

The morpheme “-s” of the simple present tense in the acquisition of English as a Foreign Language

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Introduction

The analysis of the acquisition of tenses in second languages has been the aim of many SLA studies (PERREN & TRIM (eds.), 1971, EDSTRÖM, 1973, CHAMOT, 1978 and 1979 and ABRAHAM, 1984, among others). The issue has been tackled from two main perspectives. On the one hand, we can distinguish one group of studies which have focused on the acquisition of tense forms, analysing aspects such as the presence or absence of the “-ing” morpheme to form the progressive aspect or the form of the main verb after an auxiliary such as “have”.

On the other hand, a smaller group of studies have dealt with the acquisition of tense meaning in second languages, that is, with tense sequences that learners produce and the use of the wrong or correct tense meanings in their interlanguages.

The present paper follows the former perspective. Therefore, the relationship between form and function has been left out on purpose for a further study so as to focus only on form. Previous research has shown that the analysis of tense forms in interlanguage yields results with direct implications for the teaching of

both second and foreign languages. A brief review of the most relevant articles on the acquisition of English as L2 may illustrate the above statement¹.

After an analysis of the production of learners with different mother tongues in terms of errors, RICHARDS (1973) found errors in the verb group such as omission of the copula, wrong forms after an auxiliary, omission of the auxiliary, omission of the "s" third person singular, and the wrong choice of the participle, errors which Richards considers as intralingual and developmental, challenging other researchers' opinions who saw such errors as caused by transfer from the mother tongue.

In this line, TAYLOR (1975) devised a classification of twenty error types in the verb phrase to analyse his subjects' production of English as a second language, with three main causes for errors, namely, overgeneralization, transfer and translation. Among the errors caused by either transfer or overgeneralization, Taylor cites the incorrect form of the verb after an auxiliary, wrong number agreement between subject and verb, omission of auxiliaries, and, finally, omission of the main verb.

SCOTT & TUCKER (1974) list the following as the most frequent errors in the use of tense forms by Arab students when learning English as L2:

- a) the auxiliary and the copula,
- b) the "-s" third person singular,
- c) the forms of the past and the progressive.

The learners' L1 played an important role in both a) and c). The second kind of error, however, is a developmental error which can also be found in the acquisition of English as L1.

WAGNER-GOUGH (1978) focusses on the acquisition of the progressive, as part of a longitudinal study of the English of a Persian child in the States. The learner expressed the English progressive either as the construction "V-ing" without the auxiliary "to be" or as "pronoun + the contracted form of to be + V-ing".

Finally, CHAMOT (1978 and 1979) carried out a longitudinal study of the acquisition of English in a natural situation by a bilingual boy (Spanish and French). In this study, the area of verbs was the one with the largest number of errors. The learner used the base form of verbs instead of the present third person singular and the present continuous as well as past and -ing forms for other verb forms. According to Chamot, this is the result of an overgeneralization of previously acquired forms.

¹ Most of these studies were carried out in the 1970s in the line of the so called "morpheme studies".

The study

This paper reports part of a larger study which analysed the acquisition and use of the English tense-system in EFL. Our concern here is the analysis of the form of the English simple present (“-s” of the third person singular) in a cross-sectional study which was carried out with 80 subjects at different levels of proficiency in the language.

The subjects were Spanish and Catalan speakers who were learning English as a foreign language as a compulsory subject in their school curricula. They were chosen at random from four different secondary schools in Barcelona (Spain).

Four different levels, which corresponded to their English studies at school, were distinguished, from false-beginners (level 1) to post-intermediate (level 4). Five subjects from each of the four schools were chosen for each of the four levels. Thus, there were 20 subjects per level (n= 80).

Since both the oral and the written production were to be analysed, two types of tests were devised: a written test to elicit the subjects' written IL and an oral informal interview to elicit their oral production. The reality of the teaching of English in Barcelona was taken into account when deciding what the subjects would be asked to do. The tasks had to be more or less familiar to the subjects in the sense that they should reflect what the subjects were doing in their English class and how they were acquiring English. It would have been unfair and totally unreal to use tasks which had been successful in other pieces of research but which did not fit our teaching system.

Objectives

The two main objectives of this paper are, first, the description and analysis of the subjects' production at each level and across levels. This will enable us to study whether the form of the simple present tense presents any differences as the subjects' proficiency in English increases or, whether, on the contrary, instruction does not affect the use of this form at all. In fact, the hypothesis that shall be corroborated here is that instruction helps the learner to acquire and improve the L2, especially in foreign language learning contexts where the classroom is the only or, at least, the most important source of L2 input.

