

Can the Pro-Drop Parameter Account for All the Errors in the Acquisition of Non-Referential *It* in L2 English?

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Abstract

Numerous studies, examining the acquisition of non-referential *it* in [-pro-drop] English by learners of [+pro-drop] languages, have revealed that their participants omit non-referential subjects in English if their L1 allows null-subject position. However, due to the specificity of their focus, these studies have not considered other difficulties native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages might encounter when learning non-referential subjects in English settings and have given an impression that omission is the only error L2 learners make while acquiring non-referential subjects. The present study offers a detailed account of the acquisition of non-referential *it* by native speakers of [+pro-drop] Russian in a classroom setting, investigates which domains of use of non-referential *it* may cause difficulties for L1 speakers of [+pro-drop] Russian, and examines how error patterns related to the use of non-referential *it* change with further exposure to the English language. To this end, the data are collected from two groups of Russian students, fourth- and seventh-year learners of English, who are at the pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English. The participants were asked to undertake comprehension and production tests. Quantitative and qualitative analyses are used in the study. The findings show that all the participants have difficulties related to the use of non-referential *it*, and error patterns made by the speakers of [+pro-drop] Russian are not limited to omissions of non-referential *it*. Moreover, error patterns observed in the students' data differ significantly among the groups. While the pre-intermediate fourth-year English learners mostly rely on their L1 and make literal translations from Russian, the upper-intermediate seventh-year learners, by and large, have problems in distinguishing between non-referential *it* and *there* and, due to this, make numerous errors in some domains.

Résumé

De nombreuses analyses examinant l'acquisition du *it* impersonnel en anglais [-pro-omission] par des apprenants de langues [+pro-omission] ont révélé que ceux-ci négligeaient les sujets impersonnels en anglais, si leur L1 autorisait l'omission de ce type de sujets. Cependant, à cause de l'accent mis spécifiquement sur l'omission du pronom impersonnel *it*, ces analyses n'ont pas considéré d'autres difficultés que l'apprenant d'une L1 permettant l'omission de sujets impersonnels pouvait éprouver pendant l'apprentissage de ces sujets impersonnels en anglais L2. Ces analyses donnaient l'impression que l'omission était la seule faute commise par les apprenants de l'anglais L2 pendant l'acquisition du sujet impersonnel *it*. La présente étude offre une analyse détaillée de l'acquisition du sujet impersonnel *it* en anglais L2 par des locuteurs dont la L1 est le russe [+pro-omission]. Cette étude, qui s'est déroulée dans le contexte de la salle de classe, a examiné les domaines d'usage du sujet impersonnel *it* pouvant causer des difficultés aux apprenants de L1 russe [+pro-omission] et comment les patrons d'erreurs se transforment

lors d'une plus grande exposition à l'anglais L2. Les participants consistaient de deux groupes d'étudiants russes apprenant l'anglais depuis 4 et 7 ans respectivement. L'un des groupes possédait un niveau préintermédiaire, tandis que l'autre était de niveau intermédiaire élevé. Des analyses quantitatives et qualitatives ont été utilisées pour examiner les résultats obtenus par les deux groupes de participants à des tests de compréhension et de production. Les résultats ont démontré que tous les participants ont éprouvé des difficultés basées sur l'utilisation du *it* impersonnel et que les patrons d'erreurs effectuées par les locuteurs de L1 russe [+pro-omission] ne se limitaient pas à des omissions du *it* impersonnel. De plus, les patrons d'erreurs observés dans les données des élèves différaient significativement entre les deux groupes. Pendant que les étudiants du niveau préintermédiaire (4 ans d'étude de l'anglais L2) s'appuyaient essentiellement sur leur L1 et traduisaient littéralement du russe, les intermédiaires avancés (7 ans d'étude) éprouvaient de la difficulté à distinguer entre le *it* et le *there*. Ainsi, on observait de nombreuses erreurs dans certains domaines.

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Introduction

The form *it* can be used in two different functions in English. Firstly, *it* can be a pronoun, with the same form referring to both subjects and objects. Secondly, *it* can also function as a non-referential (also known as *dummy*) subject. In this meaning, *it* is an expletive, a meaningless placeholder present to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (Chomsky, 1981). According to the Extended Projection Principle, some so-called [-pro-drop] languages (e.g., English), being non-null-subject, require the subject slot to be filled for a sentence to be grammatical; while some others, [+pro-drop] languages (e.g., Italian, Russian, Turkish), allow null-subject position. Numerous studies, within the generative framework, have examined the acquisition of non-referential *it* in the [-pro-drop] English language by learners of [+pro-drop] languages (e.g., Phinney, 1987; Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991; Wakabayashi, 2002; White, 1985). All of these studies revealed that their participants tended to omit non-referential subjects in English if their native language allowed null-subject position. However, due to the specificity of their focus, these studies did not consider other difficulties native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages might encounter when learning non-referential subjects in English, which gives an impression that omission of non-referential subjects is the only problem these second language (L2) learners experience. Yet, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) pointed out that non-referential *it* may cause difficulties for English learners that are not limited to the omission of non-referential *it*. The present study aims to provide a detailed account of the acquisition of non-referential *it* by native speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language by examining what difficulties Russian native speakers encounter while learning non-referential *it* in English.

