

■ **ARTICLES / ARTÍCULOS**

Exploring the placement of focus adverbials: EFL and native speakers judgements¹

Explorando la localización de adverbios de foco:
juicios de aprendices de lengua extranjera y nativo
hablantes de inglés

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the acceptability judgments of English word-order patterns, containing focus adverbs, of L2 English EFL learners and native English speakers. Data were collected over the last two years (2022 and 2023) in the EFL major. Thirty-five EFL participants and 16 English native speakers (NS) completed the tests, using two test versions (A and B). Participants rated sentences containing the adverbs *only*, *even*, and *also* in both prescribed (SAVO) and unprescribed (SVAO) word orders. Descriptive and inferential analyses show that EFL learners demonstrated increased sensitivity to prescribed SAVO structures over time, especially for *even*, after one more year of formal instruction. On the other hand, NS showed more tolerance for the unprescribed SVAO patterns, particularly with *only*. The Mann-Whitney U tests revealed statistically significant differences between EFL learners and NS for the prescribed SAVO pattern in *also* and *only*, but not for the unprescribed SVAO structures. These findings suggest that while EFL learners develop stronger preferences for conventional word orders with increased formal instruction and higher proficiency, NS display greater flexibility when it comes to unprescribed forms. The results contribute to understanding how syntactic awareness evolves in second language acquisition, highlighting the complex interplay between prescriptive rules and natural language use.

Keywords: focus adverbs, acceptability judgements, grammaticality, SLA, EFL.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza los juicios de aceptabilidad sobre patrones de orden de palabras en inglés que incluyen los adverbios de foco *only*, *even* y *also*. Las pruebas fueron completadas por aprendientes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) y hablantes nativos de inglés. Los datos se recolectaron en 2022 y 2023 entre estudiantes de la carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés y estudiantes estadounidenses en una universidad costarricense. Participaron 35 aprendientes de EFL y 16 hablantes nativos de inglés, quienes completaron una de dos versiones de la prueba (A o B). Los participantes evaluaron oraciones que seguían un patrón prescrito (SAVO) y otro no prescrito (SVAO). Los análisis descriptivos e inferenciales muestran que los aprendientes de EFL desarrollaron una mayor sensibilidad hacia las estructuras prescritas, especialmente con *even*, tras un año adicional de instrucción formal. Por su parte, los hablantes nativos de inglés mostraron mayor tolerancia hacia los patrones no prescritos, particularmente con *only*. Las pruebas U Mann-Whitney revelaron diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre ambos grupos en los patrones prescritos con *also* y *only*, pero no en los no prescritos. Estos resultados indican que, con mayor instrucción y competencia, los aprendientes de EFL tienden a preferir órdenes convencionales, mientras que los hablantes nativos muestran mayor flexibilidad ante formas no estándar. El estudio aporta a la comprensión del desarrollo de la conciencia sintáctica en la adquisición de una segunda lengua y subraya la interacción entre las normas gramaticales y el uso natural del idioma.

Palabras clave: adverbios de foco, juicios de aceptabilidad, gramaticalidad, enseñanza de segundas lenguas, inglés como lengua extranjera.

1. INTRODUCTION

While certain aspects of L2 grammars may require less effort from learners, other properties become significantly more demanding during a language learning process. This seems to be the case of adverbial placement for L2 English-L1 Spanish learners. Despite these learners reaching nearly native-like levels of performance in some linguistic tasks, adverb placement continues to pose challenges even for advanced L2 English-L1 Spanish learners. This paper analyses how experience with language, in an immersion program in tertiary level education, supports the acquisition of English grammatical regularities, and also how this experience enables the brain to process these regularities effectively when the language is learned in a formal EFL setting. We attempt to shed light on whether adverb positioning offers insights into the wider structures within which they occur so that investigating the relationships between different adverb positionings by this group of learners may allow us to understand broader, more fundamental aspects of syntactic structure in L2 English-L1 Spanish subjects.

The study of adverbs and their distribution in EFL settings is key because adverbs are a multi-faceted word class; not only do they include words with very different meanings and uses, but the same adverb can often function in many different ways or show different kinds of behavior depending on the context and its syntactic position. The use of flexible adverbial placement in both Spanish and English results in a number of shared possible adverbial locations in these languages. This distribution, however, is still subject to various syntactic, semantic and pragmatic restrictions, which also create key distinctions for adverbial placement in the two languages. Table I illustrates several possible adverb placements in English and Spanish.

Table I. *Adverb placement possibilities in English and Spanish.*

Adverb Placement in English	Adverb Placement in Spanish
SVOA Ann finished her test quickly.	SVOA Ana terminó su examen rápidamente.
ASVO Cheerfully, Ann opened the present.	ASVO Alegremente, Ana abrió el regalo.
SAVO Ann always watches TV.	SAVO Ana siempre ve televisión.
SAuxAVO Ann was always running around like crazy. Ann has always visited her mom.	SAuxAVO Ana estaba siempre corriendo como loca. * Ana ha siempre visitado a su madre.
SVAO *Ann buys always the same food.	SVAO Ana compra siempre la misma comida.

Note. (S) subject, (V) transitive verb; (O) direct object; (Aux) auxiliary verb; (A) adverb, (*) ungrammatical.

