

## On *That*-omission and its Absence in the Written Production of Bilingual Spanish/Catalan L2-learners of English

MIREIA LLINAS-GRAU  
mireia.llinas@uab.cat

ELISABET PLADEVALL  
elisabet.pladevall@uab.cat

MONTSERRAT CAPDEVILA  
montserrat.capdevila@uab.cat

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Following recent minimalist accounts of the English so-called *that*-omission construction (as in *I think this book is interesting*), this article analyses the written production of bilingual Spanish/Catalan L2 learners of English and reveals L1 interference in the acquisition of this construction. The first part of this article shows how the phenomenon of complementiser omission is different in English with respect to Catalan and Spanish, and summarises a selection of recent proposals. The second part of the article is devoted to the analysis of the data of a group of L2-learners of English at different levels of development. We conclude at the end of the article that the L2 production of these students suggests that the *that*-insertion rule responsible for the presence of *that* in specific syntactic environments in English has not been learned.

Keywords: complementiser omission; comparative syntax; L2 acquisition

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## Sobre la omisión del *that* y su ausencia en la producción escrita de aprendices de inglés bilingües catalán/español

Siguiendo propuestas minimalistas recientes sobre la construcción conocida como *that-omission* (como en *I think this book is interesting*, Creo que este libro es interesante), este artículo analiza la producción escrita de estudiantes de inglés bilingües español/catalán y pone de manifiesto la interferencia de la L1 en la adquisición de esta construcción. En la primera parte de este artículo se muestra cómo el fenómeno de la supresión del complementante es diferente en inglés con respecto al catalán y el español, y se resume una selección de propuestas recientes. La segunda parte del artículo está dedicado al análisis de los datos de un grupo de estudiantes de L2 inglés en diferentes niveles de desarrollo. Concluimos el artículo afirmando que la producción de estos estudiantes sugiere que la regla de inserción responsable de la presencia del *that* en ciertas construcciones del inglés no se ha aprendido.

Palabras clave: omisión del complementante; sintaxis comparada; adquisición de segundas lenguas

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called *that*-omission phenomenon is a characteristic construction of the English language which native speakers are almost unaware of. The presence or absence of the complementiser in an embedded clause such as (1) often goes unnoticed and seems not to have any semantic or syntactic consequences.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. She thinks that students enjoy the subject  
b. She thinks students enjoy the subject

Clauses (1) a and b are considered to be semantically and syntactically identical as they share the same meaning and structure (an embedded finite clause). The fact that the complementiser can be absent, as in (1)b, is not a general property of the language, as there are constructions where *that* cannot be absent:

- (2) a. The students that passed the exam are happy  
b. \*The students passed the exam are happy  
(3) a. That students enjoy the subject is clear  
b. \* Students enjoy the subject is clear

Constructions (2) and (3) indicate that the complementiser is necessary and compulsory in certain contexts, as in subject relative clauses (2) and in finite subject clauses (3).

*That* is usually considered to be equivalent to the Spanish complementiser *que*, as it is the element that introduces finite embedded clauses after verbs like *think*, *say* or *know*, each taking a *que* in Spanish that cannot be omitted as illustrated in (4) below:

- (4) a. Cree que a los estudiantes les gusta la asignatura  
b. \* Cree a los estudiantes les gusta la asignatura

The same behaviour is observed in Catalan (see 5), the other language spoken by the students whose production will be studied in this article.

- (5) a. Creu que als estudiants els agrada l'assignatura  
b. \* Creu als estudiants els agrada l'assignatura

This contrasting behaviour of an apparently equivalent item in English, Spanish and Catalan has not received much attention (but see Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (2011; forthcoming). We believe that the syntactic behaviour of these two elements, *that*

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and *que*, is best captured if they are considered as different elements (see section 2.3). In the following sections we will see that several proposals have been posited to explain *that*-omission in English but little attention has been devoted to the fact that languages like Spanish do not allow it in the same contexts — an important exception to this is Gallego (2007). Of the different proposals accounting for the phenomenon we have chosen one, Franks (2005), which seems to go hand in hand with the pragmatics and prosodic factors involved in *that*-omission (see section 2.4). Franks' proposal inverts the traditional view of *omission* and postulates instead an *insertion* process. English facts fare better with this proposal but Spanish and Catalan facts do not. For Spanish and Catalan the structure of (4) and (5) is an embedded CP but for English, we believe a proper CP is not present. We follow Franks (2005) in claiming that English embedded clauses of a specific type of verb (see section 2.2) are finite TPs.