Non-Referential *It* in English

Non-referential *it* is extremely common in the modern English language and it can be used in four lexical contexts (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Cowan, 2008; Endley, 2010):

- Time
1. *It is half past six.*
- Distance
2. *It is about 800 kilometres from Ankara to Bodrum.*
- Weather
3. *It is raining again.*
- Environment
4. *It is so dirty in this room.*

Additionally, non-referential *it* often appears in constructions with *adjective + infinitive* (Murphy, 1990), such as:

5. *It is impossible to understand you!*

From the pedagogical perspective, there seems to be no consensus among scholars. Some of them (Cowan, 2008) have defined the topic as easy to teach since non-referential *it* occurs in limited contexts and always takes a singular verb, usually *be*. On the other hand, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) have pointed out that non-referential *it* can cause difficulties for students. Students who speak languages that, unlike English, do not require a surface subject may produce ungrammatical sentences such as:

6. **Is raining.* (*Signifies an error.)

Or they may translate literally from their language into English. For example, instead of the English: *It is raining*, speakers of Cantonese might say:

7. **Rain is plentiful.*

Additionally, English has another non-referential subject, *there*, which has the same syntactic function as *it* does but which is used in different contexts. This fact might be a potential source of confusion to English learners, especially for those who have no such structures—or who have only one non-referential form, the meaning of which may overlap with the meaning of English *it* and *there*. This state of affairs may result in such errors as:

8. **There is very nice in Korea.* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999)

Russian, which is the L1 of the participants of this study, belongs to the null-subject languages and it does not require a surface subject. Examples 9 through 13 below present the Russian equivalents to some English constructions with non-referential *it* (Szczepanska, 2005; Timberlake, 1993):

English	Russian
9. <i>It is six-thirty.</i>	<i>Шесть тридцать.</i> [Six thirty.]
10. <i>It is minus thirty outside!</i>	<i>На улице минус тридцать!</i> [On street minus thirty.]
11. <i>It is about 100 kilometres to Minsk.</i>	<i>До Минска около ста километров.</i> [To Minsk about 100 kilometres.]
12. <i>It is so dirty in your room!</i>	<i>В твоей комнате так грязно!</i> [In your room so dirty!]
13. <i>It is difficult to understand her.</i>	<i>Ее трудно понять</i> [Her difficult to understand.]

In the examples above, the English sentences with non-referential *it* are translated with Russian impersonal sentences, which lack both the subject and verb in the present tense. Additionally, there are some cases when English structures with non-referential *it* correspond to Russian sentences that differ syntactically, morphologically and lexically. The examples below are illustrative:

English	Russian
14. <i>It often snows in Russia.</i>	<i>В России часто идет снег.</i> [In Russia often go snow.]

Acquisition of Non-Referential Subjects by Native Speakers of [+pro-drop] Languages

Acquisition of non-referential *it* in English by students with different first language (L1) backgrounds was in the scope of studies investigating the reset of the pro-drop parameter in English L2 acquisition. All of these studies adopted a generative approach and aimed to examine the role of L1 and universal grammar (UG) in the pro-drop parameter. The pro-drop parameter is associated with a cluster of properties such as subject omissions, subject-verb inversions and *that-trace*¹ sequences that determine two typological groups of languages: [+pro-drop] and [-pro-drop]. According to this parameter, the [+pro-drop] languages (e.g., Italian, Turkish, Russian) allow null subjects, subject-verb inversion in statements and *that-trace* sequences, but [-pro-drop] languages (e.g., English, French) do not. Scholars working on the pro-drop parameter in L2 acquisition (e.g., Phinney, 1987; Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991; Wakabayashi, 2002; White, 1985) have tried to find out whether English L2 learners of [+pro-drop] L1s were able to reset the parametric values of their L1 to the [-pro-drop] parameter in English. Since the scope of this study is limited to the acquisition of non-referential *it*, I will discuss the findings relevant to this study.

White (1985) was among the first who investigated whether native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages would reverse the parameter to [-pro-drop] English. The participants

of her study were 73 adult native speakers of Spanish and Italian studying English as L2. Additionally, a group of native speakers of the [-pro-drop] French language was included in the study as a control group. All of the participants were intermediate learners of English. The data analysis was based on a grammaticality judgement task. The findings revealed that not only the group of [+pro-drop] languages, Spanish and Italian, but also the [-pro-drop] French control group had difficulties while judging test items where non-referential *it* and *there* were used.

Another pioneering study of the pro-drop parameter was conducted by Phinney (1987), who investigated bidirectional acquisition of subject use and subject-verb agreement: by native speakers of Spanish acquiring English and by native speakers of English acquiring Spanish. The data analysis was based on free-writing compositions. Regarding the subject use in English by native speakers of Spanish, Phinney concluded that the participants omitted subjects in English and that non-referential subjects were omitted more often (between 56% and 76% on average) than referential subject pronouns (between 6% and 13%).

Tsimpli and Roussou (1991) investigated the performance of 13 adult speakers of another pro-drop language, Greek, who were at the intermediate and post-intermediate levels of learning English. The researchers used a grammaticality judgement task and a translation task from Greek into English. They found that sentences where non-referential *it* was missing were accepted as correct by 80% of the participants. Moreover, those participants who did not accept such sentences changed them with *calques*, that is, literal loan translations, from L1 Greek, which were still ungrammatical in English.

Wakabayashi (2002) investigated acquisition of non-null subjects in English by native speakers of Spanish and Japanese. The participants were 44 Japanese and 15 Spanish learners of English, who were at the intermediate and advanced levels. Native speakers of English also participated as a control group. The data analysis was based on three computer-related tasks: reading a text, answering a comprehension question, and giving a grammaticality judgement. The findings of this study revealed that Japanese learners acquired the obligatory value of overt subjects in English earlier and easier than Spanish learners. The difficulties encountered by the Spanish group were attributed to the fact that they had to reset the pro-drop parameter.

In a more recent study, Kuru Gönen (2010) investigated whether native speakers of Turkish reset their L1 pro-drop parameter at the initial, intermediary, and advanced levels of learning English. The sampling group was comprised of 60 students (20 per every proficiency level). In addition to the sampling group, a control group that consisted of 25 native speakers of English participated in the study. A grammaticality judgement task was offered to the participants. The data analysis showed that only 30% of the initial level students, 50% of the intermediate students, and 72% of the advanced students gave the correct answers on the items related to the use of non-referential subjects in English. Kuru Gönen attributed the errors made by the native speakers of Turkish to the influence of the [+pro-drop] L1.

Summarising the results of the above-mentioned studies, it can be concluded that all of the participants encountered difficulties while acquiring non-referential *it* and that they tended to omit non-referential subjects at all stages of their English learning. Subject omission rates varied depending on the participants' L1 background and proficiency level (a decrease in the number of errors in the use of non-referential *it* correlates with the increase in the proficiency level in English). Since the focus of these studies was on the

reset of the pro-drop parameter in L2 English but not on acquisition of non-referential *it* in particular, a number of issues relating to the development of non-referential *it* in interlanguages of native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages was left unclear. First of all, there was hardly any information about the contexts of non-referential subjects in which the participants performed incorrectly. Moreover, it was obscure in most of the studies which of the five lexical contexts (weather, distance, etc.) of non-referential *it* were included in the analysis. Second, although many researchers inferred that cross-linguistic influence was clearly observed in the data, the only type of error they considered in their studies was omission of non-referential subjects, which gives an impression that omission is the only type of error made due to transfer by native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages. Few studies (e.g., Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991) mentioned that the participants might not only omit non-referential subjects but also use calques from their native [+pro-drop] languages, which were still ungrammatical in English. Third, since the above-mentioned studies sought to investigate the role of L1 transfer and UG, they ignored the effect of other factors, particularly the effect of availability of another non-referential subject in English on acquisition of non-referential *it* in English by native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages. Nevertheless, as it was pointed out in the introductory section, the availability of the other non-referential subject *there* in English was defined as a potential source of confusion for English learners.

The present study aims to investigate the acquisition patterns of non-referential *it* in English by native speakers of Russian, another [+pro-drop] language, which has been previously investigated neither in relation to the pro-drop parameter nor non-referential *it*, specifically. The research questions I wish to address in this study are:

1. Do L1 speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language encounter difficulties while learning non-referential *it* in English?
2. Do the error patterns related to the use of non-referential *it* found in the data of the L1 speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language change with further exposure to the English language?
3. Which contexts/domains of the use of non-referential *it* are the most problematic for the L1 speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language?

Before moving on to the study itself, I will say a few words about how the English language teaching curriculum in the Russian educational system addresses the topic of non-referential *it*.

Non-Referential *It* in Russian Schools

The topic of non-referential *it* is included in the essential grammatical material of primary and secondary school (Vorobjeva et al., 2008). The structures with non-referential *it* are introduced at the beginning of the third year of English learning and students are expected to have acquired the use of non-referential *it* in the different contexts at the sixth year of learning English (7 class). The last two years of secondary school (the seventh and the eighth years of English learning) are devoted to general revision (Vorobjeva et al., 2008). A review of the most frequently used English as a foreign language (EFL) books in Russian schools (Afanasyeva & Miheeva, 2009; Biboletova, Dobrinina, & Lenskaya, 2009; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2008; Kuzovlev, 2007; Panova, 1994; Vereschagina & Prjtikina,

2010) revealed that non-referential *it* in different contexts appeared along with a new lexical material; however, explicit explanations regarding when non-referential *it* should be used in English as well as differences between non-referential *it* and *there* were not given in any of them.