Table I indicates that both English and Spanish share adverbial placements in contexts such as sentence-final, sentence-initial, and pre-verbal positions. However, while English permits adverbs to be positioned between the auxiliary and main verb, for both *be* and *have* auxiliaries, Spanish allows adverbials to appear after *estar* but not after *haber*, when functioning as auxiliary verbs. Moreover, and of crucial importance for this paper, while Spanish permits adverbs (as well as other word categories) to appear between the verb and its object, this breaks the VP in English and can render the sentence ungrammatical. This distinction—the intrusion of an element between the V and its object in English—will be the focus of the present study. We will report on the results of a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) that examines the focus adverbs *even*, *also* and *only* in pre- and post-verbal position with the intention of examining whether EFL learners are aware of determining the most appropriate placement for these focus adverbs in different given contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quirk et al. (1985) provide an extensive discussion on focus subjuncts and define members of this subjunct group. *Restrictive subjuncts*, are those elements that “indicate that the utterance concerned is true in respect of the part focused” (p. 604) and list the focus adverb *only* as part of the *exclusive* subclass. They further describe the additive subclass of subjuncts as indicating “that the utterance concerned is *additionally* true in respect of the part focused” (p. 604) with *also* and *even* being members of this subclass. Quirk et al. (1985) note that when focusing subjuncts precede the focused item, they are usually associated with an intonation nucleus on the concerned items, which then moves to the unmarked final position, or on the stressed or only syllable in lengthy items. Conversely, when focusing subjuncts follow the focus item, they receive the stress.

Quirk et al. (1985) also assert that restrictive and additive focus subjuncts are frequently placed at M position of a sentence; that is, between the subject and verb or following *be* when this is the main verb. This position allows focus on either the main verb, another element of the predicate, or the entire predicate. They emphasize that prescriptive grammar requires the following word order to allow for each of the corresponding readings:

(1)

John could see only his wife from the doorway [e.g. he could not see her brother]
John could see his wife only from the doorway [e.g. he could not see her from further inside the room]. (p. 606)

Moreover, regarding position, Quirk et al. (1985) insist that restrictive subjuncts can either precede or follow the focused item when this is a complete clause element. In the specific case of *only*, they further claim that the restrictive subject must precede if the item focused is part of a clause element. They illustrate this idea with the examples in (2). Finally, they add that “when focusing noun phrases, *only* and

alone are to some extent treated as though they formed part of the noun phrases concerned" (p. 608).

(2)

I $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{only saw} \\ \text{saw only} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ his $\langle \text{ELDer} \rangle$ brother – not the younger one. (p. 608)

Regarding the position of additive subjuncts, particularly *also* and *even* for the purposes of the present study, Quirk et al. (1985) claim that they usually precede a focused element, albeit a constituent or a complete predicate; they may follow the focused part carrying the intonation nucleus and follow the subject if that is the focus. In line with this, König (2002) argues that focus particles, including *even*, *also* and *only*, represent a subclass of adverbs with common characteristics that set them apart from other adverbial groups. These features include significant positional variability, quantifier-like properties, and the capacity to interact with the focus/nuclear tone of a sentence, thus the term *focus particles* used to describe them. König (2002) explains that, based on their syntactic and semantic properties, *even*, *only*, and *also*, should be regarded as a minor, non-lexical category, i.e., as members of the class *function words*.

This concept will be discussed later in connection to the bottleneck theory proposed by Slabakova (2013). According to König (2002), the semantic role of focus adverbs is reflected in their syntactic positioning. Considering the structural position within a clause and possible combinations of the particle and its focus, König (2002) describes the following possible locations for these adverbials in English: *a*. before the subject, to focus on the subject itself or a part of it; *b*. at sentence-final position, to focus on any part of the sentence except for its auxiliary; *c*. inside the auxiliary complex, frequently after two auxiliaries, to refer to either the subject, object, or indirect object of the sentence; *d*. after the main verb, to focus exclusively on the following constituent in the sentence; and *e*. inside a clause, it may follow its focus. While he also mentions a number of additional constraints, the previous ones suffice for the purposes of this paper.

König (2002) also notes that the contribution of focus particles to the meaning of a sentence relies as much on their focus as it does on their scope. According to Quirk (1985) and Gledhill (2005) adverbs represent one of the word classes whose meaning may contribute

to the meaning of the sentence [...] well beyond the particular phrase in which they occur. Their position, too, may bring particular significance... an operator at the beginning of a sentence will mark the whole of what follows it [...] SCOPE is the general term that we shall use to describe the semantic 'influence' which such words have on neighboring parts of the sentence. (p. 85)

For Gledhill (2005, p. 2), scope can be interpreted as "*a restriction in the semantics of another phrase.*" That means that an adverb may have scope over an entire clause if it is a sentential adverb, or it might have scope over one or more VP components, in the case of predicational adverbs. Quirk et al. (1985) add that scope interacts with

focus in that focus concerns the placement of the element to emphasize specific portions of the sentence that receive attention. Both scope and focus play critical roles for communicative purposes. Due to the significant roles these two elements play in determining the correct adverb placement in a sentence, they are key factors in deciding which placement is deemed correct and which one is not; or more precisely, which placement is considered a preferable choice over other possible placement options. Awareness of these concepts and their roles is a critical issue in classifying and assessing the responses gathered in this study.

