Form and Function of the English Existential Construction in Czech Learners' Written English

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Abstract
This article presents a study on teaching the English existential construction (*there is/are*) to Czech pupils as a structure without a direct syntactic equivalent in Czech. Based on written picture-description tasks from 10 primary school groups aged 8–15, the study evaluates learners' ability to use the construction correctly in form and function, as well as their capacity to alternate it with other sentence structures. Findings show that while classroom instruction helps young learners master the form, functional mastery also depends on age and L2 exposure.
Key words: word order, existential construction, unmarked word order, picture description

Introduction

Teaching English in Czech schools presents specific challenges arising from structural differences between the learners' mother tongue and the target language. Beyond sound-graphic, morphemic, lexical, and textual divergences, Czech and English differ significantly at the syntactic level, particularly regarding word-order formation.

Word-order differences relate closely to whether a language is analytic or synthetic. In English, which is morphologically analytic, word order primarily serves a grammatical function. In contrast, Czech, which is a synthetic language, uses word order primarily to express topic-focus articulation (or Functional Sentence Perspective, the term preferred in this paper). Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) structures an utterance according to the communicative importance of its constituents, guided by the speaker's communicative intent (Nekula, 1995).

The present study examines how Czech learners employ the English existential construction in a written assignment and alternate it with other sentence structures. This construction serves as an ideal example of cross-linguistic syntactic differences, given the contrasting word-order rules of Czech and English. The theoretical framework of this article outlines the relevant differences between the two languages, focusing on the English existential sentence and its Czech counterparts. The empirical section describes the research methodology and presents the findings, followed by a discussion of the study's primary conclusions.

Word order versus FSP

The use of inflection in the Czech language (changing forms through declension and conjugation) allows for a word order that is free to some extent, though not entirely arbitrary (Dušková, 2009). In practice, this means that thanks to the declension of nouns, we can place, for example, the object before the verb and the subject after the verb, and it is still evident from the form which sentence element it is, and the meaning of the message is clear.

Example

nominative accusative
1 ***Simona*** *má ráda* ***Petra****. = Simona likes Peter*

accusative nominative
2 ***Petra*** *má ráda* ***Simona****. = It's Simona that likes Peter.*

nominative accusative
3 ***Petr*** *má rád* ***Simonu.*** *= Peter likes Simona.*

These examples show that the Czech sentence can exchange the position of the subject (*Simona* in 1 and 2) with the direct object (*Petra* in 1 and 2), as the nominative forms differ from the accusative ones. The different forms of *Petr* and *Simona* are visible in sentence 3, where *Petr* is nominative and *Simonu* accusative. Also, the verb changes its form due to the subject-verb agreement rule, regardless of the subject position. In examples 1 and 2, the subject is *Simona*, which is female, and in 3 it is *Petr*, which is male. The English sentence, however, lacks declension and conjugation, resulting in much stricter word order rules. The unmarked word order in Czech declaratives is SUBJECT – VERB – OBJECT (SVO), which is the same as English unmarked word order. Nevertheless, the order of words in Czech sentences can be affected and changed by the context, its function, or the communicative perspective (Nekula, 1995).

English**,** being an analytic language, utilizes only very limited inflection. The grammatical functions of individual words are therefore expressed primarily by word order, the rules of which must be strictly adhered to (Dušková, 2009). Consequently, English uses different devices than Czech in some cases to express various grammatical categories and employs different means of expressing syntactic relations, primarily auxiliary (function) words and word order (Dušková, 2009). In English, for instance, the subject is always the sentence element that stands before the verb, whereas in Czech, the subject is the sentence element that is usually expressed by the nominative case (first case), but its position in the sentence does not matter, as we could see in the example sentences.

Within the framework of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), sentences are analysed in terms of their thematic and rhematic components. First formulated by Jan Firbas in the 1960s, FSP divides an utterance into a thematic part (less dynamic, conveying given context) and a rhematic part (more dynamic, conveying essential new information). The thematic elements carry a low degree of communicative dynamism (CD), defined by Dontcheva-Navratilova (2005, cited in Adam, 2008) as the "variation in the communicative value of different parts of an information unit." In contrast, the rhematic elements exhibit a high degree of CD, providing the core information towards which a sentence or subclause is oriented and completes the development of the communication (Vachek, 1994; Firbas, 1992). Typically, utterances transition from known information to new information, the sequence of which reflects the linearity principle. However, in fixed-word-order languages like English, strict adherence to this principle can sometimes conflict with grammatical constraints.