In section 2.1 the basic proposals for the English construction are summarised and it will become clear that a proper CP is not part of the structure of any of these special embedded finite clauses. Absence of *that* has been interpreted by some authors as presence of a null element in C but, more recently, explanations have put this view aside and taken different directions. The complementiser has been reanalysed as a tense element in the account provided by Pesetsky and Torrego (2000), and as a truncated, simplified structure in the view adopted by Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007). As mentioned, a complete inversion of the logic underlying omission accounts is found in Franks (2005), who claims that the absence of *that* is the unmarked choice, its presence being the result of an insertion rule.

In view of all of these considerations, and others that will be shown to be relevant in the following sections, we believe that the English so-called *that*-omission is an interesting construction to consider in the L2 context. Our aim in this paper is to analyse L2 production data assuming that the constructions in (1) and (4)-(5) are not equivalent. We analyse written essays of L2 English learners who are bilingual Spanish/Catalan secondary school students and relate them both to a theoretical question (Does the insertion proposal make sense in view of results obtained?) and to an applied one (Does L1 influence the production of L2 learners by making them produce *that* in written essays where native English speakers would not?). We cannot leave aside the nature of the input as an extremely relevant factor in the process of L2 learning (see section 3).

## 2. THE *THAT*-OMISSION CONTENTION

### 2.1 Absence as deletion, emptiness or movement

The term *deletion* refers back to Chomsky (1981), where *S'-deletion* was used for those embedded clauses which do not contain an initial *that*, such as embedded non-finite clauses in ECM constructions. In the same year, Stowell (1981) initiated a list of accounts of *that*-omission. Those framed in the GB model, like his own, regarded null C as an empty category that had to satisfy the basic principle of empty categories, the Empty Category Principle

(ECP). A basic aim of his proposal was to review the contexts in which *that*-omission was possible and explain why it is not a universal phenomenon. In a more updated version, Bošković and Lasnik (2003) provide an account of null C and its distribution eliminating references to notions that are not used in the present model. They follow an initial proposal by Pesetsky (1992) who claims that null C is an affix and posits a PF Merger analysis of affixation which requires adjacency of the affix and the verb. If the verb and a null C are adjacent, the null affix is licensed and attaches to the V, resulting in a construction where *that* is non-overt, i.e., an omission construction, such as (1)b, repeated here:

- (1) b. She thinks- $\emptyset$  students enjoy the subject.

If null C is not adjacent to a V element, it is not licensed, and omission is, therefore, ungrammatical:

- (6) \*  $\emptyset$  students enjoy the subject is clear

However, a very different analysis is posited by Pesetsky and Torrego (2001). They question the rooted assumption that the element *that* is a real complementiser. Their proposal is fundamentally minimalist and relies on the presence of features in functional projections which trigger obligatory movement if they are uninterpretable. A new conception of nominative case plus the essential assumption that uninterpretable features must be deleted are at the heart of their explanation, which assumes that nominative case is uninterpretable T (uT) in D. According to these authors, C contains a uT feature which must be deleted. Optionality arises when there are two equally close elements that can delete this feature: the element in T which is realised as *that* when moved to C, or a nominative subject (a D element with a uT feature). For Pesetsky and Torrego there is real syntactic optionality as both representations (those corresponding to present and absent *that*) are equal in terms of cost.

In (7)b the nominative subject (*students*) of the embedded clause moves to Spec-CP and deletes uT in C, whereas in (7)a *that* moves to C, it is the realization of T to C movement and deletes uT in C.

