

Do children obey the ban on non-finite verbs in V2?

Evidence from early second language learners of German with and without SLI

This paper investigates whether early second language learners of German (eL2) with typical development (TD) and with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) in the course of their morpho-syntactic development ever produce structures that violate the ban on non-finite verbs in verb-second position (V2). In V2 languages like German, in the adult grammar this position is restricted to finite verbs. Overtly marked non-finite forms such as *en*-infinitives (1) as well as bare forms (2), the form composed of the verb stem and a null morpheme (Spencer/Zwicky 1998), are not licensed in V2 (Holmberg 2015). According to Haider (2010), in German the verb is base-generated within a head-final VP, and movement applies only when the finite verb moves to the V2 position, i.e. the top functional head position F^0 . This holds for subject-initial and non-subject-initial V2 clauses alike (cf. Vikner/Schwartz 1996). Tense and aspectual morphemes are assigned to the verb and checked via agree with F^0 in main clauses; person and number features are checked in German by the subject (Chomsky 2008). Previous research suggests that in both monolingual and eL2-TD acquisition *en*-infinitives in V2 are very rare, compared to bare forms, which are overused in eL2-TD (Prévost 2003, Rothweiler et al. 2012; English: Haznedar 2001, Dutch: Blom/Baayen 2012). In contrast, *en*-infinitives in V2 have been reported for monolingual (and tentatively for eL2) SLI (Clahsen 1991, Chilla 2008, Rothweiler et al. 2012) as well as for adult L2 (e.g., Bohnacker 2007; Meisel 1997). However, often bare forms were analyzed together with *en*-infinitives or excluded from analysis, and V2 and Vf clauses were not always differentiated. To date it is hence unclear whether eL2 children (TD and SLI) obey the ban on non-finite verbs in V2. Using a longitudinal design we addressed two questions: (Q1a) Which verb forms do eL2 children with TD and with SLI use in V2? (Q1b) And do they distinguish between *en*-infinitives and bare forms regarding verb placement? (Q2) Do eL2 children with SLI differ from their eL2 TD peers in their morpho-syntactic behavior? Extending our previous study, elicited production data were collected at four test rounds from 22 eL2-TD learners of German with different L1's (Age at T1: 3;7, AoO: 2;10 years) and 11 eL2-SLI children (Age at T1: 7;1, AoO: 3;3 years). The SLI children fulfilled the standard exclusion criteria and performed below 1SD in $\geq 2/9$ subtests of an omnibus language test with eL2-norms. The age range for the TD and the SLI group ensured that main clauses were likely to be produced, but mastery of finiteness and verb placement was unlikely to be in place. The elicited production task contained 13 prompts targeting main clauses ((1)(2), materials: LiSe-DaZ, Schulz/Tracy 2011). 642 main clauses with a lexical verb as the main verb were analyzed further (Table 1). In V2 main clauses both TD and SLI children, from T1 onwards, used no substitutions and very few *en*-infinitives (TD=3, SLI=2); bare forms were the most frequent error types (TD=28, SLI=22) (Fig. 1a/b) (Q1a). In non-adult Vf main clauses, TD and SLI children frequently used *en*-infinitives, but only rarely bare and finite forms (Fig. 2a/b). Distribution of *en*-infinitives and bare forms significantly differed between V2 and Vf: In both the TD and the SLI group *en*-infinitives were sig. more frequent in Vf than in V2; and bare forms were sig. more frequent in V2 than in Vf (all p 's < .000, Fisher's Exact Test) (Q1b). Regarding (Q2), the occurrence of *en*-infinitives and bare forms in V2 and Vf did not differ between eL2-TD and eL2-SLI children ($p = .1465$, Fisher's Exact Test) (Table 1). Overall, bare forms patterned with finite verbs and not with *en*-infinitives; hence we assume that they are underlyingly finite for both eL2-TD and eL2-SLI children. We conclude that a) the restrictions for morphological markings are inextricably tied to specific syntactic positions, b) that this knowledge is still accessible when L2 acquisition starts around age 3, and c) that the ban on non-finite verbs in V2 is invulnerable in eL2-TD and in SLI, indicating that SLI is matter of severe delay. Further research should explore whether L2 learners with an AoO > 4, like adult L2 learners, violate the ban, in line with the predicted relations between early timing in monolingual acquisition and AoO effects (cf. Grimm/Schulz 2016, Tsimpli 2014).