In example 1, the thematic part is *Simona*, which is the subject and thus in both languages it is at the beginning, and the rhematic part is *Petra*, which is the object element. Both rules of communicative dynamism and word order are observed in Czech as well as in English. However, in example 2, the thematic part *Petra* is the object, so it can be placed at the beginning only in the Czech sentence because in the English sentence we cannot apply OBJECT – VERB – SUBJECT word order, even though the object has a low degree of CD and, according to FSP principles, should be in the initial part of the sentence. The rhematic part in example 2 is *Simona*, which is the subject of the sentence. In Czech, *Simona* is placed after the verb, where the element with a high degree of CD usually goes. Here we can see that the distribution of communicative dynamism goes against the rules of word order in the English equivalent. In such cases,

English uses different devices than word order to express the communicative dynamism, such as passive voice, the existential construction, or the cleft construction (Dušková, 2009), which has been the case in our example 2. These alternative syntactic constructions are used especially in sentences in which it is the subject that is rhematic.

English Existential Construction and its teaching

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the devices for indicating the rhematic part, namely the subject, in an English sentence or utterance is employing the existential construction *There is/are*.

The existential construction is used in English when speaking about the existence of something either without using any adverbials (existential sentence type or bare existential construction), e.g., *There is no exception,* or when speaking about the occurrence of something in a certain place (existential-locative sentence type), e.g., *There is a girl in the waiting room*, which also includes a place adverbial (Dušková, 2009). In both cases, we are conveying information about something new that has not yet been discussed in the given context. From the perspective of the principles of FSP, we place new information with high communicative value after the verb in both languages, English and Czech, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Example

In the kitchen is a new table.

4 V kuchyni je nový stůl. = There is a new table in the kitchen.

5 Ten nový stůl je v kuchyni. = The new table is in the kitchen.

In Czech, the subject, which represents new information in the sentence, can be left after the verb without losing its function as a subject, and there is no need to replace it with anything in the pre-verbal position, as we can see in example 4. Here, we are communicating the existence of a new table, which is new information with high communicative value or degree of communicative dynamism. The question for the Example 4 utterance would be: *What is there in the kitchen?* Or *What do you have in the kitchen?*

In contrast, an English sentence must always begin with the subject, which is why the word *there* is used (example 4). It represents an anticipatory subject (or dummy subject) that anticipates the actual subject in the post-verbal position (Dušková, 2009). The word *there* in this type of sentence carries no meaning, is unstressed, and its role in the sentence is purely grammatical. Learners of English are often unaware of this fact and mistake the word *there* for the place adverbial.

Another pitfall in teaching and acquiring the existential construction is distinguishing between a situation where the existence or occurrence of something is being communicated, requiring the use of the existential construction, and a situation involving a sentence with the unmarked word order SVO, where the subject is information already known from context; see example 5. Here, we are not introducing the existence of the table, but rather communicating where the table is located. The question to the utterance would be: *Where is the table?* A common mistake made by learners is that they either fail to distinguish between these two situations, or they place the subject after the verb without using the anticipatory subject *there*, thereby copying Czech word order: **In the kitchen is a new table* instead of *There is a new table in the kitchen.*

Furthermore, we must also distinguish between the dummy subject *it* and the dummy subject *there*. The "empty" *it* is a dummy subject occurring in copular sentences expressing ambient states or time data (Dušková, 2009), e.g., *It is Tuesday*, but it does not introduce the existence or occurrence of something in a particular place.

As seen in examples 4 and 5, in addition to using different sentence structures to communicate either the existence (example 4) or the location (example 5) of the new table, the use of noun determiners also varies. In example 4, the notional subject *a new table* uses the indefinite article. The notional subject is something new in discourse, so it has non-generic indefinite reference expressed by the indefinite article and constitutes the most dynamic part of the communicative field. On the other hand, in example 5, the subject *the new table* uses the definite article, as it refers to something that is known from the previous context and has a lower degree of communicative dynamism. However, as Dubec points out, "neither the indefinite article indicates always the most dynamic part of the sentence, nor the definite article signals in all instances the least dynamic element. It is the interplay of the FSP factors that determines the degree of CD." (Dubec, 2019).