- (7) a. She thinks [ that students enjoy the subject ]  
 b. She thinks [ students enjoy the subject ]

A different approach to the phenomenon is adopted by Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007), who claim that an embedded clause lacking a *that* as in (7)b is an instance of a *truncated* structure which lacks levels in the left periphery (Rizzi 1997). These authors' aim is to account for the fact that subject extraction is less extended than object extraction. To this end the authors make use of two notions which are crucial in the left-periphery framework: the *Subject Criterion* and *Criterial Freezing*. The Subject Criterion restates



distinguishes between these two verb types and refers to verbs like *say*, as *bridge verbs*, and those like *quip* as *non-bridge verbs*. The two types show different syntactic behaviour with respect to extraction of elements within the embedded clauses: a bridge verb allows extraction, but a non-bridge verb does not:

- (10) a. What<sub>i</sub> did Billy say (that) he saw ?  
 b. \*What<sub>i</sub> did Billy quip that he saw ?  
 (from Franks 2005)

Hence, Franks' proposal implies that a complement clause of bridge verbs is not a CP but a TP, as shown in (11a). Conversely, a complement clause of a non-bridge verb is a full CP, as in (11b):

- (11) a. Billy said (that) [TP he saw a ghost].  
 b. Billy quipped [CP that [TP he saw a ghost]].

Franks' account of finite complement clauses seems much more plausible than others once real usage is taken into account (see section 2.4). As will be further explained, the frequency of *that* in informal oral speech is very low and this suggests that insertion of *that* in formal registers is a more adequate account.

### 2.3 A contrast between languages

As mentioned in the *Introduction*, Spanish and Catalan contrast with English with respect to the construction under analysis in that the former do not allow the absence of the complementiser in embedded clauses selected by bridge verbs, as shown in (4)-(5):

- (4) a. Cree que a los estudiantes les gusta la asignatura  
 b. \*Cree a los estudiantes les gusta la asignatura  
 (5) a. Creu que als estudiants els agrada l'assignatura  
 b. \*Creu als estudiants els agrada l'assignatura

Both of these languages, though, allow a complementiserless clause in other contexts, associated with a different verbal tense (subjunctive), as in the following examples:

- (12) Rogamos esperen a ser atendidos  
 (13) Preguem esperin a ser atesos

The production of clauses like these, however, is highly restricted in Spanish and Catalan, being limited to written formal contexts and thereby differing significantly from instances of complementiser absence in English, which are more informal. The process that allows the absence of *que* in these constructions is V-movement, a strategy that

Spanish and Catalan have (see Gallego 2007) and which underlies (12) and (13). Note that V-movement to C predicts the verb to precede the subject when both are present:

- (14) a. \*Lamento María piense eso  
 b. Lamento piense eso María  
 (from Gallego 2007)

Thus, Spanish and Catalan seem to have a proper, complete CP structure in finite complement clauses where *que* is a proper head that projects a phrase; it is not a syntactically inert element. In contrast, as explained in the previous section, English complement clauses of bridge verbs are not full CPs when *that* is a head (see Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez forthcoming, for a more detailed account of the differences between these languages with respect to this construction). In section 2.5 we will briefly see how L1 data also point in this direction. This structural difference may underlie the L2 production facts found in our analysis (see sections 3 and 4). But before we proceed to the analysis of our data, we must first refer to the pragmatics of the constructions under analysis and place them in the L2 context.

#### 2.4 *That*-omission in use

In Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (forthcoming), it is claimed that the presence or absence of a *that* element in complement clauses of bridge verbs, like *say*, *think* or *know*, is strongly related to syntax-external factors, namely the pragmatics and the prosody of the utterance. The degree of formality of the context in which it is produced is a determining factor. The data reported therein reveal a contrast between formal and informal language in the usage of *that*. The informal data analysed in the paper comprises the speech of parents in several CHILDES files and the formal data are taken from Letters to the Editor in *The Economist*. As regards the informal data, out of the 3,288 sentences analysed, *that* was absent in over 97% of cases, while, in the 78 formal Letters to the Editor, *that* absence was only 13.63%.

Biber *et al.* (1999) observed the same behaviour in the use of *that*-omission in different registers. They found that in conversation the omission of *that* is the norm whereas academic prose favours its presence. They claim that the different distributional patterns found are related to what they call production circumstances and also communicative purposes. In other words, conversation favours omission of elements but academic prose is a more elaborated and explicit speech. These “production circumstances” can be the triggering factor for the *that*-insertion rule.