Method

Participants

The participants were two groups of students from different Moscow state schools, who, in addition to their regular classes at school, attended extra English classes at a private English language course twice a week. To get more detailed information about the participants, they were asked to fill in a background questionnaire. The analysis of the questionnaire data showed that at the moment of the data collection, the participants were attending English classes five times a week. Two different teachers, who are native speakers of Russian, were teaching English in these classes. The proficiency level of the participants was measured relying on the comprehensive proficiency exam of the Hacettepe University preparatory unit, which is used to assess the level of English proficiency of newcomer students. Group 1 consisted of 30 students (age 11-12). They had been studying English for three years and were at the pre-intermediate level of proficiency. Group 2 also consisted of 30 students (age 14-15). They were upper-intermediate students who had been studying English for six years. In other words, the participants in Group 1 were introduced to non-referential *it* one year prior to this study, while those in Group 2 had been dealing with non-referential structures for four years prior to this study and were supposed to have already acquired the structure according the English language teaching curriculum in the Russian educational system. Grouping the participants in this way allowed me to trace how the rates and patterns of errors related to the use of non-referential *it* change with further exposure to the English language.

Materials

A questionnaire and two tests were designed for this study.

Questionnaire.

The questionnaire included seven questions eliciting information about participants' age, years of learning English, and factors that might influence their learning of English.

Tests.

Definition of knowledge of non-referential it in the English language.

In defining the construct under investigation, that is, the knowledge of non-referential *it*, the definition of grammatical knowledge suggested by Bachman and Palmer (1996) was adopted for this study: "knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and graphology" (p. 68) that is involved in comprehending or producing formally accurate utterances or sentences. Following Bachman and Palmer's definition, knowledge of non-

referential *it* was determined as the ability to comprehend and produce accurate utterances in which non-referential *it* would be used in five main contexts: time, weather, distance, environment, and in constructions with *adjective + infinitive* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Murphy, 1990).

Description of the tests.

To examine the learners' knowledge of non-referential *it*, two diagnostic tests were developed: a multiple choice (MC) test and a translation task (TT). The aim of the MC test was to find out whether or not the participants were able to match structures with non-referential *it* with their Russian equivalents. To this end, in the MC test the students were asked to find the correct English equivalent for the given Russian structure. Example 15 illustrates an item from the MC test.

15. *Отсюда до центра города пять километров.*
 [From here to center city five kilometres.]
 (It is five kilometres from here to the city centre.)
- a. *It is five kilometres from here to the city centre.*
 - b. *There are five kilometres from here to the city centre.*
 - c. *It takes five kilometres from here to the city centre.*
 - d. *From here to the city centre are five kilometres.*

The TT included items for translation and it was suggested to the students to see whether they were able to use non-referential *it* in their production. Example 16 is illustrative.

16. *В комнате очень темно.*
 [In room very dark.]
 (It is very dark in the room.)

Following Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Murphy (1990) the main domains of non-referential *it* use were identified as: (a) distance context, (b) weather context, (c) *adjective + infinitive* context, (d) environment context, and (e) time context. Test items related to each domain were constructed (four tokens for each domain per test).

Further, in order not to allow the students to guess which grammar topic was being tested, along with the questions related to non-referential *it* (20 items per test), items related to other grammar topics (*there is/there are*, copula *be*, present tenses) were included in the MC test and TT. Thus, each test consisted of 40 items (20 on the use of non-referential *it*, which were analysed, and 20 on other topics, which were excluded from the analysis). All the items were randomised. To minimise the impact of the students' knowledge of other grammatical topics on their performance related to the use of non-referential *it*, all the test items were used only in the present tense. To validate the tests, their content and criterion-based validities were examined. First, two teachers working at state schools in Moscow were asked to examine the content and relevance of the test items to the material they teach. The feedback evaluations were provided in the form of written reports. The feedback reports were positive on the whole, yet slight modifications of a few items were done based on the teachers' feedback (e.g., the word *mile* was changed with the word *kilometre* since

the former is not generally used by Russians as a measure of distance). Further, the tests were piloted. They were administered to 30 students aged between 12 and 14 years ($M = 13.2$), who were studying English by attending a private English language course, which was chosen randomly. The students' success on the tests was calculated. Then, the criterion-based validity of the tests was examined. For this purpose, the instructor working with the students taking part in the piloting was asked to rank them according to their success in English for the last two years. The Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient test was used to assess the level of correlation between the teacher's ranking and tests scores. The correlations between the teachers' ranking and Test 1 and Test 2 scores were $r = .86$ and $r = .92$ respectively. Finally, to assess the test-retest reliability of the tests, the same students who took part in the piloting were asked to do the tests again in three months. The test-retest reliabilities of the MC and TT were estimated as .89 and .94 respectively across three months.

Data Analysis and Results

Overall Performance of the Students on the Tests

In order to find out whether the participants would encounter difficulties while using non-referential *it*, the data were analysed first in terms of central tendency (mean and median) and standard deviation (see Table 1 for Group1 and Table 2 for Group 2) using SPSS 20. Then, statistical tests (Mann-Whitney U Test) aiming to uncover whether or not there were statistically significant differences between the performances of the groups were run.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Fourth-Year Students

	Group 1: Fourth-Year Students	
	Test 1	Test 2
Total <i>N</i>	20	20
<i>M</i>	6.07 (30 %)	6.77 (34 %)
<i>Mdn</i>	5.00	5.50
<i>SD</i>	3.403	3.766