The existential construction and its teaching is also highlighted by Swan and Smith (2001) in the book *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*, which is a handbook for native English-speaking teachers who teach English abroad. Here, the authors point out phenomena in various languages that cause problems for students. They highlight the issue of using the existential construction in the case of Polish-speaking students, whose mother tongue is very similar to Czech and whose equivalent structure also differs from the English one.

Research

The aim of this study, which was part of a larger-scale research, was to investigate the extent to which young learners of English are capable of using the existential construction in a written assignment after being taught this topic at school. For this study, the following research questions were identified:

1. To what extent do Czech learners use the existential construction appropriately?
2. How successfully do they alternate it with unmarked word order structures?

The data have been collected from 10 groups of learners at primary and lower secondary school, aged between 8 and 15 years. Learners were asked to complete a written assignment: describing a picture they were given. All learners within one group received the same picture. Each group of learners was composed of approximately 15 respondents. The total number of respondents was 140. This type of task had been chosen for several reasons:

- Simplicity: The topic is not demanding in terms of vocabulary or the factual information the learner is expected to express in the essay. Therefore, primary school and lower-secondary school students should have no trouble writing this type of text within a single class period.
- Contextual fit: Describing a place naturally prompts the use of the existential construction, which is highly typical of this type of discourse.
- Equity and accuracy: Describing an unfamiliar place prevents potential discrimination that could occur if students described their own homes. It also prevents the potential overuse of the verb *have*, which students might otherwise use to replace the existential construction when describing their own environment.
- Finally, by having everyone describe the same picture, identical conditions were established for all learners.

For the purpose of processing the textual data, categories had been established to classify the sentences of individual respondents. Two categories tracked which sentences were used functionally appropriately or inappropriately in terms of

employing the existential construction, namely, and whether the existential construction or unmarked word order was applied in the appropriate context. The third category comprised sentences that were grammatically incorrect in terms of word order. This category included sentences mirroring Czech word order typically used when describing a place: PLACE ADVERBIAL – VERB – SUBJECT (e.g., *"In the picture is..."*), as well as sentences containing other word order errors.
A text is considered highly rated when students can correctly alternate between existential sentences, sentences with unmarked word order, or sentences starting with the grammatical subject *it/this/that*, rather than a text where students solely use the *there is* construction, even if used correctly and appropriately.
Formal (surface-level) errors within these categories were disregarded. This is due to both the young age of some respondents – the youngest group studied being 3rd-grade primary school learners – and because such errors are irrelevant to the focus of the research.

Here are the categories into which the sentences have been distributed:

- **Category 1 – Functionally appropriately used sentences**
  - **1a** – Functionally appropriately used existential construction
  - **1b** – Functionally appropriately used unmarked word order
- **Category 2 – Functionally inappropriately used sentences**
  - **2a** – Functionally inappropriately used existential construction
  - **2b** – Functionally inappropriately used unmarked word order
- **Category 3 – Grammatically incorrect sentences**
  - **3a** – Existential-locative sentences mirroring Czech word order
  - **3b** – Other word-order errors

Results
This section presents the sentence distribution across three categories: Category 1 (functionally appropriate existential or unmarked sentences), Category 2 (functionally inappropriate sentences), and Category 3 (grammatically incorrect sentences). Data are presented chronologically by learner age. The abbreviation "R" designates individual respondents.

School 1, age 8 – 9, primary school, grade 3

School 1	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 3	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	10						10
R2				1			1
R3		1		5			6
R4	1						1
R5				2			2
R6	1			2			3
R7				3			3
R8				1			1
R9				1			1
R10				1			1
R11						1	1
R12							0
R13							0
R14				3			3
R15				3			3
Total	12	1	0	22		1	36

Most respondents found the task challenging due to their young age. Spelling errors were ignored as non-essential. Respondents R12 and R13 listed only isolated words (e. g., *globe, teacher*). However, R1 successfully produced ten existential sentences

(Example 1). Although from a non-English bilingual home, R1 received strong family encouragement in English, producing the group's highest-rated text.

Example 1
**Der are buks.* (R1)
**Der are penclekajs.* (R1)
**Der is a compjuter.* (R1)

School 2, age 9 – 10 years, primary school, grade 4

School 2	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 4	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1					7		7
R2					1		1
R3	1	1			1	1	4
R4		1				1	2
R5		2		2		1	5
R6				2			2
R7				8			8
R8				3			3
R9	1					1	2
R10	12						12
R11	4						4
R12	7	5					12
R13	4			2			6
R14	7						7
R15	1						1
R16	1	4			1		6
R17	4	4					8
Total	42	17	0	17	10	4	90

Compared to School 1, the ratio of appropriate sentences increased (66 % in Category 1 vs. 19 % in Category 2). However, ten sentences exhibited Czech A-V-S (adverbial-verb-subject) word-order transfer (Example 2).