In a study on adverb placement in L1 French-L2 English learners, White (1991) tested subjects using three different tasks in a series of pre-test, test, and post-tests, focusing on the fact that English does not permit separation of a verb and its object. In that study, White (1991) emphasized the importance of form-focused explicit instruction, particularly negative evidence, to learn the correct adverb placement properties in English, as opposed to French, which, like Spanish, commonly allows adverbs to be placed between the verb and its object. Although the follow-up results suggest that instruction on English adverb placement may not be retained long-term, the test results showed no statistically significant difference between the L2 English-L1 Spanish learners and NS, indicating short-term positive effects. She found that, prior to instruction, SVAO sentence patterns were accepted, and that negative evidence is required to make the necessary parametric change. She argued that negative evidence is crucial to demonstrate to L1-French speakers that verb movement is not allowed in English; otherwise, the positive evidence available in the classroom is insufficient for students to come to that understanding on their own.

Vann (2018, 2022), through a grammaticality judgement task, investigated the acquisition of English focus structures, particularly focus adverbs, in a study involving L1 Italian-L2 English learners. Her main goal was to investigate the word order acceptability of the focus adverbs *only*, *even*, and *also* following the SAVO or SVAO word orders. She discovered that focus adverbs in the SAVO structure to be more accepted by both EFL and native-speaker participants. Additionally, Italian participants accepted the SVAO order more frequently than NS did. Vann (2018) states:

the acceptability and grammaticality of SVA only, which happened to be a surprising result from the native speaker. This finding implies that the Focus Adverb *only* behaves lightly differently than the others and needs to be further studied in order to better understand the reasoning behind this. (p.72)

Vann (2022) also refers to the unexpectedly high rate of acceptability of the SVA *only* structure among the English monolinguals in her study. She had anticipated that this word order would be rated as clearly ungrammatical by English NS. This point will be revisited in our discussion.

Lahuerta (2024) examined accuracy in the written production of university EFL learners at the B1, B2, and C1 levels. The study found that syntactic, morphological, lexical, spelling, and punctuation errors decreased as proficiency increased, although development remained incomplete even at advanced levels. These findings support the present study's results by suggesting that sensitivity to grammatical restrictions, including appropriate word order patterns and adverb placement, develops

gradually through second language acquisition. The persistence of syntactic errors across proficiency levels also helps explain why some advanced EFL learners may continue to accept unprescribed SVAO structures despite extensive exposure to English instruction. Additionally, Suescún and Arango-Tobón (2022) investigated the relationship between extensive reading and several cognitive and affective variables in EFL learners, including working memory, processing speed, motivation, and literacy skills. Their findings revealed that extensive reading positively influenced these factors and contributed to more effective language learning. From the perspective of second language acquisition, these results suggest that increased exposure to meaningful language input can strengthen the cognitive resources necessary for processing and internalizing grammatical regularities. Such mechanisms may contribute to the development of learners' awareness of acceptable English word-order patterns, including the placement of focus adverbs examined in the present study.

Solís (2006) had previously conducted a brief study involving Costa Rican graduate students and university professors at a public university in Costa Rica. She investigated whether these participants could identify and correct adverbial misplacement in sentences. The sentences in the task included various types of adverbs such as frequency, time, manner, as well as adverbial phrases and the focus adverb *also*, in one case. Her results indicated that not only students but also some instructors were unable to identify sentences containing problems with adverbial placement. While some sentences were corrected adequately, participants failed to identify problems in other statements. Specifically, in the case of SVAO, Solís (2006) found that many of the students and some of the professors were unaware that separating the verb from its object is usually not permitted in English; that is, despite demonstrating advanced levels of proficiency in English, these participants were not yet fully aware of the ungrammaticality of such constructions. It is also possible that these participants still rely on the Spanish structure in which this syntactic parameter is present. If, as is the case for the participants in the present study, the curricula for these subjects did not highlight this restriction in English, it is quite likely that the participants were unaware of it.

3. THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine whether participants, L2 English-L1 Spanish and L1-English_L2-Spanish, could identify grammatically unprescribed word orders in English sentences. The task was a grammaticality judgement task (GJT), containing the focus adverbs *even*, *only*, and *also* in SAVO and SVAO positions, as well as a number of distractor items including frequency and manner adverbs.

3.1 Participants

A total of 51 students participated in the study. Sixteen NS of English completed the tests within two weeks of arriving in Costa Rica to take Spanish classes. These controls had a mean age of 21.1 years and reported having studied Spanish for an average of 4.7 years. They were placed at B1 and B2 Spanish levels based on Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thirty-five L2 English-L1 Spanish learners, with a mean age of 20.5 years, completed the task and were placed at B1 level based on CEFR. The same EFL participants were tested in both 2022 and 2023 as part of a longitudinal study, and their results in each data collection are compared to those of the NS group are discussed in this paper. Both groups of students were enrolled in a public university in Costa Rica. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were not economically or otherwise compensated. All participants consented to the use of the data collected for research purposes.

3.2 Instrument

The GJT was adapted from the version created by Vann (2022) for her case. In our case, the GJT was a paper-and-pencil type of test that included 36 experimental items using *also*, *even* and *only*. In 18 of these items, the adverb appeared in a pre-verbal position, and in the other 18 items, it appeared post-verbally. In addition, there were 36 filler statements, bringing the total to 72 items. The filler statements contained 18 manner adverbs and 18 frequency adverbs, with 9 items following the SAVO pattern and 9 following the SVAO pattern.

Participants were asked to judge all items using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant 'No one would say this' and 5 meant 'This is very appropriate'. Participants were instructed that they could use the numbers (2, 3 and 4) lying between 1 and 5 depending on whether they were more inclined towards one end of the scale or the other. Two versions of the test were created to cover a larger number of items. Sentences which appeared in Test A following the SAVO word order would appear in Test B with the SVAO word order, and vice-versa.