Moreover, and in view of the results in the current study, we would suggest that the two options, absence *versus* presence of *that*, are not in fact really optional, the choice is determined by register, an extrasyntactic factor. The percentages suggest that there is no real optionality: overt *that* occurs more often in formal contexts, absence of *that* is the default option in informal ones.

Optionality is a debated issue in both theoretical and applied proposals within the Minimalist framework. Optional phenomena are problematic in a framework which assumes an optimal design of the system, guided by economy principles. In L1 studies, optionality is also a crucial concept as child speech seems to contain a high amount of optional constructions. Two clear examples of this are missing subjects, which co-occur in child speech with overt subjects, or non-finite root infinitives, which also cohabit with certain inflected forms. Even in L1 studies, though, optionality has been questioned. Hyams (2001) reanalyses data in other works and finds that what is apparently optional depends on other factors that invalidate any account or description in terms of real optionality. What we see in the construction under analysis is that the presence or absence of *that* is also dependent on other factors associated to the utterance.

### 2.5 How L1 and L2 data can clarify the issue

We begin this section by briefly considering L1 acquisition of the two elements under analysis, *that* and *que*. Although there is not extensive research on this issue, complementisers in Spanish follow the expected order and are found in early utterances either a little before or a little after *wh*-questions (see Barreña 2000). In fact, Barreña found lexical complementisers before *wh*-question constructions in the production of the bilingual (Spanish-Basque) child he analysed. This suggests that the two constructions (lexical complementisers and *wh*-questions) are related to the acquisition of the CP layer, and thus indicates that *que* in Spanish is a proper C element.

The acquisition of English *that* seems to follow a different pattern. Interestingly, Norris (2004) analyses the production of three children and finds that the usage of *that* is delayed in comparison to their usage of a verb plus a finite clause. Norris attributes this late acquisition of *that* to the fact that this element is not a simple head, but an instance of T to C (Norris adopts Pesetsky and Torrego's view, see section 2.1). Independently of what the correct analysis of *that* is for adult English, these findings on L1 acquisition suggest that our conclusion related to adult speech is correct: the syntactic nature of *que* and *that* is not identical. Spanish and English children follow different paths in the acquisition of these elements.

Moreover, the L2 proposal in Sorace (2005) may also shed light on this phenomenon. Sorace claims that certain linguistic properties, those that “involve the complex interplay of syntactic and discourse conditions” (65) are harder for very advanced learners of a given L2 to acquire because of L1 interference. These are called “soft constraints” and have to do with “the mapping between syntax and lexical-semantics, pragmatics and information structure” (55). Conversely, “hard constraints” are related to basic structural properties of language; those syntactic features that L2 learners have to learn and whose production in very advanced speakers is similar or identical, to native speakers' production.

In Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (2011) the distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ constraints was considered with respect to *that*-omission: Spanish and Catalan near-native speakers of English were tested in an oral task which elicited the use of complementiser



*that* in an informal context. The same experiment was repeated with native speakers of English. The results revealed that near natives produced sentences with an overt *that* in 75% of cases, in contrast to L1 English native production, where an overt *that* was quite marginal, reaching only to 8,3%.

In this article we provide evidence that seems to point in the same direction or, in any case, shows that the acquisition of *that* by L2 learners of English is not complete by adolescence.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Subjects

The study is based on 184 secondary school students ranging from 3<sup>rd</sup> year of ESO (Educación Secundaria Obligatoria) to 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Batxillerat, that is, 14 to 17 year-olds. All the subjects had been learning English as an L2/foreign language since the first year of Primary Education (6-7 years old) and had always received 3 hours a week of English teaching. All subjects were bilingual Catalan/Spanish. Whether the students were balanced or unbalanced bilinguals has not been taken into consideration since both Catalan and Spanish show the same syntactic behaviour with respect to the use of the complementiser in the contexts under analysis (see sections 1 and 2.3).

No placement test was applied, since the aim of the research was not to focus on the level of students, but rather on progress made concerning the use or omission of the complementiser although levels ranged from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. In Table 1 we provide information about the number of participants, the hours of exposure to English, the number of *that*-clauses produced and the mean number of words in the essays taken as a basis.