The second objective is the comparison between the oral and the written data to check whether different media may influence the form of the simple present in any way. The hypothesis is that the oral production will present more errors than the written one because of time constraints and focus on meaning as predictors of a poorer performance in a second language (KRASHEN (1981 and 1982), among others)

Description and analysis of the data

The data show three different cases in the use of the morpheme “-s” simple present:

- a) Absence of “-s” in the third person singular.
- b) Overgeneralization of “-s” to two contexts which do not admit this suffix:
- to first and second persons singular and to the plural pronouns in the simple present tense
- to tenses other than the simple present tense (usually to the simple past).
- c) Use of the “-s” with the third person singular as in standard English.

The first use is exemplified in the following extract, produced by one of the subjects at level 4:

L (level 4): There's .. there's a boy who who ... turn off the lamp ... there's a woman who watch the television (...) there's a girl who open the door.

Two examples of overgeneralization can be seen in:

L (level 2): She *drinks*² any coke at the party yesterday?
L (level 1): *Did she drinks* at the party yesterday?

Finally, the correct use of the “-s” morpheme is seen in the following examples:

L³ (level 2): and then we went there with my uncles because my fathers went to London.
R: Oh! That's nice!
L: Yes, my grandfather lives in London.

R: What about your father's activities?
L (level 4): eh ... he ... goes to work eh every day

It is necessary to refer to two characteristics which describe the data further. In the first place, the fact that the three cases appear in the production of single learners, showing thus that second language acquisition does not take place overnight but that, on the contrary, more than one form to express the same meaning may coexist until the L2 form is established in the learner's IL:

R: What does she do every morning?
L (level 4): She eh she she get up and and she prepares hers her class.

² This is the blank the subject had to fill in.

³ L stands for learner and R for researcher.

KELLERMAN (1987), for instance, argues that language learning does not follow a straightforward line and that some learners may go backwards and forwards in their use of L2 forms, that is, they may use a given form incorrectly at one time, correctly later on and then go back to the incorrect use.

Secondly, certain verbs in the data usually appear with the "-s" morpheme in the appropriate contexts whereas others do not. This is the case of the verb "to like", to which the "-s" is always added when in agreement with the third person singular, as can be seen in the following examples:

L (level 1): She *dance* every day.
 She *likes* swimming very much.

L (level 2): She *read* every day.
 She *likes* swimming very much.

The reason for such variation is clear if we bear in mind that "to like" can be learnt as an already made expression as in "I like ..." or "he likes ..." and, besides, that this verb is often used in classes because its meaning is associated with contexts familiar to the students (likes and dislikes, hobbies, preferences, and so on). However, the reason for the use of the "-s" in some verbs and not in others which apparently have identical characteristics is not so easy to find.

After this overall description of the data, we shall focus on the production at each level and across levels to analyse the effects of instruction. It is necessary to point out that, since very few instances of overgeneralization (see b) above) have been found in the data and that, furthermore, the objective of the study is the analysis of the morpheme "-s" in the simple present, not as applied to other contexts, only cases a) and c) above have been taken into account for the quantitative analysis that follows.

Contrary to expectations, based on the general belief among language teachers, more correct forms of the simple present than incorrect ones have been found in the data. This is true of both the oral and the written data. This means that, as required in standard English, the subjects in the study tended to supply the "-s" morpheme when the verb agreed with a third person singular.

At level 1, the percentage of incorrect forms, that is, the absence of "-s" in the third person singular is 40%. From level 2 to level 4, the subjects seem to have learnt the rule, since they do not supply the "-s" in less than half of the cases that appear at level 1. Thus, at level 2, the percentage is 16.4% and at levels 3 and 4 we find similar percentages (12.5% and 13.7%, respectively).

The analysis of the data across levels shows, then, a significant difference between level 1 and the rest of levels, especially level 3. The form of this tense is still difficult for the students at the end of level 1, whereas the percentage of incorrect forms decreases considerably as the level increases.

Our second objective was the comparison between the written and the oral data. Once again, contrary to expectations, the oral data show a higher overall

percentage of correct forms of the simple present tense (77.6% against 67.1% in the written data). The reason may lie in the fact that the oral interviews allowed the subjects to avoid those forms about which they were not sure and, consequently, they produced only the forms that they knew were correct. The written test, on the other hand, was more grammar-oriented and may have, to a certain extent, obliged the subjects to answer what they were asked.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the written and oral data per levels is more revealing. The analysis of the written data according to levels shows that the percentage of correct forms is higher in higher levels even if the percentage of incorrect forms is very similar in the four levels. Thus, the subjects use the correct form of the simple present in 58.7% of the cases at level 1, 66.2% at level 2, 73.7% at level 3, and 70% at level 4. The percentage of incorrect forms is similar (30.1%, 32.6%, 25.1% and 27.5%, from levels 1 to 4, respectively) because the percentage of items without an answer decreases considerably from level 1 to level 4.

Two interesting aspects can be pointed out if one analyses the form of the simple present in the oral data according to the levels. One of them is that at level 1, the subjects use this tense in an incorrect form more frequently than at levels 2, 3 and 4. The percentage of incorrect forms drops from 50% at level 1 to 4% and 0% at levels 2 and 3, respectively. The other aspect is that at level 4 the percentage of incorrect forms is higher than the percentage at level 2, although not as high as it is at level 1. The explanation to this result may lie in the fact that at level 4 the subjects use a wider range of tenses and, consequently, the risk of making mistakes is higher.

The comparison between the written and the oral data shows, first, that the percentage of incorrect forms at level 1 is higher in the oral data than in the written data but that the reverse is true from level 2 on. Secondly, that the use of more incorrect forms at level 4 than at levels 2 and 3 in the oral data does not appear in the written data (although at level 4 the percentage is slightly higher than at level 3).

Discussion

This study has analysed the form of the present tense third person singular in the oral and written production of learners of EFL in Spain. A study with similar objectives was carried out by ABRAHAM (1984) with University learners of English as L2 in the States. The results show that most of the students acquire the "-s" morpheme as attached to particular verbs. These verbs are those which appear more frequently in the input, those in which the attached morpheme is more salient, and those which, once the "-s" has been added, are less difficult to pronounce. Similar conclusions were reached by KAPLAN (1987) for the acquisition of past morphemes in French as L2.

The results that have been presented above show that the subjects in the study always add the morpheme "-s" to the verb "to like" and that some verbs appear with the "-s" for the third person singular and others do not. As in ABRAHAM

(1984), we can also conclude, therefore, that frequency of appearance in the input may help learners to acquire the morpheme "-s". The conclusion, however, must be taken with caution, since in the present study it arises from the knowledge of EFL classes and materials, not from a thorough analysis of the input made available to the subjects.

The analysis of the data across levels, which was the first objective in the study, reveals that instruction seems to be beneficial for the acquisition and use of the third person singular morpheme. We must bear in mind, however, that this effect may be a delayed one, since the "-s" morpheme is usually taught in EFL classes from the very beginning and it is not until a higher level that the subjects show what can be called quite a good command of the form in question. RISSEL (1981) studied the order of presentation of the present / past distinction and found that early introduction of the past tense did not facilitate the acquisition of this tense, since the tense was presented before the students were ready for it⁴.

The analysis of the data according to the medium (oral / written) has shown that there exist differences in the percentage of suppliance of the "-s". The oral production shows a higher percentage of incorrect forms than the written production at level 1, but, then, contrary to expectations, the written data maintain similar percentages at the rest of the levels whereas the oral data presents a relevant decrease in the percentage of incorrect forms at levels 2, 3 and 4. The possible explanation to such finding has already been commented on.

The implications for language teaching that can be drawn from this study are, first, that teaching grammar is beneficial, since, contrary to the general belief among teachers, learners know and use quite correctly the "-s" morpheme in the simple present tense. The "focus on form" issue in second language teaching, which has been receiving much attention recently, cannot be overlooked by language teachers (see SINGLETON, 1992).

Secondly, as the case of the verb "to like" has shown, the use of different kinds of examples when explaining the

"-s" third person singular may help to acquire this morpheme.

Nevertheless, teachers who often come across instances of "She like English very much" in their students' IL should not despair. The absence of the "-s" has also been reported in studies of the acquisition of English as L1. In fact, in Brown's order of acquisition of 14 morphemes in English as L1 (BROWN, 1973), the "-s" of the present is acquired quite late by native speakers.

If, as language teachers, our focus is on accuracy, we should bear in mind that students will probably learn the rule in the long run. If our focus is on fluency, we should not worry about a morpheme which does not hinder communication

⁴ See PIENEMANN (1985) on the question of the learnability of languages and language teaching.

at all. However, those of us who care for both fluency and accuracy should start thinking about how and when to teach the controversial "-s" morpheme.

Conclusion

To conclude, the two objectives which were set at the beginning of the study have been tackled. The description and analysis of the data have shown differences in the use of the "-s" depending on the level of proficiency, with an improvement as the level of proficiency increases. The first hypothesis, then, has been corroborated.

As far as the second objective is concerned, differences between oral and written data have been found, showing thus that the medium seems to influence the use of the "-s" morpheme. However, the hypothesis that more instances of the absence of the "-s" morpheme would appear in the oral data than in the written data has turned out to be false.

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