For the GJT, the same verb forms were used in each subcategory of items and all sentences were short. For the focus adverbs, there were 12 items for each adverb, such as those in (3).

(3)

S-*even*-VO (She *even* found a book)

SV-*even*-O (She found *even* a book)

S-*also*-VO (Sam *also* wrote the letters)

SV-*also*-O (Sam wrote *also* the letters)

S-*only*-VO (He *only* knew Mary)

SV-*only*-O (He knew *only* Mary)

For the manner and frequency adverbs, there were 18 items following an SAVO order (e.g. He often found a solution) and 18 items following the SVAO order (e.g. Lydia needed clearly a car). For frequency and manner adverbs each statement contained a different adverb. As in Vann (2022), each item in the task contained verbs in the simple past tense.

In all types of items, the following types of noun phrases (NPs) appeared after the verb:

- Indefinite article + singular noun: She *even* found a book.
- Proper Noun: She *even* knew Mary.
- Non count noun (no article); She *also* played soccer.
- Some + plural noun: Robert *also* painted some pictures.
- Definite article + singular noun: She *only* wrote the letters.
- Definite article + plural noun: Mary *only* lost the key.

The items were randomized using the *List Randomizer* tool (Random.org) using the “Remove duplicates” option to ensure that no two items with the same pattern under investigation appeared consecutively.

3.3 Procedure

For the GJT, participants were given a paper test to complete. The tests were administered during a class period for one of the major subjects. After collecting the data, it was processed using Excel spreadsheets, where the responses were coded. Following the coding, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted in R software. As in Vann (2022), a rating of 4 or higher was considered grammatical and was binarized as 1; while responses of 3 or lower were considered incorrect, as they indicated either uncertainty or ungrammaticality, and were thus assigned a 0. Both groups of students took between 20 and 25 minutes to complete the test.

3.4 Results

This section presents an analysis of the GJT results. A general descriptive analysis is presented first, followed by an inferential analysis.

Table II provides a description of the participants of this study grouped by test version and year. While a total of 35 EFL subjects took the test in 2022 and 31 completed it in 2023, only the 30 participants who took part in both data collections are considered for comparison and analysis. Out of the 30 EFL participants, 9 took Test A in both 2022 and 2023, and 9 took Test B in both years. The remaining 12 EFL participants completed a different version of the test each year. As for the NS, 8 completed test A and 8 completed test B. Both versions of the test were checked for internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha for version A of the test is 0.800, while version B yielded a raw alpha of 0.802, indicating consistent reliability in both tests. Internal consistency with item deletion was analyzed, but no statistically significant improvement was identified, so all items were maintained throughout the data analysis.

Table II. *Distribution of participants per test.*

Year	Participants	Total	Test A	Test B
2022	L2 English-L1 Spanish	30	15	15
2023	L2 English-L1 Spanish	30	15	15
2023	L1 English-L2 Spanish	16	8	8

Table III shows a general review of the mean values for items containing *also*, *even* and *only* items, in Tests A and B combined, indicating that most items yield mean results ranging between 4.12 and 4.83. However, two means stand out as being below the 4-point mark: S-*even*-VO items in the EFL subject's test in 2022, with a mean of 3.94; and S-*even*-VO items for the English native group in 2023, with a mean value of 3.48. Both of these lower mean results pertain to the prescribed word order of elements in a sentence, where the object precedes the verb and does not break the VO unit. Sample items following the S-*even*-VO pattern for Test A include: 6. *He even knew Mary*; 35. *Lauren even played tennis*, and 41. *She even found a coin*, while Test B contained items such as 3. *Justin even wrote the lists*; 10. *Jen even lost the hat*; and 35. *Robert even painted some pictures*. This type of items are the ones obtaining the lower acceptance levels in the test.

Table III. *Mean values per test and sentence pattern.*

Pattern	EFL 2022	EFL 2023	NS 2023
SVAO_Only	4.33	4.21	4.15
SAVO_Only	4.62	4.47	4.12
SVAO_Even	4.29	4.39	4.38
SAVO_Even	3.94	4.47	3.48
SVAO_Also	4.24	4.38	4.40
SAVO_Also	4.83	4.66	4.54

Note. Mean values for the unprescribed SVAO patterns reflect an inverted Likert scale. Consequently, a higher mean indicates a stronger rejection of this word order.

This information is better illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the distribution for each group across the data collections. Throughout the analysis of the results in this study, it is important to keep in mind the following aspects. For items following an SAVO pattern, we would expect participants to rank these items as close to 5 as possible on the Likert scale, indicating that they consider this the appropriate sentence pattern, as conventionally prescribed. A different interpretation applies to items containing the SVAO pattern, where the values were inverted for processing. On the Likert scale, participants were expected to assign a value of 1 to this structure, bearing in mind that it represents the traditionally unprescribed form, a so-called wrong structure. Once inverted, the closer these values are to 5, the better students

are at identifying the structure as erroneous, thereby recognizing the SAVO structure as the correct one. Conversely, the further the values are from 5, the more acceptable the participants find the SVAO structure.