Example 2
**In this picture is a classroom.* (R1)
**In this picture are pencils and books.* (R1)

Respondents R12, R16 and R17 effectively alternated between existential and unmarked structures while correctly applying definite and indefinite articles (Example 3). Both R12 and R17 engaged heavily in extramural English (media exposure); R17 also spoke Bulgarian at home.

Example 3
There is a teacher and kids. They read books and listen to the teacher. (R12)
There are a lot of kids in the classroom. There is a teacher teaching all of the kids. The kids have got books and pens on their tables. (R17)

School 3, learners aged 9 – 10 years, primary school, grade 4

School 3	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 4	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	2	5			2	1	10
R2	5						5
R3	1			1		4	6
R4	13						13
R5	7						7
R6	11					1	12
R7	16						16
R8	2					1	3
R9	4						4
R10	19						19
R11	8						8
R12	10						10
R13	12						12
R14	9						9
Total	119	5	0	1	2	7	134

This group yielded an 89% rate of *there is* sentences, suggesting recent explicit instruction. While R8 produced incomplete structures, R1 wrote the highest-rated text by successfully alternating sentence types (Example 4). According to the teacher, R1 reads extensively in Czech, which may enhance her metalinguistic awareness and sensitivity to communicative dynamism.

Example 4
There are fifteen children. The girls have long hair. (R1)

School 4, age 11 – 12, primary school, grade 5

School 4	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 5	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	10	1					11
R2	7	4					11
R3	14						14
R4	11	7					18
R5	11						11
R6	4	8		2			14
R7	10	2			2		14
R8	7			7	1		15
R9	3	4			12		19
R10	4				9		13
R11	2	3		6			11
R12				13			13
R13				11	1		12
Total	83	29	0	39	25	0	176

Despite high error rates, many pupils varied their sentence structures. When placing place adverbials in the initial position, pupils frequently omitted the existential *there*, resulting in A-V-S word order (Example 5). Unmarked word order was used appropriately when expanding on details (Example 6).

Example 5
*There is a carpet. *On the carpet are books. (R10)*
Example 6
There is a chair opposite the table. The chair is red, yellow, and pink. (R4)

R6 produced the top-rated continuous text, utilizing linking expressions. Driven by peer motivation (R4), R6 actively improved her English by watching TV programs.

School 5, age 11 – 12, primary school, grade 5

School 5	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 5	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	8						8
R2	9						9
R3	9						9
R4	9						9
R5	9						9
R6				1	8		9
R7	5						5
R8	9						9
R9	9						9
R10	9						9
R11	9						9
R12	5	3					8
R13	9						9
R14	9						9
Total	108	3	0	1	8	0	120

Following structured instruction, most pupils produced standardized sentences (*There is* + NP + Place Adverbial). Exceptionally, R12 alternated sentence structures effectively (Example 7). R12 benefits from a supportive home environment, plays computer games, and reads extensively.

Example 7
…There is a computer or a laptop in the classroom. It looks like the students are paying attention to the teacher. The teacher is about to start explaining something. The clock shows that it's 12 o'clock. (R12)

School 6, age 11 – 12, primary school, grade 5

School 6	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 5	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	1	5	1				7
R2	7						7
R3	2	1		1	3		7
R4				7			7
R5	7						7
R6	7						7
R7	7						7
R8	7						7
R9		1		2	4		7
Total	38	7	1	10	7	0	63

Only three pupils used non-existential structures. R1 wrote the top text (Example 8), forming a coherent narrative rather than isolated sentences. The teacher noted that while R1 is usually slow in class, he possesses strong grammatical reasoning.

Example 8
… There are two big windows in the classroom. The teacher in the classroom is looking at the green board. The kids are behind the teacher. (R1)

School 7, age 11 – 12, primary school, grade 5

School 7	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Senteces
Grade 5	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1				6			6
R2			5				5
R3	10						10
R4	9						9
R5	7						7
R6	5						5
R7	10						10
R8	8						8
R9	5						5
R10				1	1		2
Total	54	0	5	7	1	0	67

This group received extra afternoon instruction, mostly driven by parental interest. All respondents produced isolated sentences. R1 used unmarked word order exclusively, R6 used interrogative existential forms, and R10 used a grammatically correct but contextually inappropriate cleft construction (Example 9).