Table 1. Participants, exposure, *that*-clauses and number of words per essay

Students	Number of participants	Hours of exposure	Number of <i>that</i> -clauses	Mean number of words/essay
3 <sup>rd</sup> ESO	46	840	50	101.93
4 <sup>th</sup> ESO	63	945	61	94.23
1 <sup>st</sup> Batx	48	1050	56	128.91
2 <sup>nd</sup> Batx	27	1155	49	184.48
	184		216	

#### 3.2 Data

Students were asked to write a composition about extracurricular activities and they were given 20 minutes to carry out the activity. The present research focuses only on the use of the verbs *think* and *say* with respect to complement clauses as these are the paradigmatic ‘bridge verbs’ which allow *that* absence in their finite clauses. In our analysis of the data the input has also been taken into consideration. In particular, the students under analysis were exposed to instructed SLA. One of the properties of this kind of input is that it is

non-native and very often incomplete. Foreign Language Learning takes place in a non-naturalistic setting, in which reference to the L1 is often made to explain certain syntactic structures.

Apart from analysing the compositions of the aforementioned students, part of the research focused on analysing two English textbooks of each course (from 3<sup>rd</sup> ESO to 2<sup>nd</sup> Batxillerat). In none of the books was there a section devoted to the analysis of *that*-deletion explicitly, so the study focused on the number of exercises which indirectly contained practice on the phenomenon, as part of activities of speaking or language in use. By way of illustration, activities such as the following were considered: “Ask your partner his/her opinion about these topics using the following expressions: I think that..., in my opinion, I believe that..., frankly... Topics: Mobile phones, Smoking, Football matches on TV”.

Use versus omission of the complementiser in the different activities in the textbooks under analysis was calculated, as Table 2 shows:

Table 2. Number of examples of insertion and omission of *that* in textbook activities

3 <sup>rd</sup> ESO	4 <sup>th</sup> ESO	1 <sup>st</sup> Batxillerat	2 <sup>nd</sup> Batxillerat
6 insertion	7 insertion	7 insertion	9 insertion
10 omission	9 omission	11 omission	14 omission

#### 4. RESULTS

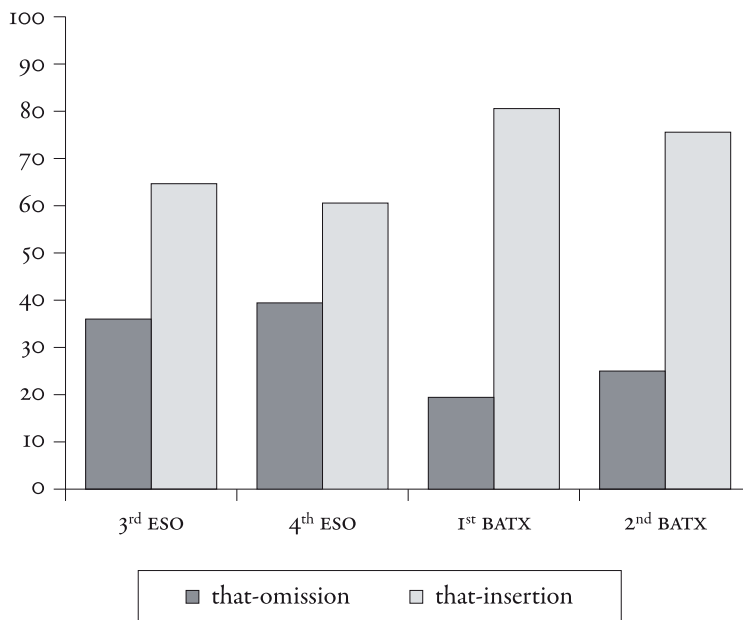
In order to analyse the insertion and omission of *that* in students' written *that*-clauses and its relationship with their stage of L2 development, T-tests were carried out to find out if significant differences in insertion/omission existed within year groups and to analyse whether the percentages of *that*-omission were significantly different between year groups.

Table 3. Percentages of *that*-omission and *that*-insertion and p-values.