‘Look, what is happening in this picture?’

- (1) Lise spiel-en mit dem Ball.
Lise play.INF with the ball
- (2) Lise spiel mit dem Ball.
Lise play.Ø with the ball

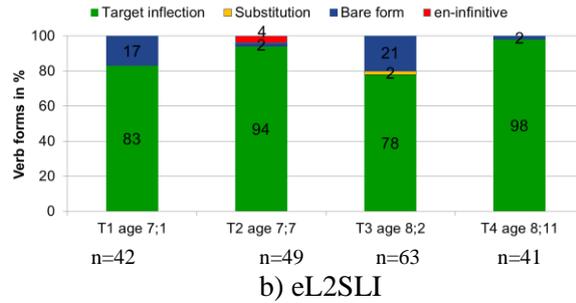
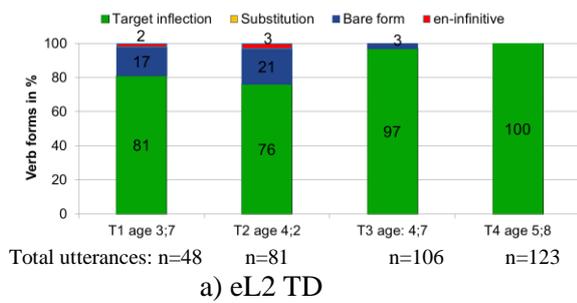


Fig 1: Lexical verb forms used in V2 main clauses

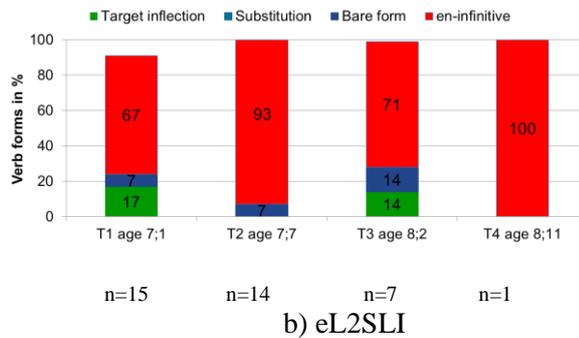
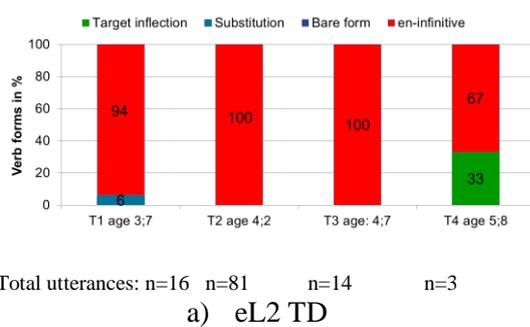


Fig 2: Lexical verb forms used in Vf main clauses

Table 1. Verb forms of lexical verbs produced in main clauses (V2 and Vf) in absolute numbers and in % for the TD and the SLI group (across all test rounds).

		eL2 TD	eL2 SLI
N		22	11
Mean age at T1		3;8	7;1
Mean exposure at T1		11	45
Verb form	Clause type		
Target inflection (+finite,+agree)	V2	327 (79,4 %)	168 (73,0 %)
	Vf	1 (0,2 %)	5 (2,2 %)
Bare form (?finite, -agree)	V2	28 (6,8 %)	22 (9,6 %)
	Vf	0	3 (1,3 %)
en-infinitive (-finite,-agree)	V2	3 (0,7 %)	2 (0,9 %)
	Vf	52 (12,6 %)	29 (12,6 %)
Substitution (+finite, -agree)	V2	0	1 (0,4 %)
	Vf	1 (0,2 %)	0
Total		412 (100 %)	230 (100 %)

Coding. Finite: verbs inflected with *-e, -st, or -t* or *-en* in 1PL or 3PL contexts. The form *-Ø* was coded as ‘?finite’ in all contexts except for 1SG, where it was coded as finite, because the bare form, resulting from Schwa-deletion, is accepted in this case (e.g., *Ich komm* ‘I come-Ø’). Substitution: finite, but incorrect person and number marking.