a reference point suggesting that the task can distinguish, at least descriptively, between less advanced learners and more advanced learners.

Taken together, the results suggest that A2 learners' difficulty with PCCs is not simply a matter of unfamiliar vocabulary or a general inability to

understand Spanish sentences. Rather, the lower accuracy in PCCs, especially in *gustar*-type constructions, points to a specific difficulty in mapping preverbal clitics, postverbal noun phrases, semantic roles, and verbal agreement onto the grammatical subject. The findings are compatible with an interpretation in which an SVO-based processing schema, possibly associated with L2 English, contributes to subject misidentification. However, this interpretation remains provisional and should be tested with a larger sample and more controlled measures in the follow-up study.

4.2. Questionnaire Responses and Methodological Implications

The post-task questionnaire provides additional information for interpreting the results of the Subject Identification Task. Because the questionnaire was based on self-report, the responses should not be treated as direct evidence of learners' actual processing mechanisms. However, they are useful for examining how learners perceived their own strategies during the task and for identifying methodological issues to be addressed in the follow-up study.

In Q1, five of the eight A2 learners (63%) reported that they relied primarily on verb endings when identifying grammatical subjects, whereas three learners (37%) reported relying on word position. This result is noteworthy because the task performance did not fully align with the learners' reported reliance on verbal morphology. As shown in Section 3.1, mean accuracy was lower for transitive PCCs (50%) and *gustar*-type PCCs (43%) than for the baseline SVO and VO constructions. This pattern suggests that some learners may have been aware that verbal morphology is relevant to subject identification, but were not always able to apply this knowledge consistently when processing PCCs.

This interpretation is compatible with the assumptions of Input Processing theory, but it should be stated cautiously. VanPatten (2020) notes that processing is concerned with how learners establish form-meaning connections during comprehension, and that comprehension can be demanding for

learners with limited processing capacity. The present results suggest that explicit knowledge about verb agreement may not have been sufficient for accurate subject identification in all constructions. However, because the task did not record response times or eye movements, the data should not be taken as direct evidence of implicit processing. Rather, they point to a possible gap between learners' reported strategies and their performance on the task.

The Likert-scale items also suggest that learners may have drawn on more than one language when interpreting Spanish sentences. Among the items related to Japanese, the mean rating for Japanese translation was the highest among all questionnaire items ($M = 4.75$), and the item concerning the possible insertion of a Japanese topic marker also received a relatively high rating ($M = 4.50$). These responses suggest that Japanese-based interpretive patterns may have been active for some learners during the task. In particular, the reported tendency to interpret sentence-initial elements through a topic-like frame may help explain why some learners treated preverbal elements as subject-like or discourse-prominent.

The items related to English also received moderately high ratings. English pre-activation had a mean rating of 4.50, and perceived unnaturalness of PCCs had a mean rating of 4.13. By contrast, direct English translation ($M = 3.13$) and the explicit assumption that Spanish follows SVO order ($M = 3.38$) received lower ratings. This pattern suggests that the role of L2 English may not have been limited to conscious translation into English. Rather, English may have influenced learners' expectations about sentence structure in a less explicit way. This interpretation is consistent with the task results, especially the lower accuracy for PCCs, but it remains provisional and should be examined more directly in the main study.

At the same time, the questionnaire does not support a simple account in which errors are caused only by L2 English interference. The relatively high ratings for Japanese translation and topic-marker interpretation suggest that L1 Japanese may also have shaped how learners interpreted sentence-initial

elements. Therefore, the present findings are better understood as pointing to multiple possible sources of influence rather than to a single transfer mechanism. The data do not allow us to determine the exact timing or order of these influences during comprehension. For this reason, it would be premature to describe the error pattern as a fixed two-stage processing mechanism. A more cautious interpretation is that L1 Japanese and L2 English may both contribute to learners' subject identification in PCCs, but in different ways.

The questionnaire also provides useful information about the design of the pilot study. Responses to the items concerning task difficulty, vocabulary level, item volume, and instruction clarity suggest that the task was generally manageable, although some learners experienced hesitation during the task. This point is also consistent with Q2, where seven of the eight A2 learners reported that they hesitated either "sometimes" or "frequently." The relatively low confidence rating in Q10 ($M = 2.88$) further suggests that learners were not fully certain about their responses. These findings indicate that the task was capable of eliciting variation in performance and self-reported uncertainty, which is useful for a pilot study.

However, the questionnaire also points to several methodological issues. First, the task should be revised to reduce unnecessary processing demands. Although the vocabulary and verb forms were selected from previously taught material, some learners may still have experienced difficulty with particular lexical items or sentence patterns. In the follow-up study, it may be useful to include a brief vocabulary review before the task or to further restrict the lexical range of the test items.

Second, five of the A2 learners reported that they noticed some aspect of the underlying sentence pattern during the task. This does not invalidate the data, but it suggests that the task may have been relatively transparent to some participants. If learners become aware of the target structure while completing the task, they may begin to use explicit grammatical reasoning rather than relying on their initial interpretation of the sentence. In the main study, this issue could be addressed by increasing the number of filler items,

varying the types of filler questions, and spacing target PCC items farther apart.