Students	Number of <i>that</i> -clauses	<i>that</i> -omission	<i>that</i> -insertion	p-value ( <i>that</i> -omission between year groups)
3 <sup>rd</sup> ESO	50	18 (36%)	32 (64%)	p= .556
4 <sup>th</sup> ESO	61	24 (39.34%)	37 (60.65%)	p= .262
1 <sup>st</sup> Batx	56	11 (19.64%)	45 (80.35%)	p= .160
2 <sup>nd</sup> Batx	49	12 (24.48%)	37 (75.51%)	
Total	216	65 (29.86%)	151 (70.12%)	

As Table 3 shows, the number of *that*-clauses in the students' essays remains quite stable across year groups, although, as we can see in Table 4 further below, the mean number

of words per essay increases significantly with age, indicating that the use of *that*-clauses alone does not clearly illustrate development in students' interlanguage. As for the use and omission of *that*, taking into account overall percentages first, only 29.86% of *that*-clauses used by students display *that*-omission. In fact, the differences between the insertion and the omission of *that* are only significant in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Batx, where there is a preference for the use of *that*. In the first two years studied the difference is not significant, so there does not seem to be a strong preference for one or the other. Regarding percentage of *that*-omission across year groups, there was a slight decrease as age and exposure—and hence supposedly development— increase. Yet differences are not statistically significant. Graph 1 illustrates the data in Table 3.



Graph 1. Percentages of *that*-omission and *that*-insertion.

The fact that no significant differences were found across year groups might indicate that no development in the students' L2 proficiency had actually taken place. Among other factors to be considered in the discussion section, the mean number of words per essay was calculated as a fluency measure and hence an indicator that development was actually taking place in the students' interlanguage and T-tests were carried out between the results for each year group to detect significant differences. In Table 4 the results of this analysis show that the mean number of words per essay significantly increases from 4<sup>th</sup> ESO to 1<sup>st</sup> Batx. and from 1<sup>st</sup> Batx. and 2<sup>nd</sup> Batx. Between the first and the second courses analysed the mean number of words per essay very slightly decreases but the difference is not significant.

Table 4. Mean number of words per essay and p-values (between courses).

Students	Mean number of words/essay	p-value
3 <sup>rd</sup> ESO	101.93	
4 <sup>th</sup> ESO	94.23	p= .503
1 <sup>st</sup> BATX	128.91	p= .009
2 <sup>nd</sup> BATX	184.48	p= .0005

From the data analysed, we conclude that students from all four year groups actually use *that*-omission in their written *that*-clauses but clearly much less than they use *that*-retention, which indicates that they might have started acquiring the syntax of *that*-omission but still show a strong preference for their L1 option, namely the obligatory presence of *that*. In fact, general percentages show a significantly higher use of *that*-insertion and differences are also significant in the last two courses analysed. As for the use of *that*-omission across year groups, it slightly decreases as age and exposure to the target language increase but differences are not significant. This might be taken to imply that the students' L2 proficiency does not develop over the four years but in fact and as pointed out above, their essays do show L2 development, as the number of words per essay fluency measure indicates. The mean number of words per essay significantly increases from the second to the third course and from the third to the fourth, hence illustrating the students' progress. What clearly does not show development is their insertion and omission of *that*.

## 5. DISCUSSION

We can analyse the results of this study in relation to what adult native speakers of English do and how their use and omission of *that* is accounted for. As explained in section 2.4, Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (forthcoming) have observed 97% *that*-omission in informal adult native speaker English and a notable insertion of *that* in formal contexts. The data considered in section 2.5 (from Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez, 2011), also showed that native speakers deleted *that* in 91.7% of cases, whereas L2 near-native speakers only did so in 25% of cases, thus revealing specific L2 speaker difficulty in the acquisition of *that*-omission. The performance of these almost natives coincides with the written data we have analysed in the previous sections. L2 learners do not show full acquisition of *that*-omission in any of the levels studied.