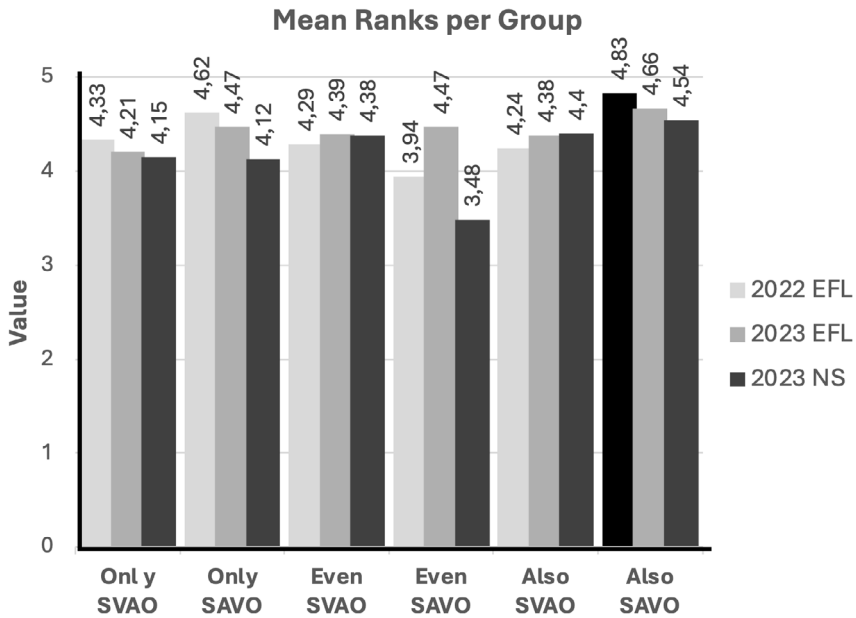


Figure 1. Mean ranks per year, group and sentence pattern for only, even and also.

We will first describe the results for the group of adverbs under the SVAO structure, for both groups of participants. For the EFL participants, the SV-*only*-O structure was ranked higher in 2022 (4.33) than in 2023 (4.21); indicating slightly less acceptability of this unprescribed word order as they advanced in their major. However, the NS identified this structure as unacceptable to a slightly lesser degree than the EFL participants, reaching a mean score of 4.15. In the case of the SV-*even*-O structure, the EFL participants showed greater ability to identify this as an unacceptable sentence pattern in 2023 (4.39) compared to 2022 (4.29); suggesting increased awareness of the unacceptability of the unprescribed form as they progress in their major. The EFL 2023 result almost matches the NS's mean rank of 4.38.

Finally, the adverb *also* generally received higher ratings across both word order options than the other two adverbs in this study. For the SV-*also*-O structure, the EFL participants found this structure less acceptable in 2023 (4.38) than in 2022 (4.24), while the NS considered it slightly less acceptable than either EFL result, with a mean of 4.4.

As for the items containing the SAVO word order, the results show the following. For the *S-only*-VO structure, the EFL subjects ranked this structure as more acceptable in 2022 (4.62) than in 2023 (4.47). Both EFL results show higher levels of acceptability than those identified for the NS, which reached a mean mark of 4.12. Interestingly, when comparing the means of the SVAO structure to those of the SAVO structure for *only*, we find that the EFL participants' rejection of the SVAO word order is not as strong as their acceptance of the SAVO pattern. As for the NS, there is slightly more rejection of the SVAO pattern (4.15) compared to their acceptance of the SAVO pattern (4.12), with both ratings falling below the mean ranks of the EFL group.

As mentioned earlier, the *S-even*-VO items reveal the most contrasting results, from a prescriptivist perspective. While the EFL group's mean rank for acceptability increased in 2023, reaching 4.47, their rating for this prescribed word order was only 3.94 in 2022. We could interpret this result as indicating that, as they advance in the English learning process, participants develop better judgement and awareness of the type of syntactic constructions that English permits. The EFL participants' 2022 mean rank is close to that reached by the NS at 3.48. These results deserve particular attention, as they represent the lowest levels of acceptability in this study for a traditionally prescribed sentence pattern. Finally, the *S-also*-VO structure received acceptability ranks of 4.83 and 4.66 from the EFL participants in 2022 and 2023, respectively, and a mean acceptability rank of 4.54 from the NS, which is the highest rank for this group of subjects across the test.

Overall, EFL participants found the SVAO structure progressively less acceptable for *even* and *also*, with a mean score in 2023 for the adverb *even* that closely aligns with that of NS. Over time, the SVAO structure became somewhat more acceptable for *only*, with the EFL mean score being higher in both data collections than that of the NS, indicating that NS more commonly accept the SV-*only*-O. Regarding the prescribed SAVO structure, EFL participants identified it as progressively less acceptable in the cases of *also* and *only*, and clearly more acceptable in the case of *even*. In general, EFL participants' mean acceptability scores were higher than those of the NS for SAVO word-order patterns. For the SVAO structure, NS found it more acceptable for *only*, *even*, and *also* respectively. Among EFL subjects, the acceptability hierarchy shifted from *also*, *even* and *only* in 2022 to *only*, *also*, and *even* in 2023.

Having discussed the general descriptive features of the data, we move to a more in-depth analysis of the data. The following analysis aims to determine whether a specific preference for a pattern could be identified based on the participants' responses throughout the study. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted for this purpose. Table IV presents the resulting *p*-values—in columns 3, 5, and 7—for the comparison of the results for each structure. The means of each structure are also included to help draw conclusions regarding the preference for specific patterns.

Table IV. Mean values per test and structure and *p*-values per adverb comparison.