The descriptive statistics of the recognition and production tests of Group1 suggested that the students encountered many difficulties in the use of non-referential *it*. Moreover, assuming the grading system standard in Russia (which correlates with the American and European grading systems, <http://www.euroeducation.net/prof/usa.htm>), “a paper is worth an unsatisfactory mark if less than fifty per cent has been fulfilled correctly” (State Standard of Grading System for Secondary School approved by the Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 7), the performance of Group 1 could be estimated as unsatisfactory.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Seventh-Year Students

	Group 2: Seventh-Year Students	
	Test 1	Test 2
Total <i>N</i>	20	20
Correct <i>M</i>	11.20 (56 %)	13.23 (66 %)
Correct <i>Mdn</i>	11.00	13.00
<i>SD</i>	2.265	1.813

Relying on the descriptive statistics and results of Mann-Whitney U Test, the seventh-year students demonstrated a much better level of recognition and production skills on the topic and their performance was statistically significantly better on both tests than that of the fourth-year students [Test 1: Group 1 (*Mdn* = 5.00, *SD* = 3.403) and Group 2 (*Mdn* = 11.00, *SD* = 2.265), $r = .000$; Test 2: Group 1 (*Mdn* = 5.50, *SD* = 3.766) and Group 2 (*Mdn* = 13.00, *SD* = 1.813), $r = .000$]. However, taking into consideration that Group 2 had been dealing with non-referential *it* structures for more than four years (starting from the third year of English learning), at that time they were having English classes five times a week with two different instructors and, according to the detailed long-term planning for the English language taught in Russia (Vorobjeva et al., 2008), were supposed to have acquired the use of non-referential *it*, it could be suggested that the seventh-year learners of English still had numerous problems while using non-referential *it*.

Classification of the Domains Related to the Use of Non-Referential *It*

In order to see which contexts cause difficulties for the fourth- and seventh-year learners and how error patterns change between the groups for every context, classifications of the use of non-referential *it* were adopted for this study. These classifications (see Appendix) were based on the description of the different contexts in which non-referential *it* can be used suggested by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), Cowan (2008), Endley (2010), and Murphy (1990).

First, in order to see the level of performance of the participants in each of the domains, descriptive statistics were used. Then, tests aiming to uncover whether or not there were statistically significant differences between the students' performances on each of the domains were run.

The examination of the statistical data provided by Group 1 showed that according to the level of difficulty the domains of the use of non-referential *it* could be ordered as follows:

- (a) distance context [$M = 0.60$ (15%), *Mdn* = .00, *SD* = 0.694];
- (b) environment context [$M = 1.03$ (26%), *Mdn* = 1.00, *SD* = 1.041];
- (c) *adjective + infinitive* context [$M = 1.35$ (34%), *Mdn* = 1.00, *SD* = 0.988];
- (d) weather context [$M = 1.53$ (38%), *Mdn* = 1.00, *SD* = 1.157]; and
- (e) time context [$M = 1.88$ (47%), *Mdn* = 2.00, *SD* = 1.415].

A one-way between groups analysis of variances (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in the performance of the fourth-year students for different domains ($F = 12.192, p < .001$). The analysis of the statistical data provided by Group 2 revealed that according to the level of difficulty the domains of the use of non-referential *it* could be ordered as follows:

- (a) distance context [$M = 0.77$ (19%), $Mdn = 1.00, SD = 0.593$];
- (b) weather context [$M = 2.00$ (50%), $Mdn = 2.00, SD = 1.120$];
- (c) environmental context [$M = 2.90$ (73%), $Mdn = 3.00, SD = 1.020$];
- (d) *adjective + infinitive* context [$M = 3.12$ (78%), $Mdn = 3.00, SD = 0.940$]; and
- (e) time context [$M = 3.82$ (96%), $Mdn = 4.00, SD = 0.390$].

A one-way between groups ANOVA revealed significant differences in the performance of the seventh-year students for different domains ($F = 112.536, p < .001$).

Second, relying on the description of error patterns that would be likely to emerge in the performance of EFL learners when using structures with non-referential *it* suggested by Celce-Murcia and Freeman-Larsen (1999), errors in the use of non-referential *it* in each of the domains were further labelled as *omission* of non-referential *it* (see example 6), *literal translation from L1* (see example 7), and *substitution* of non-referential *it* with non-referential *there* (see example 8).

Analysis of the Fourth- and Seventh-Year Learners' Performance on Domain 1

As shown in the Appendix, the first domain was related to cases when non-referential *it* was used in the time context. Sentences with non-referential *it* found in Domain 1 correspond to Russian impersonal sentences, which lack subjects (see example 9). Non-referential *it* used in the time context can be followed by a noun phrase (NP; see examples 17a and 17b) or by a numeral (see example 18). For scrutiny, the performance of both groups was examined within these two subdomains. Table 3 presents error patterns found in the participants' data on both tests.