The responses from the two B2 reference participants should also be interpreted cautiously. Their higher task accuracy and reported reliance on verbal morphology suggest that more advanced learners may be better able to use agreement cues when identifying grammatical subjects. However, because only two B2 participants were included, these results cannot establish a developmental pattern. They serve instead as preliminary reference data showing that the task may distinguish between learner profiles with different levels of Spanish proficiency.

Taken together, the questionnaire results support the usefulness of combining a Subject Identification Task with post-task self-report data. The task results showed lower accuracy for PCCs among the A2 learners, while the questionnaire responses provided additional information about the strategies and language-related perceptions that may have accompanied these errors. These findings remain exploratory, but they provide a useful basis for formulating a more specific hypothesis about how L1 Japanese and L2 English may jointly shape the processing of Spanish PCCs. In this respect, the present pilot study can be seen as an empirical extension of the pedagogical concerns discussed in Nishiguchi (2025). A larger follow-up study will be needed to examine whether the patterns observed here are stable across participants and whether they can be explained by L2 English influence, L1 Japanese influence, construction-specific difficulty, or some combination of these factors.

5. Conclusion

This pilot study examined subject identification in L3 Spanish among L1 Japanese learners who had previously studied English as an L2. It focused on whether learners show difficulty in processing preverbal clitic constructions (PCCs), including transitive PCCs, pronominal verb constructions, and *gustar*-type constructions. The Subject Identification Task showed that the A2

learners had lower accuracy on PCCs than on baseline SVO and VO constructions, with the lowest mean accuracy observed for *gustar*-type constructions. These descriptive findings suggest that PCCs pose a specific challenge for learners when they are required to identify the grammatical subject during sentence comprehension.

The post-task questionnaire provided additional information about learners' self-reported strategies and language-related perceptions. Although several learners reported relying on verbal morphology when identifying subjects, their task performance suggests that this knowledge was not always applied consistently in PCCs. The questionnaire responses also indicated that both L1 Japanese and L2 English may have been relevant to learners' interpretation of Spanish sentences. In particular, the relatively high ratings for Japanese translation, topic-marker interpretation, and English pre-activation suggest that subject misidentification may involve more than a simple transfer of English SVO word order. Rather, the results point to the possibility that learners draw on multiple linguistic resources when processing Spanish PCCs.

Because this was a small-scale pilot study, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory. The sample size was limited, and the B2 participants were included only as reference participants rather than as a statistically comparable control group. In addition, the task did not include response-time measures or other online processing indicators. Therefore, the present study does not establish the cognitive mechanisms underlying subject misidentification. Instead, it provides a preliminary basis for refining the research design and formulating more specific hypotheses for a larger follow-up study.

Future research should examine whether the patterns observed here are stable across a larger sample of L1 Japanese learners of Spanish. A follow-up study should include a larger number of participants, a more balanced proficiency design, additional filler items to reduce task transparency, and further control of vocabulary and item difficulty. These refinements would make it possible to conduct inferential statistical analyses and to examine more carefully the relative roles of L2 English influence, L1 Japanese influence, and

construction-specific difficulty in the processing of Spanish PCCs.

It is hoped that the present study will contribute to future research on L3 Spanish acquisition by clarifying methodological issues involved in assessing subject misidentification among Japanese learners. More broadly, the findings may help inform the development of pedagogical approaches that draw learners' attention to clitic placement, verbal agreement, and the distinction between semantic roles and grammatical subjecthood in Spanish.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- (1) Some earlier Indo-European languages, including Sanskrit, Latin, and Old English, allowed relatively flexible constituent order, including object-initial patterns (Bybee, 2015). In the history of Spanish, the placement of clitics to the left of the finite verb became increasingly established around the sixteenth century (Flores & Melis, 2015).
- (2) In Japanese, psychological predicates such as *suki-da* 'like' are often expressed in a topic-nominative construction, as in *watashi-wa inu-ga suki-da* 'I like dogs' (literally, I-TOP dog-NOM like). Although this is not a verbal transitive construction, *watashi* is marked by the topic marker *wa* and corresponds semantically to the experiencer, whereas *inu* 'dog' is marked by *ga* and corresponds to the stimulus, or the entity toward which the psychological state is directed. Thus, the Japanese construction is not syntactically equivalent to Spanish *gustar*-type constructions, but it is relevant for comparison because both involve a distinction between the experiencer and the stimulus (Nishiguchi, 2023).
- (3) Real Academia Española and Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española (2025) define eleven forms of unstressed personal pronouns (*pronombres personales átonos*). In the present study, the term *clitic* refers primarily to proclitic forms that appear before finite verbs. Formal second-person pronouns such as *usted*, which are grammatically third person, and cases of *leísmo*, including *leísmo de cortesía* 'polite leísmo,' were excluded from the stimulus design because they go beyond the proficiency level of the target learners (pp. 1435–1549).
- (4) Prior to the experiment, the present, preterite, and imperfect tense conjugations, object pronouns, *gustar*-type constructions, and reflexive structures had already been covered in the introductory Spanish courses taken by all participants.

Abbreviations

1SG = first-person singular; 3PL = third-person plural; ACC = accusative; CLI = cross-linguistic influence; DAT = dative; DOM = differential object marker; FNP = First-Noun Principle; IP = Input Processing; NOM = nominative; OBL = oblique; OV = object-verb; PCC = preverbal clitic construction; PL = plural; REFL = reflexive; SVO = subject-verb-object; TOP = topic marker; VO = verb-object.

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