Pattern	EFL 2022	<i>p</i>	EFL 2023	<i>p</i>	NS 2023	<i>p</i>
SVAO_Only	4.33	<i>p</i> 0.000	4.21	<i>p</i> 0.002	4.15	<i>p</i> 0.184
SAVO_Only	4.62		4.47		4.12	
SVAO_Even	4.29	<i>p</i> 0.002	4.39	<i>p</i> 0.009	4.38	<i>p</i> 0.059
SAVO_Even	3.94		4.47		3.48	
SVAO_Also	4.24	<i>p</i> 0.000	4.38	<i>p</i> 0.002	4.40	<i>p</i> 0.277
SAVO_Also	4.83		4.66		4.54	

Note. For SVAO items, the Likert scale was inverted during analysis. Therefore, a higher mean score denotes a greater recognition of the structure as incorrect. This inversion should be kept in mind when evaluating the statistical significance (*p*-values) of the group comparisons.

As shown in Table IV, certain structures, when compared, reveal statistically significant differences in the preference that students may have towards one pattern. For the adverb *only*, NS did not show a significant preference for any particular pattern, while EFL participants favored the S-*only*-VO pattern in both data collections, with statistical significance. For *even*, no statistically significant difference was found for the EFL group in 2022, whereas in 2023, EFL participants showed a statistically significant preference for the S-*even*-VO pattern, and NS favored the SV-*even*-O pattern.

Finally, in both 2022 and 2023 EFL students showed a statistically significant preference for the S-*also*-VO structure, whereas this statistically significant difference was not found among NS. In sum, the results indicate a clear preference for the SAVO word order among EFL participants, while NS show a preference for the SVAO word order only in the case of *even*.

We move now to a comparison of the results for the EFL group in the 2022 and 2023 data collections. Normality assumptions were explored using a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for each EFL data collection to determine whether any changes could be identified between the results of one collection and the next. The normality distribution test results indicate that there is insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis of normality in the data, thus necessitating the use of non-parametric tests. Therefore, a Mann-Whitney U test was applied.

As can be observed in Table V, and was earlier illustrated in Graph 1, the non-prescribed SVAO word order does not exhibit a statistically significant difference for EFL participants between the results of the 2022 and 2023 collections. Table V presents *p*-values of 0.245 for *also*, 0.448 for *even*, and 0.282 for *only*, all of which are clearly above the 0.05 threshold that distinguishes statistically significant differences. However, the traditionally prescribed SAVO word order does show statistically significant differences for the EFL group across data collections. This is the case, at least, for *also* and *even*, with *p*-values of 0.040 and 0.001 respectively. A closer examination of the results indicates that, for *also*, this statistically significant difference reflects a progressively lower acceptability of the SAVO pattern between the 2022 and 2023 data collections. In contrast, for *even*, the statistically significant difference indicates

a clearly higher recognition of the pattern SAVO as more acceptable in 2023. The data does not show any statistical differences for the adverb *only* for the EFL subjects.

Table V. *Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test results comparing EFL subjects' performance per year.*

Pattern	Statistics	p-value
SVAO_Also	3680	0.245
SAVO_Also	4501.5	0.040*
SVAO_Even	3808.5	0.448
SAVO_Even	3111.5	0.001*
SVAO_Only	4397	0.282
SAVO_Only	4154	0.686

Further testing was conducted to check normality assumptions when comparing each EFL data set to that of the NS via the Shapiro-Wilk test. Once again, the test determined that there is insufficient evidence to assume a normal distribution in the data, leading to the application of Mann-Whitney U non-parametric test.

As seen in Table VI, no statistically significant differences were identified between either of the EFL collections and the NS results in the case of the structures SV-also-O, SV-even-O or SV-only-O. This indicates that the non-prescribed word order, where the object is separated from the verb by the adverb, is treated similarly by the EFL participants and the NS in each data collection. An additional year of instruction in the EFL participant group has no effect on this portion of the results. The seemingly close mean results presented earlier in Table III, indeed turn out to be non-statistically significant when tested. The SV-also-O word order results show *p*-values of 0.375 in 2022 and 0.854 in 2023; the SV-even-O pattern yields results of 0.518 and 0.960 for 2022 and 2023 respectively, and the SV-only-O order presents values of 0.099 in 2022 and 0.518 in 2023.

Table VI. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test results comparing EFL to NS performance per year.

		2022		2023	
Comparison between EFL learners and NS	Pattern	Statistics	p-value	Statistics	p-value
	SVAO_Also	1977.5	0.375	2197.5	0.854
	SAVO_Also	2773	0.000*	2499	0.053
	SVAO_Even	2028	0.518	2149.5	0.960
	SAVO_Even	2696.5	0.011*	3274	0.000*
	SVAO_Only	2501	0.099	2295	0.518
	SAVO_Only	2786	0.000*	2674	0.005*

In contrast the data for the SAVO word order tells a different story. The *also* structure shows a clear statistically significant difference between the EFL and NS participants when the 2022 EFL data is compared with the 2023 NS, yielding a *p*-value of 0.000. For the data collected in 2023, there is insufficient evidence to claim statistically significant differences between the groups, as the *p*-value is 0.053, just above the threshold for significance.

For the *S-even-VO* structure, the analysis reveals statistically significant differences both in 2022 (*p* = 0.011) and in 2023 (*p* = 0.000). Similarly, the *S-only-VO* structure shows statistically significant differences with a *p*-value of 0.000 in 2022 and 0.005 in 2023. In summary, while no statistically significant differences were found between the EFL and NS results for the structures following the SVAO word order, significant differences were observed when comparing the traditionally prescribed SAVO pattern.

4. DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the above description of the results, statistically significant differences are found between the EFL and NS when it comes to the SAVO word-order pattern after most comparisons. For the *S-also-VO* structure in 2022, a *p*-value of 0.000 demonstrates this statistically significant difference. The mean ranks obtained for each of the groups in 2022 show that EFL participants (mean 4.83) favored this structure far more than the NS (mean 4.54). However, the 2023 comparison for the *S-also-VO* structure does not yield statistical differences, with a *p*-value slightly above the threshold at 0.053. This closeness is also reflected in the means for each group: 4.66 for the EFL and 4.54 for the NS.

For the *S-even-VO* structure, statistically significant differences were found with *p*-values of 0.011 in 2022 and 0.000 in 2023. While these differences are evident, the EFL participants showed considerably more acceptability for this structure in 2023 (mean 4.47) than they did in 2022 (mean 3.94) whereas the NS mean was established at 3.48, the lowest level of acceptability for the SAVO pattern among NS. The *S-only-*

VO structure is also more statistically significant for acceptance by EFL subjects than by NS participants, with p -values of 0.000 in 2022 and 0.005 in 2023. These p -values correspond to means that indicate much higher acceptability among EFL participants, with means of 4.62 and 4.47 compared to a mean of 4.12 for NS. We will see in the discussion below that NS find the SVAO pattern much more acceptable for *even* and slightly more acceptable for *only*.

Additionally, the results of this study suggest that the L2 English-L1 Spanish subjects treat the non-prescribed SVAO word order items containing the focus particles *also*, *even* and *only* in a manner very similar to that of the L1 English-L2 Spanish. In fact, no statistically significant differences are found when comparing the tests results between these two groups. Once more, it is important to remember that for the SVAO word order items, higher scores in the Likert scale (closer to 5) indicate lower acceptability, as the scale was inverted. Although there are slight differences in how each group ranks these items in the Likert scale, or regarding which adverb is likely more acceptable in that position, these differences do not reach the level of statistical significance.

Among NS, the SV-*only*-O structure (4.15) is rated as more acceptable than the SV-*even*-O pattern (4.38), followed closely by the SV-*also*-O pattern (4.40). In the 2022 collection, EFL learners find the SV-*also*-O structure (4.24) slightly more acceptable than the SV-*even*-O pattern (4.29), with the SV-*only*-O structure (4.33) being the least acceptable. This means that out of the three adverbs under study in this position, the Costa Rican students in 2022 found *also* to be the most acceptable, followed by *even*, and then *only*. In 2023, the order changes, with EFL participants finding the SV-*only*-O (4.21) pattern the most acceptable, followed by the SV-*also*-O (4.38), and the SV-*even*-O (4.39) word orders.

The NS acceptability ranks for the SVAO sentence pattern is as follows: SV-*only*-O (4.15), SV-*even*-O (4.38) and SV-*also*-O (4.40). Notably, the 2023 rankings for the EFL subjects closely mirror those of the NS. Both groups rank *only* as the most acceptable adverb to break the verb-object sequence (EFL: 4.21, NS: 4.15). *Even* is the second-ranked adverb by the NS at 4.38, and while it occupies the third position for the EFL participants, it does so with a very similar rank of 4.39. Finally, the NS ranks *also* as the least likely adverb to occupy that position, with a rank of 4.40, although the EFL participants assign *also* a mean value of 4.38, placing it as their second choice, still very close to the NS rank.

The findings of this study contrast with those of Vann (2018, 2022), who determined that monolingual English speakers preferred the SAVO word order over the SVAO order. In this study no statistically significant differences were found for NS regarding the use of *also* and *only* in these word orders. However, NS did show a preference for the SV-*even*-O pattern over the S-*even*-VO. Vann L1-Italian_L2-English learners displayed little sensitivity to word order, treating both structures as equally grammatical and assigning lower acceptability ratings for *also* and *even* in the SVAO word order. In contrast, the L2 English-L1 Spanish in the present study preferred the SAVO pattern for *also* in 2022 and 2023, for *even* in 2023, and for *only* in both years. The preference for the SVAO structure appeared only for *even* 2022, this sole direct similarity to NS preferences, which did not persist in 2023. In Vann's study the NS participants were monolingual, whereas those in the present study were learning Spanish as a second

language. Additionally, the first language of the EFL learners in both studies differs. These variables could also be explored in greater depth to determine whether they influence the results.

As for the acceptability mean ranks for *SV-only-V* and *SV-even-O*, as noted by Quirk et al. (1985) and König (2002), the position focus particles like *only* and *even* allows them to modify the verb, another element of the predicate, or the whole predicate. This syntactic flexibility combined with prosodic cues such as intonation nucleus or the stress on a constituent result in variations in the meaning of the sentence. As illustrated in examples (1) and (2) above, the position of the focus adverb plays a crucial role in conveying different information. For instance, in the sentence *Noah knew only Sally*, the focus adverb *only* restricts the action to Sally, indicating that Noah did not know anyone else. Similarly, in *Jenny lost even the hat*, the use of *even* adds the hat to a list of other possible items Jenny might have lost, highlighting the hat as an unexpected or notable addition. While the focus adverb *also* in *Eric new also Joy* can similarly convey an additive meaning. The present results signal *only* and *even* as more likely candidates to appear in that position. Evidently, NS are well aware of the nuanced meanings that arise from placing adverbs in specific positions, and this understanding is evidently reflected in their responses, both in Vann's studies and in the present one.