- 17. (a) *It is Friday today.*
- (b) *It is time to go home.*
- 18. *It is three p.m. now.*

Table 3
Error Patterns Made by the Participants in Domain 1 (Time Context)

	Tests	Error Pattern	Number of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Domain 1	
			Fourth Year	Seventh Year
<i>It + noun</i>	Test 1	Correct	23	55
		Incorrect	37	5
		Subject omission	0	0
		L1 literal translation	37	2
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	3
	Test 2	Correct	28	60
		Incorrect	32	0
		Subject omission	0	0
		L1 literal translation	32	0
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	0
<i>It + numeral</i>	Test 1	Correct	32	56
		Incorrect	28	4
		Subject omission	0	0
		L1 literal translation	28	3
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	1
	Test 2	Correct	29	60
		Incorrect	31	0
		Subject omission	0	0
		L1 literal translation	31	0
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	0

As evident from Table 3, the fourth-year students made errors in both subdomains and all their errors were due to literal translation of the structures from Russian. Example 19 and example 20 illustrate typical errors in the domain from the recognition and production tests.

19. **Today Wednesday.*
 20. **Now half past two.*

The seventh-year students appeared to make errors both due to L1 influence and substitution of non-referential *it* with *there*. However, relying on the overall performance of Group 2 on both tests, these errors could hardly be considered representative as they occurred only occasionally.

Analysis of the Fourth- and Seventh-Year Learners' Performance on Domain 2

As shown in the Appendix, the second domain was related to cases when non-referential *it* was used in the weather context. Non-referential *it* used in the weather context can be followed by a verb (see example 21) and by a numeral (+NP; see example 22).

21. *Sometimes it snows in my country in winter.*
 22. *It is thirty (degrees) outside!*

Sentences with non-referential *it* followed by a verb in Domain 2 are translated with Russian structures that differ syntactically, morphologically and lexically as illustrated in example 14. Sentences with non-referential *it* followed by a numeral in Domain 2 correspond to Russian impersonal sentences, as in example 10. Further, for scrutiny the performance of both groups was examined within these two subdomains.

Table 4
Error Patterns Made by the Participants in Domain 2 (Weather Context)

	Tests	Error Pattern	Number of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Domain 2	
			Fourth Year	Seventh Year
<i>It + verb</i>	Test 1	Correct	27	44
		Incorrect	33	16
		Subject omission	5	0
		L1 literal translation	28	4
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	12
	Test 2	Correct	23	41
		Incorrect	37	19
		Subject omission	7	0
		L1 literal translation	30	6
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	13
<i>It + numeral</i>	Test 1	Correct	20	21
		Incorrect	40	39
		Subject omission	9	0
		L1 literal translation	31	6
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	33
	Test 2	Correct	23	14
		Incorrect	37	46
		Subject omission	3	0
		L1 literal translation	34	9
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	37

As seen in Table 4, the fourth-year students seemed to have problems with both subcategories of Domain 2. The majority of the errors found in the performance of Group 1 occurred due to the transference of literal translation from Russian. Example 23 and

example 24, taken from the recognition and production tests respectively, were typical in the data of Group 1 for this domain.

23. **Outside forty degrees!*
 24. **(The) children are home now because rain is going.*

The performance of the seventh-year students was also marked with errors in both subdomains, nevertheless the majority of the errors were made in the subdomain when non-referential *it* was followed by a *numeral + NP*. Contrary to Group 1, the seventh-year students tended to replace non-referential *it* with non-referential *there* (see example 25) in the majority of the erroneous answers, and errors due to the literal translation from Russian (see example 26) occurred more rarely in their performance.

25. **There are forty degrees outside!*
 26. **Snow do(es) not go in my town often.*

Analysis of the Fourth- and Seventh-Year Learners' Performance on Domain 3

As shown in the Appendix, the third domain was related to the cases when non-referential *it* is used in the distance context. Non-referential *it* used in the distance context can be followed by a *numeral + NP* (see example 27) and by an *adjective + NP* (see example 28). Sentences with non-referential *it* in the distance context correspond to Russian impersonal sentences (see example 11).

27. *It is just two kilometres from here to the city centre.*
 28. *It is a long way from my house to the Bolshoi Theatre.*

The data of both groups were examined for error patterns found in the fourth- and seventh-year students. Table 5 presents the percentage of error patterns made by both groups while using non-referential *it* in the distance context.

As previously mentioned, Domain 3 was the most problematic for both groups. All the participants appeared to perform worse on the subdomain when non-referential *it* was followed by a *numeral + NP*. Moreover, as is evident from Table 5, in this subdomain the seventh-year students did not perform any better than the fourth-year learners of English, and the absolute majority of the test items in both groups were answered incorrectly.

Regarding error patterns observed in the data of the participants, the data analysis revealed that they differed significantly between the two groups in both subdomains. Similarly to the previously discussed domains, the fourth-year learners tended to rely on their L1 and transferred literal translation from Russian, while the seventh-year students made very few errors of that kind and used non-referential *there* in the majority of the erroneous cases in the domain. Example 29 and example 30 taken from the TT of Group 1 and Group 2 respectively display the differences between the error patterns found in the two groups' performances.