Example 9
*It's children at school. *On the xxx (illegible word) is teacher. (R10)*

School 8, age 11 – 12, primary school, grade 6

School 8	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 6	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	3					2	5
R2	5						5
R3	2	2	1		2		7
R4	4						4
R5	10						10
R6	8			2			10
R7	8						8
R8	1		1	1	1		4
R9	10						10
R10	8						8
R11		1	1		3	4	9
Total	59	3	3	3	6	6	80

While most pupils submitted isolated sentences, R3 composed a continuous narrative alternating between existential and unmarked structures (Example 10). R3 was identified as a diligent, high-performing student.

Example 10
There are pupils. They study in school. (R3)
**In front of them is a teacher, he looks on the board. (R3)*

School 9, age 12 – 13, lower secondary school, grade 2

School 9	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 2	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	6	2			4		12
R2	10						10
R3	10						10
R4	10						10
R5	10						10
R6	9	1					10
R7	5	1					6
R8	7	3					10
R9	5	3				1	9
R10	10						10
R11	4				6		10
Total	86	10	0	0	10	1	107

In this selective grammar-school group, R1 and R11 repeated L1 transfer errors by omitting *there* after initial place adverbials. Conversely, R8 produced an error-free, highly varied text (Example 11), correctly utilizing ambient "empty *it*" to express time. R8's high proficiency stems from extramural practice (Netflix, AI chat tools, and an English pen pal) alongside a school requirement to read and present English books.

Example 11
…There is a male teacher… There are a lot of kids… One boy has a backpack beside his desk. The teacher is wearing a shirt and black pants. There is only one girl with short hair. It's twelve o'clock. (R8)

School 10, age 14 – 15, primary school, grade 9

School 10	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Sentences
Grade 9	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	in total
R1	9	4			1		14
R2	20						20
R3	10						10
R4	10						10
R5	8						8
R6	9						9
R7	10						10
R8	9						9
R9	10						10
R10	10						10
R11	8					2	10
R12	9						9
R13	10						10
R14	10						10
R15	12						12
R16	10						10
R17	10						10
R18	10						10
R19	10						10
R20	8						8
R21	8				1		9
R22	8						8
R23	8						8
R24	4						4
R25					6		6
R26		9					9
Total	230	13	0	0	8	2	253

As the oldest group, pupils were familiar with advanced participle extensions (*There is somebody doing* something). R26 relied exclusively on unmarked word order but maintained discourse coherence via article contrast (Example 12). R1 composed the highest-rated continuous text, alternating sentence types and using transitions like *Let's move on…* (Example 13), though one initial-adverbial A-V-S error occurred.

Example 12
A girl is sitting on a pushchair. The girl is reading. … A girl is eating ice-cream. She is sitting on xxx (an illegible word) (R26)
Example 13
*There is a park. *Above the park is a street. …There are also a few shops. Let's move on to the park. There is a lake. On the lake we can see some swans and ducks. (R1)*

Discussion and Conclusions
The present study aimed to introduce the differences between Czech and English word-order rules and the unequal structure of the existential sentence in both languages resulting from these differences. We examined ten groups of English learners aged 8 to

15 who were given a task to describe a picture. Subsequently, all sentences from the written assignments were distributed into pre-established categories. These categories tracked the frequency of use of the existential construction, its correctness, and its appropriateness, as well as the learners' ability to alternate the existential construction with unmarked word order, which is more suitable when specifying further details that have already been introduced by the existential *there is.*

All results are summarized in the following table:

Age / grade / number of learners	**Category 1**		**Category 2**		**Category 3**		Total
	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a	3b	
8 – 9 / 3 / 15	12	1	0	22	0	1	36
9 – 10 / 4 / 17	42	17	0	17	10	4	90
9 – 10 / 4 / 14	119	5	0	1	2	7	134
10 – 11 / 5 / 13	83	29	0	39	25	0	176
10 – 11 / 5 / 14	108	3	0	1	8	0	120
10 – 11 / 5 / 9	38	7	1	10	7	0	63
10 – 11 / 5 / 10	54	0	5	7	1	0	67
10 – 11 / 5 / 11	59	3	3	3	6	6	80
11 – 12 / 7* / 11	86	9	0	0	10	1	106
14 – 15 / 9 / 26	230	13	0	0	8	2	253
Total	831	87	9	100	77	21	1125

*the second grade at lower secondary school

As presented in the table, the youngest respondents experienced the greatest difficulty in completing the task. This aligns with their cognitive immaturity, as forming complete sentences remains challenging at this developmental stage. Consequently, Category 2 contained a higher frequency of sentences than Category 1, and two pupils in this group produced only isolated words. Notably, the existential construction was included both in their textbooks and the School Education Programme. Surprisingly, learners only one year older completed the task with relative ease.

