



THE USE OF THIRD PERSON SINGULAR–S BY TURKISH SPEAKERS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The study aims to analyse the use of third person singular present tense –s by the students who are undergraduate Turkish speakers learning English as a foreign language at Duzce University, H. E. School of Foreign Languages. The study gathered data from six students' oral exams, which were recorded in 2015-2016 academic year. The recordings were transcribed by the researchers and the students' uses of 3sg –s were analyzed. The results comprised nine grammatically/correctly inflected items, one omission item (OI) and 15 wrongly/incorrectly inflected items (WI). The findings suggest that adult Turkish English language learners seem to have difficulty mastering the use of the 3sg –s most probably due to first language (L1) interference. The findings of this study have both pedagogical implications for EFL classroom practices and for foreign language teachers and researchers.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, third person singular -s, L1 interference.

INTRODUCTION

The 3rd person singular inflection in English is considered an introductory concept for second/foreign language learners since it is one of the major grammatical rules taught by teachers to L2 learners of English at an elementary level. According to Heironymous, (1993) though there is a consensus among researchers and ESL teachers that the third person singular rule is simple, there is some variability in its use by learners, and it seems that there are not so many students that apply the rule, even with L2 learners with an advanced level of English. As an underlying effect, we can talk of 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 or little difficulty in understanding the rule for English third person singular –s, but they have serious difficulty in internalizing this structure to use it accurately.

The Acquisition of 3rd Person Singular

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, 2008; 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 auxiliary *be* (Brown, 1973).



After analyzing the acquisition of different morphemes by L1 speakers of English as a native language, it was 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

1. Present Progressive –ing
2. Plural –s
3. Irregular Past Tense
4. Possessive –'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, that are acquired in a different order between L1 and L2 learners of English (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Gass & Selinker, 2008). 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

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 for L2 learners' acquisition of morphemes, it was observed that as happened with L1 learners, the 3rd person singular morpheme –s was acquired in a penultimate position; nevertheless, it was acquired before the possessive-s (Dulay and Burt, 1973; Krashen, 1982; Freeman, 1975; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001).

However, in both cases the acquisition of 3rd person singular is stated to occur late which would demonstrate that, as Krashen (1982) stated, 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, walks, walked or walking.).

English L2 learners with a rich inflecting L1 are more predisposed to use the 3SG 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 not 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.

A Comparison of Third Person Singular in English and Turkish

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 & Greenbaum, 1990).

Almost all lexical or full English verbs have five different forms; *base form (open), the 3rd person singular (opens), the past tense (opened, chose), the past participle (opened, chosen) and the –ing (opening)* form. The following table illustrates the verb system in the 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.

Table 1: Verb ‘Open’ inflected in the Present Tense

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

When it comes to the Turkish inflectional system, Turkish is classified as a head-final language with an unmarked SOV word order in main and embedded clauses. As Turkish morphology is agglutinative, Turkish verbs are inflected for person, number and tense (Haznedar, 2003). According to the typology criteria presented by Dressler (2003), Turkish language is an agglutinative language which has the inflection in both noun and verb.

Table 2: Verb ‘Open’ inflected in the Present Tense

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

Ertekin (2006), asserting that Turkish EFL learners have difficulty internalizing inflectional morphemes, worked on third person singular, plural and possessive s morphemes, copula be and past tense verbs to throw light on whether the rule-governed system of Turkish morphology has an impact on the acquisition of English 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 data was then analyzed according to correct and incorrect usage of the third person



singular s. A further analysis of the nature of the incorrect forms revealed that participants mostly 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

The main aim of the study is to analyse the use of third person singular present tense –s by the students who are undergraduate Turkish speakers learning English as a foreign language. The study was conducted at Duzce Universtiy, H. E. School of Foreign Languages, Department of Basic English. Six students studying English at H. E. School of Foreign Languages English preparatory classess participated to the study. The students' English proficiency level was pre-intermediate. The preparatory classes at Duzce University are selective and % 80 attendance to the classes is required from the students to be able to take the final exam. Each class receive 24 hours basic English and two hours optnal club activities per week. The study gathered data from students' oral exams, which were recorded in 2015-2016 academic year. The recordings were transcribed by the researchers and the students' uses of 3sg –s were analyzed. The corpus consisted of 3329 words. The data analyzed the corpus in terms of grammatically/correctly inflected items, omission item and wrongly/incorrectly inflected items.