29. **From my school to my house about two kilometres.*
 30. **There are about two kilometres from my school to my house.*

Table 5
Error Patterns Made by the Participants in Domain 3 (Distance Context)

	Tests	Error Pattern	Number of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Domain 3	
			Fourth Year	Seventh Year
<i>It + adjective + (noun)</i>	Test 1	Correct	16	27
		Incorrect	44	33
	Test 2	Subject omission	14	0
		L1 literal translation	26	4
		<i>There</i> overuse	4	29
		Correct	13	14
		Incorrect	47	36
		Subject omission	2	0
		L1 literal translation	45	4
		<i>There</i> overuse	0	32
<i>It + numeral + noun</i>	Test 1	Correct	5	3
		Incorrect	55	57
		Subject omission	2	0
		L1 literal translation	51	8
	Test 2	<i>There</i> overuse	2	49
		Correct	2	1
		Incorrect	58	59
		Subject omission	2	0
		L1 literal translation	50	0
		<i>There</i> overuse	6	59

Analysis of the Fourth- and Seventh-Year Learners' Performance on Domain 4

As shown in the Appendix, the fourth domain was related to cases when non-referential *it* is used in the environment context. Non-referential *it* in the environmental context is followed by an adjective, and sentences with non-referential *it* found in Domain 4 correspond to Russian impersonal sentences (see example 12). The data of both groups were investigated for error patterns. Table 6 presents the percentage of error patterns made by both groups while using non-referential *it* in the environment context.

As seen in Table 6, all three of the error patterns were observed in the students' performance on the production and recognition tests. However, similarly to the previous domains the fourth-year students relied mainly on their L1 while in the performance of the seventh-year group, cases of non-referential *there* overuse were predominant. Example 31

and example 32 below taken from Test 2 illustrate typical error patterns found in the production of Group 1 and Group 2 respectively.

31. **In this shop so crowded again!*
 32. **There are (is) so crowded in this shop again!*

Table 6

Error Patterns Made by the Participants in Domain 4 (Environment Context)

Tests	Error Pattern	Number of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Domain 4	
		Fourth Year	Seventh Year
Test 1	Correct	28	91
	Incorrect	92	29
	Subject omission	16	4
	L1 literal translation	66	8
Test 2	<i>There</i> overuse	10	17
	Correct	35	85
	Incorrect	85	35
	Subject omission	28	6
	L1 literal translation	47	9
	<i>There</i> overuse	10	20

Analysis of the Fourth- and Seventh-Year Learners' Performance on Domain 5

The last domain of non-referential *it* referred to cases when *it* is followed by an *adjective + infinitive*. Sentences with non-referential *it* in the *adjective + infinitive* context correspond to Russian impersonal sentences (see example 13). The data of both groups were investigated for error patterns found in the fourth- and seventh-year students. Table 7 presents the percentage of error patterns made by both groups while using non-referential *it* in the environment context.

Table 7

Error Patterns Made by the Participants in Domain 5 (Adjective + Infinitive Context)

Tests	Error Pattern	Number of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Domain 5	
		Fourth Year	Seventh Year
Test 1	Correct	31	99
	Incorrect	89	21
	Subject omission	18	6
	L1 literal translation	71	11
Test 2	<i>There</i> overuse	0	4
	Correct	50	89
	Incorrect	70	31
	Subject omission	15	4
	L1 literal translation	55	25
	<i>There</i> overuse	0	2

The analysis of error patterns made by the fourth- and seventh-year students revealed that the two groups tended to transfer the literal translation of the Russian structures in English when mistaken, that is the participants produced sentences that lacked both non-referential *it* and the copula as example 33 illustrates:

33. **To stay in this hotel very expensive.*

In this respect the language behaviour of the fourth-year students did not differ from all the other domains; however, for the seventh-year students, it appeared to be the only domain where they did not substitute non-referential *it* with non-referential *there* but instead predominantly transferred from Russian when they were mistaken.

Overall Findings and Discussion

The data analysis presented a detailed account of learning non-referential *it* in English by native speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language in the classroom setting. Based on this analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, native speakers of Russian seem to have difficulties using non-referential *it*. This finding contradicts the view expressed by Cowan (2008), according to which non-referential *it* structures are considered to be fairly easy to teach as they occur in limited contexts and always take a singular verb, usually *be*.

Second, the data analysis demonstrated that omission of non-referential *it*, referred to as the main if not unique error type in the use of non-referential subjects in numerous studies on the reset of the pro-drop parameter in English L2 acquisition, was not the only type of error made by the speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language. All of the three possible error patterns identified by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) were observed in the participants' data. Moreover, the majority of the errors were due to transference of the literal translation from Russian and substitution of non-referential *it* with non-referential *there*, while cases when the students omitted non-referential *it* but preserved the copula were quite rare. This might be linked to the fact that copula *be*, which follows non-referential *it* in most contexts, is not used in Russian in the present simple tense (Timberlake, 1993). The error patterns observed in all but one domain of non-referential *it* occurred to differ between the fourth- and seventh-year students. The Group 1 learners appeared to rely on their L1 nearly always when they were mistaken. However, the errors due to L1 transfer could be defined as developmental because with further exposure to English, they occurred to decrease and/or even disappear in some of the domains. The seventh-year students did not tend to omit non-referential *it* but demonstrated a different prevailing pattern of errors: the majority of their errors were due to substitution of non-referential *it* with non-referential *there*.