At first glance, the total results of groups aged 9 and above suggest a potential pattern: a lower ratio in Category 1b often corresponded to a lower ratio in Category 2b. This trend might imply that strict adherence to the rules of existential constructions during picture description reduces the risk of inappropriately using sentences with unmarked word order. This aligns with classroom observations, which confirmed that all introductory lessons presented the existential construction through picture description, which is the standard pedagogical approach at the primary level. However, a detailed analysis of individual respondents revealed that Categories 1b and 2b do not correlate. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that a higher frequency of unmarked word-order sentences directly causes an increase in their inappropriate use.

The study demonstrated that following instruction, learners tended to employ the existential construction in the majority of their sentences when describing a picture. Those who appropriately utilized alternative sentence structures were predominantly children with significant extramural language input. This exposure included audiovisual media, interacting with AI tools, or reading books. Furthermore, these learners often came from bilingual or highly supportive family environments. Interestingly, some even engaged heavily in reading in their native Czech, which may have enhanced their general metalinguistic awareness. Conversely, background data were unavailable for pupils who did not receive specific teacher commentary; thus, it cannot be definitively stated that out-of-school language practice was exclusive to the highest-performing group. This limitation highlights a valuable path for further research to determine the precise extent to which extramural sources enhance the understanding of communicative dynamism.

The same task was also given to a group of 18- and 19-year-old learners. Although this group was not included in this study, their results showed that they used much more complex sentences and a wider variety of sentence structures when speaking about a

picture, such as "*This photo shows…" "The classroom has…" " This picture captures…"* or *"The classroom walls display…"* alongside the *there is* construction, which was actually not employed in this group's texts as frequently as in those of younger learners. The teenagers' texts displayed much higher syntactic complexity and a very natural use of the existential construction, which was employed neither too often nor too seldom, despite these learners not having been directly taught syntax or Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) theory. The existential construction is typically reviewed only once during secondary school education. Seeing the difference might result in asking a question what enables the teenage students to write texts of significantly higher quality.

A possible answer to the question is that teenagers are cognitively more mature and are likely at a higher developmental stage. The results can be interpreted in the light of the Processability Theory developed by Manfred Pienemann, who describes six developmental stages. According to his theory, second language acquisition has two dimensions (the Multidimensional Model): a **developmental dimension** for certain aspects of the target language, where acquisition progresses according to fixed developmental stages and cannot be altered by external factors; and a **variational dimension** for other aspects, where acquisition can be influenced by factors such as learner motivation or the degree of integration into the target language environment. The developmental dimension depends on general language processing factors, whereas the variational dimension depends on the aforementioned individual learner variables (Mielke, 2019; Cook, 1993). Although it remains unclear to which dimension acquiring the existential construction belongs, older learners clearly reach higher developmental stages and experience far more interaction with the second language both inside and outside of school. Both factors play a vital role in mastering the word order and developing sensitivity to communicative dynamism.

A final remark should be made on Category 3a. According to Lightbown & Spada (2021), the prior knowledge of the mother tongue may be an advantage in some respects, but it can also lead learners to incorrect assumptions about how the second language works. This can result in negative language transfer, which is evident in Category 3a, where learners copied the Czech word order pattern: PLACE ADVERBIAL – VERB – SUBJECT. The younger the learners are, the more difficult it is for them to grasp function words, as these concepts are too abstract for their current stage of development.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that learners' functional command of the existential construction appears to be influenced not only by formal instruction but also by broader linguistic experience acquired through reading, media consumption, and authentic interaction in English. Through formal schooling, learners master the structure's form with relative ease, but often fail to master its communicative function at an early age. Young learners tend to mechanically apply the structure they have been taught to a given scenario (such as picture description), whereas older, more cognitively mature, and L2-experienced learners apply it much more flexibly and effectively.

Declaration on AI use

AI-assisted tools were used during manuscript preparation for language editing and refinement. The author takes full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and integrity of the research.

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