FINDINGS

There is a common belief in the literature that more errors are attested in oral registers (Chafe, 1982; Kenworthy, 2006; Hsieh, 2009; Paradis & Duncan, 2012). This is mostly because time plays a crucial role in the distinction between oral and written register. Unlike a writing task, students feel uneasy, and with instant utterances without careful planning, they are more likely to perform worse in the oral task. 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 employed in the study was narrow in the sense that students were asked generally fixed questions whose answers require mostly to talk about their choices and ideas; and thus making it less possible to talk about actions with samples of third person singular –s. So, the examples of third person singular –s was limited in number. The corpus gathered from six students' oral exams comprised nine grammatically/correctly inflected items. The sentences below are taken from different students' oral registers to set examples.

***T:** what does a mechanical engineer do?

S: because my cousin *says* mechanical engineering is so beautiful for your future and I ()

***T:** Dream job. That's OK. What is your dream job?

S: It is not my dream job but (0.2) I think my big brother *has* a dream job (.) He is teacher at (.)high school (0.2) I think he is a good teacher because (0.2) his personality is (0.2) his personality probably that (0.2) good teacher.

***T:** OK. saturday sunday?

S: Saturday Sunday?(.) it's enough for me (0.2) just saturday or sunday. It *doesn't matter*.

***T2:** ok. biomedical engineering. what does a biomedical engineer do?

S: (h) every person *asks* this questions.

The corpus comprised only one example of omission item (OI) which is followed by a self-correction.

***S:** I think it's mostly about education and it's about family. Family is important for this. If his or her family (.) raised him good... he or she...

T: him? (h)

S: (h) he or she *follow*, follows the rules.

When it comes to wrongly/incorrectly inflected items, the corpus contained 15 examples.

***T:** That's OK.



S: I don't know (0.5.) his goals but (.) he, he was do (.) his goal (.) <he **play** Real Madrid, İnter >

***T:** do you remember a Turkish hero?

S: (.)

T: In our culture?

S: >him him eeeeeee< Turkish police, police turkish army because he **protect protect** my country. he (.) he **work** he **work** every time (.) he **work** every time.

***T:** ok when you graduate you will become an engineer. what are the important things for you to choose a job? ok you like to be an engineer, that's ok. what else? for example money what else, for example...money like salary.

S: actually i didn't want to choose this department (.) my big brother **want**, wanted this department... because of you.

***S:** Powers. But Batman is a human and he **tries** to do something (.) I think he is better than Superman.

T: What makes him better? He is human?

S: Yeah. He doesn't have any special powers but (.) he **try** to do something good. Yes.

In this example we see that the student uses the same verb both grammatically/correctly and wrongly/incorrectly in the same discourse. The fact of producing a correct verb in some cases and at the same time producing the same verb incorrectly could be related to the notion of *lexicon strength* or the number of times that a learner uses a word and, as a consequence, how the word leaves a trace in the learner's lexicon (Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012). The more times a word appears in the input of the learner, the easier for the learner to produce the word and increase his/her lexicon strength. Furthermore, the fact of producing these same verbs correctly and incorrectly at the same time proves that students have not really acquired the rule of the 3rd person singular in present tense, because if they had acquired it correctly, they would always produce these verbs properly.

T: any favorite singer from Turkey?

S: any favorite singer from Turkey. sometimes cemal cayan's voices (0,6) **impresses** me. err. and I don't know.who is the best in Turkey.

Another important aspect that has also been studied is the ungrammaticality of 3rd person singular produced in a specific case of a singular verb with a plural noun. Student's register above can be a sample for this. Here the problem might be either with the noun's singularity/plurality or simple present third person singular -s problem.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The 3rd person singular inflection in English is considered an introductory concept for second/foreign language learners as it is one of the first grammatical rules taught by teachers to L2 learners of English at an elementary level. Although there is a general belief that the third person singular rule is very simple, there is some variability in its use by learners. The students participated to this study supported this view as each of them showed nine examples of grammatically/correctly inflected items, one omission item and 15 wrongly/incorrectly inflected items. 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. Ertekin (2006) and Ulgu, Nisançı and Unal (2013) also stated that Turkish EFL learners have difficulty internalizing inflectional morphemes, worked on third person singular, plural and possessive s morphemes, copula be and past tense verbs to throw light on whether the rule-governed system of Turkish morphology has 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. The variety and richness of the corpus used is limited with only six students oral registers. Much of the previous research related to the field is descriptive and focused on written registers. So, this study is valuable as it analyzed oral registers of students. However, to be able to make generalisations further studies with larger samples are needed to be carried out.

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