Third, all the domains of the use of non-referential *it* appeared to be difficult for the fourth-year students as they did not manage to answer 50% of the test items in any of the domains. The performance of the seventh-year students showed that the participants were erroneous, at least, on 50% of the test items in two out of the five domains. The performance of the seventh-year students in different subdomains and domains of non-referential *it* revealed that the Russian participants associated the use of non-referential *it* with time, *adjective + infinitive* and environmental contexts. The context of weather and,

especially, the context of distance in the subdomain when non-referential *it* is followed by a *numeral + NP* were not associated with non-referential *it* by the Russian students even after a long period of English learning.

These findings might raise a question of why the participants failed in these subdomains of weather and distance contexts. In this respect, it could be suggested that intralinguistic factors, particularly syntactic structures of the impersonal sentences in the distance and weather contexts, might have triggered errors in these subdomains. Most probably, the structures in which non-referential *it* is followed by a singular copular but a plural NP might be perceived by the students as violating number agreement and thus incorrect. Moreover, the structures with non-referential *it* followed by a *numeral + NP* used in the context of weather and distance are syntactically similar to the constructions with *there are*, which are used when the logical subject and its location are introduced as example 34 (a, b) and example 35 (a, b) demonstrate:

34.

Non-Referential Form	<i>Numeral + NP</i>	Adverbial Modifier of Place
(a) <i>It is</i>	<i>three miles</i>	<i>from here to our house.</i>
(b) <i>There are</i>	<i>three parks</i>	<i>not far from our house.</i>

35.

Non-Referential Form	<i>Numeral + NP</i>	Adverbial Modifier of Place
(a) <i>It is</i>	<i>forty degrees</i>	<i>outside!</i>
(b) <i>There are</i>	<i>hundreds of people</i>	<i>outside!</i>

Thus, the surface number disagreement between non-referential *it* followed by a singular copula and a plural NP as well as the similarity of the syntactic structures between the two non-referential constructions might have confused the students in their attempt to work out the rule of the use of non-referential *it* and led to the numerous errors in the subdomains. This presupposition, in turn, might imply that the participants did not relate the use of non-referential *it* to the lexical contexts of impersonal sentences but to their syntactic structures, and they did not have complete understanding of non-referential *it* use.

Conclusion

The present study presenting a detailed account of the acquisition of non-referential *it* in L2 English by the native speakers of the [+pro-drop] Russian language revealed that the difficulties L2 English learners encountered when dealing with non-referential *it* were not limited to those related to the reset of the pro-drop parameter. Along with the omission of

non-referential *it*, the performance of the participants was marked with numerous cases of literal translations from L1 Russian and substitution of non-referential *it* with *there*. Moreover, according to the findings of this study the substitution of non-referential *it* with *there* seems to be the most persistent error pattern since it was observed in the data of the participants even after a long period of English learning. The participants seem to fail to associate the use of non-referential *it* with some of the contexts where non-referential *it* is required, and tended to replace it with non-referential *there*.

In order to prevent and/or overcome the difficulties related to the use of non-referential *it* in English, the following suggestions could be taken into consideration in the teaching/learning process:

1. Native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages leaning L2 English should have a clear-cut notion of non-referential *it* and the lexical contexts in which it is used.
2. Each context (time, weather, distance, etc.) where non-referential *it* is used in English should be introduced and practiced separately, and special attention should be paid to the structures where non-referential *it* + *singular copular* are followed by plural NP.
3. To enable students to distinguish between non-referential *it* and *there*, numerous examples contrasting the use of these non-referential subjects may be suggested.

Though the present study examined the acquisition of non-referential *it* by native speakers of [+pro-drop] Russian, the findings of the current research might be beneficial for instructors working with learners of different L1 backgrounds and English language teaching material writers. The errors due to distinguishing between the two non-referential subjects in English, *it* and *there*, might be made not only by native speakers of [+pro-drop] languages but also by native speakers of [-pro-drop] languages that have no such structures or have only one non-referential form, the meaning of which may overlap with the meaning of English *it* and *there*.

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Notes

¹*That-trace*: The phenomenon that the complementiser (*that*) cannot be followed by a trace (except in relative clauses) in some languages (e.g., English). Thus, in languages showing the *that-t*(race) effect, a subject cannot be extracted when it follows *that*.

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Appendix

Domain 1:

Non-referential *it* is used in the lexical context of time:

1. *It is half past six.*
2. *It is my birthday tomorrow.*
3. *It is Monday.*

Domain 2:

Non-referential *it* is used in the lexical context of weather:

4. *It is minus 30 outside!*
5. *It is raining again.*
6. *It is getting cold.*

Domain 3:

Non-referential *it* is used in the lexical context of distance:

7. *It is five stops on the metro to my office.*
8. *It is not far.*
9. *It is about 800 kilometres from Ankara to Bodrum.*

Domain 4:

Non-referential *it* is used in the lexical context of environment:

10. *It is so dirty here.*
11. *It is always crowded in this supermarket!*
12. *It is dangerous here at night.*

Domain 5:

Non-referential *it* is used in the constructions with *adjective + infinitive*:

13. *It is nice to see you again!*
14. *It is impossible to understand you.*