More specifically in the case of the data examined here, and bearing in mind that the participants' proficiency level ranged from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate, we might well expect non-native use and omission of *that*. Although the context analysed—school essays—is written and might be considered formal, students do not tend to regard it as a very formal context but rather as a common everyday school activity that only the teacher will read. Participants indeed use *that*-omission in their compositions hence

indicating that they have at least begun to acquire its syntax and that their interlanguage use of *that* is not constantly interfered with by its L1 features where the use of *that* in embedded clauses is compulsory (except in very residual formal contexts, see section 2.3). However, *that*-insertion is significantly higher when general percentages are taken into account and in the last two year groups and non-significantly higher in the first two year groups. Considering that this context is not regarded as formal by the participants and given the results presented in Llinas-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (2011; forthcoming), we would propose that these students are, as anticipated, not displaying native-like use of *that* but are instead frequently using their L1 option and are only just starting to show that they have acquired the L2 option.

Thus, in view of the information and results presented in the previous sections, we suggest that these L2 learners of English are analysing *that* as a proper C-element on a par with the Catalan and Spanish complementiser *que*. Moreover, given the low percentage of *that*-omission, we cannot say that the insertion rule we took to be responsible for the presence of *that* in native English underlies the performance of these learners. In relation to this, we observe in the data that no development takes place across year groups. This may be taken to illustrate that the students treat embedded clauses as CPs (and not TP<sub>S</sub>), as if they were dealing with Spanish/Catalan sentences and have clearly not acquired the English insertion option.

The results obtained can also be related to the kind of input students have had, namely foreign language learning in instructed classroom contexts, with non-native and non-fluent language teachers and only being exposed to the target language three hours a week. The input teachers offer is often poor and it might not itself display *that*-omission. The students' learning occurs mainly through textbooks, where *that*-omission is not dealt with explicitly as a grammatical point (see section 3). The analysis of *that*-clauses present in two books per year group reveals that *that*-omission is only slightly more common than *that*-presence in all of them. School-based formal instruction might have provided enough exposure to trigger acquisition of the relevant syntactic features but clearly not enough exposure to facilitate register constraints on the use of the complementiser *that*. Further research is needed to test students' oral production in informal contexts or in more formal written contexts and also to observe how the phenomenon is affected when students reach higher levels of proficiency.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article has explored the phenomenon of *that*-omission in different ways: we have considered the syntactic constructions which allow the presence and absence of *that* after *say*, *think* and *know* in English and shown how this phenomenon does not occur in Spanish or Catalan, the native languages of the L2 learners whose production we studied. We have also summarised some of the basic existing proposals on the issue in the minimalist literature and chosen one, Franks (2005), which captures the non-core nature of the phenomenon by postulating a rule of *that*-insertion external to the syntactic

component of the grammar. We analysed the written production of L2 adolescent learners of English in terms of the development of competence and the percentage of *that* presence and absence. Our corpus reveals that these L2 learners are strongly influenced by the syntactic structure of the embedded clauses in their native languages, which determines that the constituent selected by the verb *think* is a CP. L2 learners have not yet learned to distinguish between an inserted *that* (a syntactically inert element) and a proper *that* head, the only option in Spanish and Catalan. We suggest that the reason why L2 learners may not have reached complete competence in the usual native choice of *that*-omission may be due to several factors, among them, the input they receive in the context of classroom language instruction. The research presented here reveals that the phenomenon of *that*-omission may be a fundamental construction for L2 research.

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Mireia Llinas-Grau obtained an MA in Linguistics from University College London in 1989 and completed a PhD on verbal sequences at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 1990. Her research interests include theoretical syntax and the acquisition of a first and a second language from a generative perspective. She is Senior lecturer in the Department of English Philology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Elisabet Pladevall obtained an MA in Linguistics in University College London in 2002 and completed her PhD in English Philology in Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 2007. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition in bilingual immersion and instructed classroom contexts and more recently in CLIL contexts in primary education. She is Assistant Lecturer in the Department of English Philology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Montserrat Capdevila i Batet obtained an MA in Linguistics from University College London in 1992 and completed her PhD on the acquisition of functional categories at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 1996. Her research interests focus on the acquisition of English as a first and as a second language. She is Senior lecturer in the Department of English Philology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística. Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, Edifici B. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. 08193, Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 935812327, +34 936811567. Fax: +34 935812001.