This study aims to investigate the function of a particular nontargetlike use of be by Korean and Russian learners of English. Since be is like a light verb, used in various contexts with its meaning underspecified in the lexicon, it is challenging for learners to grasp the features associated with it. Reflecting divergent understanding of its function in interlanguage, the insertion of be before a thematic verb is widely attested in the early stage of L2 English by speakers of divers L1s (e.g. He is want to go up then).

There have been two main hypotheses concerning the function of be-insertion in interlanguage: the first analyzes be as a tense/agreement (T/AGR) morpheme and the second suggests that it functions as a topic marker. Nam (2016), a preliminary study that was done in advance of the development of the current study, investigated the explanatory adequacy of the two hypotheses in the case of Korean and Russian beginner learners. The results showed that be-forms can mark both Topic and T/AGR at one time in interlanguage regardless of the L1, indicating that the two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

Expanding and revising Nam (2016), this study focuses on the proposed functions of be-insertion – marking Topic, T, and AGR – and aims to investigate which functions be-insertion can have in the interlanguage of Korean and Russian learners through a production and an acceptability judgment task (AJT).

In the production task, five types of answers are elicited based on given information: sentences starting with a) nontopic subjects, b) topic subjects, c) topic objects, d) topic temporal adverbs, and e) topic locative PPs. The number of the initial phrase – singular vs. plural – and the tense of the context are systematically varied across items to examine how tense and agreement are marked in the production.

In the AJT, the participants read a question and listen to the answer to judge whether it is appropriate or not. The items are manipulated to examine whether the acceptability of be-insertion is influenced by 1) the topicality of subjects, 2) the topicality of temporal adverbs, 3) correct tense marking with be, and 4) whether be-insertion is accepted after topic locative PPs.

In a pilot study, 41 Korean EFL learners completed the tasks. The results were consistent with Nam (2016). In production, be-insertion was most frequent after topic subjects and in past contexts. In the AJT, topicality of the preceding phrase and correct tense marking with be-forms increased acceptability of be-insertion. In addition a closer look at the production data presented a common L2 developmental path in which be-insertion plays a role. With more data from Russian participants, this study will be able to present a detailed description of how form-feature mapping changes in the development of interlanguage and how the process can be influenced by the L1. Moreover, as be-insertion in interlanguage is a grammar found in neither the L1 nor the L2, it will shed light on the role of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition.