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A case study: Exploring the use of 3rd person singular –s in English in written register[1]

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Abstract

The acquisition of the 3rd person singular -s in English is considered as an introductory concept for second/foreign language learners because it is one of the basic grammatical rules instructed by teachers to L2 learners of English. Therefore, it has been analyzed through different perspectives and theoretical frameworks in order to find a proper interpretation to understand why it is one of the most challenging grammatical rules to be acquired by English L1 and L2 learners. The study aims to analyze the use of third person singular present tense –s by the students who are undergraduate Turkish speakers learning English as a foreign language at a state university in Blacksea region of Turkey. The study gathered data from 39 students' writing exams in 2017-2018 academic year. The writings were transcribed by the researchers and the students' uses of 3sg –s were analyzed. The results comprised 40 grammatically/correctly inflected items, 43 omission item (OI) and 13 wrongly/incorrectly inflected items (WI). Compatible with the results in relevant literature, the findings of the study suggest that students learning English seem to have difficulty mastering the use of the 3sg –s. The findings of this study have both pedagogical implications for EFL classroom practices and for foreign language teachers and researchers.

Key words: English as a foreign language, third person singular -s, Morpheme, L1 interference.

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Özet

Öğretmenlerin İngilizceyi ikinci/yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilere sunduğu temel dilbilgisi kurallarından biri olan üçüncü tekil şahıs –s edinimi ikinci / yabancı dil öğrenenler için giriş niteliğinde bir kavram olarak kabul edilir. Bu nedenle, hem anadili İngilizce olan bireylerde hem de İngilizceyi yabancı/ikinci dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler tarafından ediniminin neden oldukça zorlayıcı bir dilbilgisi kuralı olduğunu anlayabilmek için bu konu farklı bakış açıları ve kuramsal çerçevelerde incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, Karadeniz bölgesinde yer alan bir devlet üniversitesi bünyesindeki yabancı diller yüksekokulu İngilizce hazırlık sınıflarında gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen anadili Türkçe olan öğrencilerin geniş zamanda üçüncü tekil şahıs –s kullanımını incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Çalışma verileri 39 öğrencinin yazma sınavlarından 2017-2018 yılında elde edilmiştir. Öğrenci sınavları araştırmacılar tarafından çevriyazıya

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dönüştürülmüş ve öğrencilerin üçüncü tekil şahıs kullanımları incelenmiştir. Öğrenci sınavlarında 40 doğru, 43 atlama ve 13 yanlış kullanım örnekleri tespit edilmiştir. Alanyazınla tutarlı bir sonuç olarak, çalışma kapsamında elde edilen veriler İngilizceyi öğrenen öğrencilerin üçüncü tekil şahıs -s kuralını öğrenmede ve kullanmada zorlandıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Çalışmanın bulguları hem İngilizce yabancı dil sınıf uygulamaları hem de İngiliz dili öğreticileri ve araştırmacıları için eğitimsel çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Key words: Yabancı Dil olarak İngilizce, Üçüncü tekil şahıs –s, Biçimbirim, Anadil etkisi.

Introduction

Ellis, (2008) explains the goal of SLA research as to describe and explain different linguistic phenomena. IHe states that in the case of explanation, the focus is on the question of how learners acquire a language based on the input they receive. And in the case of description, SLA research seeks for different patterns to show regularities and systematicities in the learning and use of L2. According to Ellis (1997), one of the contributions of such research is improvement of language teaching. This happens by proposing different models and hypotheses which can describe different acquisition phenomena and with the light of these, teachers can find solutions to learners' problems in language learning. In this regard, researchers have sought to study the impact of teaching on second language acquisition. Such research aim to investigate different aspects of classroom ptactices and instruction. One of the aspects that has received a great deal of attention is the acquisition of grammatical forms. "A series of cross-sectional and longitudinal morpheme studies of 1970s were carried out to find out systematicities in acquisition of grammatical morphemes" (Ellis, 2008: 57). For example, Dulay and Burt (1974) found that some of English morphemes follow a fixed order in acquisition and learners' first language and teaching method have no impact on this order. Similar results were obtained in a study by Baily, Madden, and Krashen (1974) who conducted their experiment on adult learners. In another study, Larsen-Freeman (1976) found that difference in mother tongue will not alter the acquisition order.

The acquisition of 3rd person singular

The 3rd person singular inflection in English is considered as an introductory concept for second/foreign language learners as Krashen (1982) states it is one of the first grammatical rules taught by teachers to L2 learners of English generally at a very early phase of their language learning. Heironymous, (1993) states that although both researchers and ESL teachers seem to agree in the fact that the third person singular rule is very simple, there is some variability in its use by learners, and it seems that there are not so many students that apply the rule. Heironymous, (1993) depicts that even L2 learners who have an advanced level of English face with some problems in terms mastering the use of third person singular -s. Here, it is important to refer to two different kinds of difficulty: the difficulty learners have in internalizing a grammatical feature and the difficulty they have in acquiring the ability to use that feature accurately in communication. According to Ellis, (2008) most learners have no difficulty in grasping the rule for English third person singular –s, but they have enormous difficulty in internalizing this structure to use it accurately.

Most studies (Dulay and Burt, 1974; Krashen, 1982; Freeman, 1975; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001) suggest that second language learners have the most difficulty in acquiring the third person -s morpheme. In both L1 and L2 acquisition research (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Gass & Selinker, 1994), studies assert that third person -s morpheme is learned much later than the others. For native speakers, this

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complexity is attributed to the nature of the morpheme itself. Most studies relevant in the literature proved that not only native speakers but also L2 learners acquire English grammatical morphemes invariably in a fixed order. The third person singular –s takes place at ends of this order. Ironically, however, this morpheme continued to occupy the beginning stages of language learning until very recently. Shin and Milroy (1999) conducted a study conducted which focused on acquisition of ten grammatical morphemes. The researchers proposed that second language learners' performance on plural-s and third person-s is the least accurate.

The acquisition of 3rd person singular in English has extensively been studied both in the areas of first and second language acquisition, as well as from different theoretical frameworks (Brown 1973, Dulay & Burt, 1974; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Hsieh, 2009; Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012). From the perspective of first language acquisition, the acquisition of the 3rd person singular-*s* has been studied in relation to the order of acquisition of other morphemes as the present progressive-*ing*, the plural -*s*, the irregular past tense, the possessive-*'s* the copula *be*, the articles *a/an* and the and the auxiliary *be*. After analyzing the acquisition of different morphemes by L1 speakers of English as a native language, Brown (1973) found that the 3rd person singular was acquired in a penultimate position, just before the auxiliary *be*.

*"Order of Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes for L1 Learners of English" (*Dulay & Burt, 1974: 261*).*

1. Present Progressive –ing

2. Plural –s

3. Irregular Past Tense

4. Possesive –'s

5. Copula be

6. Articles a /an and the

7. Regular Past Tense –ed

8. 3rd person singular Present Tense –s

9. Auxiliary be

This acquisition order of morphemes in English as L1 was also compared to the acquisition order of morphemes in English as L2. And it was suggested that there is a sequence of fourteen morphemes, which includes the 3rd person singular morpheme –s. This sequence shows that fourteen morphemes are acquired in a different order between L1 and L2 learners of English (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Gass & Selinker, 1994). Most studies suggest that L1 influence (Luk & Shirai, 2009) or the qualities of the morphemes themselves, such as perceptual salience, morphophonological regularity, semantic complexity (Goldshneider & DeKeyser, 2001) or redundancy (DeKeyser, 2005; VanPatten, 1996, 2007) might be the reasons behind this order of acquisition.

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The following list shows the order of acquisition of some of these morphemes by L2 learners of English.

"Order of Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes for L2 Learners of English" (Dulay & Burt, 1974: 263).

1.Plural-s

2.Present progressive –ing

3. Copula be

4. Auxiliary be

5. Articles a /an and the

6. Irregular Past Tense

7. Regular Past Tense –ed

8. 3rd person singular Present Tense –s

9. Possessive –'s

As far as the acquisition of morphemes by L2 learners is concerned, it was observed that as happened with L1 learners, the 3rd person singular morpheme –s was acquired in a penultimate position, but in this case before the possessive-*s* (Dulay and Burt, 1974; Krashen, 1982; Freeman, 1975; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001). In both cases the acquisition of 3rd person singular is claimed to occur very late which would demonstrate that, as Krashen (1982) suggested, this morpheme is one of the most difficult to acquire despite the fact that it is one of the easiest grammatical rules to learn.

The acquisition of 3rd person singular morpheme -s by L2 learners has been also studied taking into consideration the typological proximity between the first and the second language being acquired (Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012). It has been considered that those learners with a rich inflecting L1 are more successful than those with an isolating (language with no inflection to indicate grammatical relationships) L1, especially when facing verbs that had a *high frequency lemma* in the input. Thus, they are more successful when using those verbs that appear more in the input they receive with different inflectional forms (e.g. walks, walked or walking.). English L2 learners with a rich inflecting L1 are more predisposed to use the 3rd person singular morpheme thanks to the positive transfer of the L1, since they are more used when inflecting verbs and it is easier for them to generalize rules.

However, isolating L1 learners lack the knowledge that make possible the generalizations of third person singular morpheme –s. The same happens with learners with L1 with a larger lexicon. The possibility of a negative transfer from the L1 to the L2 has been also taken into consideration especially if L1 does not have subject-verb agreement and tense marking. In consequence, it is probable that their L1 knowledge of tense and agreement features interfere in their performance of the L2 (Hsieh, 2009), as happened with Chinese learners of English in Hsieh's study as they replaced inflectional verb forms for non-finite forms.

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Third person singular and its properties in English and Turkish: A comparison.

In English, Tense and Agreement are grammatical categories that are realized by verb inflection. Finite verb forms in English are those which carry Tense and they are morphologically marked as either Present or Past. Since English has no future inflected form of the verb, the English conjugation is reduced to these two inflected tenses (Quirk & Greembaum, 1990: 231).

Almost all lexical or full English verbs have five different forms; *base form (open, drive), the 3rd person singular (opens, drives), the past tense (opened, drove), the past participle (opened, driven) and the –ing (opening, driving)* form. The following table illustrates the verb system in English language in Present Tense. As can be seen, the base form of the verbs is the one used in all forms except in the third person singular form, which is the only person that carries inflection.

Person and Number	Pronouns	Present Simple 'Open'
1st sing.	I	Open
2nd sing.	You	Open
3rd sing.	He/She/It	open-s
1st plur.	We	Open
2nd plur.	You	Open
3rd plur.	They	Open

Table 1. Verb 'Open' inflected in the Present Tense in English.

As for the Turkish inflectional system, Turkish is classified as a head-final language with an unmarked SOV word order in main and embedded clauses. Haznedar (2003) states that since Turkish morphology is agglutinative, Turkish verbs are inflected for person, number and tense. According to the typology criteria presented by Dressler (2003), Turkish language is an agglutinative language which has the inflection in both noun and verb. According to Dressler (2003), the noun and verb inflection systems of the following languages can be ordered gradually in regard to inflectional morphology on the scales of (a) isolating ↔ inflecting-fusional ideal type, (b) inflecting-fusional ↔ agglutinating ideal type.

a. Noun inflection: French – Spanish – English – Dutch – Italian – German – Greek – Slavic languages – Lithuanian

b. Verb inflection: English – Dutch – German – Spanish – French – Italian – Slavic languages – Greek – Lithuanian

c. Noun and verb inflection: Lithuanian – Slavic languages – Finnish – Hungarian – Turkish

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Person and Number	Pronouns	Present Simple 'Eat'
1st sing.	I	aç-*ar*-ım
2nd sing.	You	aç-*ar*-sın
3rd sing.	He/She/It	aç-*ar*
1st plur.	We	aç-*ar*-ız
2nd plur.	You	aç-*ar*-sınız
3rd plur.	They	aç-*ar*-lar

Table 2 . Verb 'Open' inflected in the Present Tense in Turkish.

Although limited in numbers, there are examples of morpheme acquisition studies conducted with Turkish learners. Ertekin (2006), studied on third person singular, plural and possessive -s morphemes, copula be and past tense verbs to understand and analyze whether the rule-governed system of Turkish morphology has an impact on the acquisition of English inflectional morphemes. The study came with a conclusion that Turkish EFL learners have difficulty internalizing inflectional morphemes. Forty five participants provided data through three free writing tasks which were given in three consecutive weeks with the beginning of the academic schedule. The researcher analyzed the data according to correct and incorrect usage of the third person singular -s. A further analysis of the nature of the incorrect forms unearthed that participants generally omitted the -s morpheme, which the researcher contended to have stemmed from the structure of Turkish language, which has no inflection in the third person singular.

Method

Data collection tools

The data for the study composed of prepatory class students' final exam writing in 2017-2018 academic year. In the final exam students are asked to write essays about given topics. The topics for the final exam were:

1) How do movies or television influence people's behavior?

2) The Effects of the Poor Quality Water on People

Data collection procedure

The study gathered data from 39 students' writing in final exam in 2017-2018 academic year. The students take four midterms and one final exam. Both midterms and final exam have a writing section. For the first and second midterm the students are asked to write a paragraph and for the third, fourth and final exam they are asked to write essays. In each midterm and final exam, the students are given 40 minutes to write their essays. The essays of the students were transcribed by the researchers and the students' uses of 3rd person singular –s were analyzed

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Data analysis

The study gathered data from 39 students' writing in final exam in 2017-2018 academic year. The writings were transcribed by the researchers and the students' uses of 3rd person singular –s were analyzed. The students' English proficiency level was pre-intermediate and intermediate. The corpus consisted of 5880 words. The corpus was analyzed the in terms of grammatically/correctly inflected items, omission item and wrongly/incorrectly inflected items.

Findings

An important factor that could influence the production or non-production of the 3rd person singular morpheme -s is the kind of task designed to carry out the research. The task was narrow in the sense that students were asked to write about only two topics:

1) How do movies or television influence people's behavior?

2) The Effects of the Poor Quality Water on People

The corpus gathered from 39 students' written exams comprised 40 grammatically/correctly inflected items. The sentences below are taken from different students' written registers to set examples. According to Thompson (2012) simple random sampling omits the chance of sampling biases. Therefore, the examples are selected according to simple random sampling.

 - Environmental pollution ***causes*** dirty water.

- It ***has*** positive and negative results.

- According to the istatistics, manipulation level in the advertisement ***increases*** %13,8 every year.

- Poor water quality" ***results*** from public health, growing plants, animal products

- Firstly, it ***helps*** to people achieve for new news for example the news programs.

The corpus comprised 43 examples of omission item (OI).

- Then it ****happen**** obsession about it.

- When he ****sleep****, he ****see**** to think monster.

- For instance my friend ****love**** watching movies.

- ... if he ****win**** the game, he is winning a prize.

- For instance, when a hero ****save**** a normal people's life, the kid ****want**** to save their friend's life in their game.

- Television ****influence**** to people's behavior is one of the topics on the agenda.

- He is 5 years old and he ****watch**** Cartoon Network

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- Behavior *affect* the movies bad or good I wish all the time.

- When a hero *save* a normal people's life, the kid *want* to save their friend's life in their game.

- Water degree *increase*, Quality *decrease*.

When it comes to wrongly/incorrectly inflected items, the corpus contained 13 examples.

- According to surveys, two of three people *says* people who watch the fight in TV is more aggressive than other peoples, especially children.

- They scared and *doesn't* have good sleep if baby and child watch scared movie.

- Finally, they *watches* television and than they want to make saw in the television programs.

- When people *watches* "The Pianist" movies, They were unhappied and saw their history.

- For instance in some place of word people *has* a culture like other places of word.

Discussion and conclusion

Chafe (1982) and Kenworthy (2006) stated that learners produce more errors in oral rather than in written register. The factor of time is essential in order to understand how written and oral register works. Some hypotheses suggest that time and technique may influence the production of grammatical errors committed by English L2 learners, especially when writing (Kenworthy, 2006). When compared with an oral task, students may feel more comfortable in a writing task in that they can plan and go over their writings. In both tasks there is time limit but a writing task is less challenging since it gives the opportunity to organize ideas and review their writings. Cosequently, students are more likely to perform better in a writing task. In a writing task students are asked to write about two or three generic questions. In the final exam srudents were also given two generic questions whose answers may bear personal ideas. This can limit the students mostly to write about their ideas about the effect of TV and poor water quality; and therefore, making it less possible to talk about actions bearing third person singular –s.

As for the students' writing and their examples of omission and wrong/incorrect usage, here, it is important to refer to two different kinds of difficulty: the difficulty learners have in internalizing a grammatical feature and the difficulty they have in acquiring the ability to use that feature accurately in communication. According to Ellis, (2008) most learners have no difficulty in grasping the rule for English third person singular –s, but they have enormous difficulty in internalizing this structure to use it accurately. Therefore, classroom activities and practices should include drills which will help students to internalize the target form. The opportunity to use the target form in the classrooms should be increased. Teachers should clearly state that verbs in the present simple tense must take the present tense agreement morpheme *–s* "V + -s" especially the third person singular. Moreover, teachers should encourage the students to produce target form when they speak and write.

Though the related literature abounds in research on the acquisition of 3rd person singular morpheme, there is little research particularly focusing on Turkish EFL learners. The findings of the study supported the literature in that the challenging process of acquisition of third person singular –s also applies to

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Turkish language learners of English. The students participated to this study supported this view as they showed 40 examples of grammatically/correctly inflected items, 43 omission item (OI) and 13 wrongly/incorrectly inflected items (WI). The numbers prove that third person singular –s is still a problem for the Turkish students. Much as the number of the wrongly inflected items are relatively low, the omission examples' rate is considerably high. The errors with the 3rd person singular –*s* can be attributed to developmental errors which occur in interlanguage development and reflect the learners' gradual discovery of the second language also found in L1 acquisition.

Ertekin (2006), Ulgu, Nisancı and Unal (2013) also stated that Turkish EFL learners have difficulty internalizing inflectional morphemes, and the rule-governed system of Turkish morphology may have an impact on the acquisition of English inflectional morphemes. Negative first language (L1) interference can be a cause of adult Turkish English language learners' having difficulty mastering the use of the 3sg –*s*. Since the study is a case study, the variety and richness of the corpus used is limited with only 39 students written registers. Therefore, to be able to make generalisations further studies are needed to be carried out.

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