As König (2002) emphasizes, focus adverbs have a distinct semantic role reflected in their position. He further indicates that when focus adverbs appear after the main verb, they focus exclusively on the following constituent. This explains why, when placed between the verb and their object, focus adverbs, unlike other adverbs, do not render a sentence ungrammatical. This is only one of the features that distinguishes focus adverbs as a subclass of adverbs, which König (2002) categorizes as a non-lexical category—a group of function words.

At a first glance, the results are very positive for the L2 English-L1 Spanish participants. Nonetheless, while the results of this study show a close alignment between the EFL and NS, caution is necessary when interpreting these findings. The fact that Spanish allows objects to disrupt the VO unit might contribute to the similarity of the results between the L2 English-L1 Spanish and the NS. Despite the apparent alignment, there is limited evidence of similarity between the two groups of participants.

The experience of the author, and of other colleagues, suggests that further studies are needed to determine whether the disruption of the VO unit is specific to focus particles or whether it extends to other adverbial forms or even other word categories. A point in favor of EFL knowledge is the preference shown by EFL students for the SAVO word order, as reflected in higher mean scores compared to those of NS. This suggests that EFL learners have a solid understanding of this pattern and its usage. Nevertheless, the experiences of instructors in the classrooms, along with findings such as those by Solís (2007), suggest the need for further studies to determine whether this occurrence is limited to focus particles or applies more broadly within this population.

According to Schwartz and Sprouse's (1994) Full transfer/Full Access Hypothesis, L2 English-L1 Spanish learners' reliance on the Spanish structure is to be expected, just as it is expected that they reorganize and redistribute the new parameters of the

L2 grammar based on their previous knowledge. For successful reorganization and redistribution of L2 information, learners must first recognize the differences in the L2. Only then can they assign new items their appropriate roles in the L2, allowing them to be effectively stored in memory. Lahuerta (2024) found that sensitivity to grammatical restrictions develops progressively across proficiency levels and that syntactic development may remain incomplete even among advanced EFL learners. Similarly, Suescún and Arango-Tobón (2022) reported that extensive reading strengthens cognitive resources such as working memory, processing speed, and literacy skills, facilitating the internalization of grammatical regularities. Together, these findings suggest that learners' awareness of word-order constraints and adverb placement develops gradually through exposure to input and continued second language acquisition.

In the context of adult learners receiving formal L2 instruction, this inevitably leads to explicit instruction, especially for areas identified as problematic for L2 learners, as pointed out by White (1991). Positive evidence alone is insufficient since the absence of the SVAO structure in the input students receive does not imply its nonexistence in the L2. Schwartz and Sprouse's (1994) Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis asserts that learners can access the necessary parameters to implement the required rebuilding or re-setting of roles and functions for new items, including all that this process entails. However, there remains some doubt as to whether the L2 English-L1 Spanish participants in this study fully understand what distinguishes focus particles from other word categories that they typically use to disrupt the VO unit in English. This information is neither officially part of their curriculum nor a common topic of discussion in our classroom settings.

Returning to König (2002)'s idea of *even*, *only*, and *also* as members of a minor, non-lexical category—meaning they are *function words* based on their syntactic and semantic properties—we may take into consideration Slabakova (2013)'s perspective, where functional morphology represents the bottleneck of L2 acquisition. Building on Lardiere (2005), Slabakova argues that the assembly and re-assembly of formal features is central to language acquisition. She claims that “[a]cquisition of L2 functional categories involves the functional properties of a set of lexical entries, but is manifested in syntactic reflexes superficially unrelated to these lexical entries, like displacement...” (pp. 8-9). Slabakova further contends that this explains why English verbs remain inside the VP, which is directly related to the topic of this paper. This highlights that, in learning an L2, individuals must rearrange the mappings between meanings and concepts as well as between meanings and syntactic structures. This new information should be reorganized and redistributed when it comes to adverb position for the L2 English-L1 Spanish participants in our study. Based on these results, it appears that the EFL participants reorganized their understanding of the English VO split restriction. This reorganization led to a redistribution of syntactic roles, where the NP object within the VP remains in situ when focus adverbs are involved in the syntactic calculation. Once again, the question arises: Are the EFL participants in the present study aware of the meanings and syntactic distribution that is attached to certain adverbs while being detached from others? Further studies are required to answer these questions.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the acceptability of focus adverb placement among Costa Rican EFL learners and NS of English. Overall, EFL participants showed higher acceptability ratings for the prescribed SAVO pattern than NS, while NS demonstrated greater acceptance of certain SVAO structures, particularly those containing *only* and *even*. These findings suggest that although EFL learners display considerable awareness of the preferred English word order, their judgments do not always mirror those of NS. From a second language acquisition perspective, the results support the view that learners gradually develop sensitivity to grammatical restrictions and the semantic-syntactic properties associated with focus particles. The findings also raise questions regarding the extent to which learners distinguish focus adverbs from other categories that may disrupt the verb-object sequence in English. Consequently, the study contributes to our understanding of how word-order constraints and focus-particle placement are acquired in an EFL context. Pedagogically, the results highlight the potential value of explicit instruction on the syntax and interpretation of focus adverbs. Future research should include larger samples, learners from different linguistic backgrounds, and additional adverbial categories to determine whether the observed patterns are specific to focus particles or reflect broader tendencies in learners' treatment of English word order.

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