



USE OF SIMPLE PAST FORMS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine students' use of past forms in speaking in an EFL context. To this end, 48 students' speaking exams in 2014-2015 academic year, will be transcribed and the students' use of past forms will be analyzed. Not all input will be obtained from only one exam, but rather a progressive use of past forms in English will be analyzed with data obtained from three different exams. The findings of the study will be presented under the subtopics which will include lack of use, overuse and misuse of past forms. The changes that might be observed through the process will be discussed from a progressive perspective to give a clear understanding of the points that lead to students' inappropriate use of past forms in English. Conclusions will be presented in a manner that will show the fashion students following using past forms over the time.

Keywords: Spoken English, Past forms in English, EFL context.

INTRODUCTION

A targeted foreign language is a process that needs to be meticulously focused on foreign language learning and teaching, whether coming from the same language family as the mother tongue or having a totally different root. Therefore, a variety of teaching methods have emerged for each age group for native language education. Foreign language education is quite prevalent for all ages; but if they want to approach the qualifications of the people who are using that language as the mother tongue in the target foreign language, then they should begin language education as early as possible. Many studies in this regard (Krashen, 1973, Roth, 1998, Lambert, 1972) show that children who are exposed to language education quite early can easily approach the qualifications of those who use the native speaker language as their mother tongue.

One of the main points of emphasis in foreign language education is that foreign language is taught through the planned contents and activities in line with the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Of these skills, listening and reading skills are called as "perceptive skills", while writing and speaking are labeled as "productive skills". According to Aküzel (2006: 17-18), language learning consists of the functional completeness of these four basic skills. These basic skills need to be taught together while teaching how to use it as a medium of communication.

It is very important in foreign language education especially to think about four skills separately and to focus on their own methods. In addition, speaking and writing skills, which are the production skills called "productive skills" in language teaching, should be emphasized. Thus, the target language of the foreign language learners can be approached to the competence of the speakers, and the learned foreign language can be effectively used in social settings (Padem, 2012: 28).

It is known that the importance of acquiring second language in a globally shrinking world is very significant for a country that is rapidly developing like Turkey. Thus second language learning is a crucial part of education system in Turkey as it is one of the fastest developing countries in the world and performs its role as a bridge between west and east due to its geographic position. Success can be achieved in this respect only if studies are undertaken specifically on the second language acquisition of the Turkish learners. Speaking is considered to be the latest of the skills to acquire and one of the hardest. Thus, students often achieve progress in reading and writing skills in which they do not need to be reactive, but they are often less motivated in listening and speaking skills as these skills require them to be responsive in environments where they need to make use of them interchangeably. This makes students opt out for reading and writing and they see themselves mostly competent in these two skills.

The key element that can be looked into in understanding a language is morphemes. Morphemes can be defined as the smallest meaningful element in a given language. In terms of meaning they carry, morphemes are divided into two categories: lexical and grammatical morphemes. For instance, in the word "A car", "car" is defined as a lexical morpheme as it bears a meaning on its own while "A" carries a grammatical meaning but doesn't mean anything by itself. Grammatical morphemes are also divided into two categories; free and bound morphemes. While free morphemes add a meaning to sentences (prepositions, possessive pronouns etc.) bound morphemes must be joined to other words to form a meaning. Under the category of bound morphemes are the inflectional morphemes giving meanings of case, tense etc.

One of the first important studies on morpheme sequencing was carried out by (Brown, 1973). He found out that there is a natural order in the acquisition of morphemes in L1. This study marked the beginning of morpheme order studies. Dulay and Burt (1973) approached the same subject this time focusing on acquisition order of morphemes in L2. Krashen (1978) put forward four stages in the acquisition of morphemes. All these studies contributed to the theory of an innate device which is present in all learners and defined by Chomsky (1986:3) as Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

Cognitive theory was aided by "Interlanguage" hypothesis in language learning. Emergence of this theory began when Corder (1967) discussed that production of L2 can be similar to L1 thus systematic errors made by learners in L2 can be an evident sign of learning. The term "Interlanguage" was later coined by Selinker (1972). He pointed out that fossilization which are errors preferred by learners even after long durations of instruction tend to appear in utterances either in difficult or relaxed environments.

Frith (1978) summarizes "Interlanguage" hypothesis as follows: Errors are seen as a signal of learning rather than problematic uses which should immediately be dealt with. Errors also assist the learners in testing the hypotheses they want to excel and finding out about the learners' errors reveals their built-in syllabi and learner strategies. Having these features, interlanguage helps us shed light on students' inner minds and making future projections.

According to Touchie (1986) intralingual and developmental errors vary according to the level of difficulty of the second or target language. Some of the factors that were mentioned by Touchie were as follows:

1. Simplification: Learners tend to choose a simpler form instead of more complex forms. They may stick to "will" form of future tense when "be going to" and other forms of future tense are available.
2. Overgeneralization: this happens when the learner extensively uses a form in places where it should not be applied.
3. Hypercorrection: some errors of learners are over-corrected by teachers, causing students to make errors where they should not.
4. Faulty teaching: Source of errors can sometimes don't emanate from the learner but from other sources such as the teacher, teaching material etc.

5. Fossilization: learners repeat some mistakes so often that these errors can no longer be corrected.
6. Avoidance: Addition of some structures to sentences becomes hard for learners so they avoid these structures.
7. Inadequate learning: as some learners cannot learn some forms adequately they mostly ignore them in their utterances.
8. False concepts hypothesized: Learners adopt some uses hypothesized by themselves which don't exist.

As can be understood from the information given above, errors are not just one type and are not the subjects to blame. Instead, they give the stakeholders in language learning and teaching processes the opportunity to improve the outcome of these processes.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to determine students' use of past forms in speaking in an EFL context and in a progressive manner.

METHODOLOGY

In this part of the research, information about the model of the research, the population and sampling, data collection tools, oral exams in through which qualitative data are obtained, collection of data and analysis of obtained data are included.

Design

In this study, descriptive method has been used and in the light of this method, qualitative data have been benefited. The performance of the students in the speaking section of three of the four midterm exams taken by the students during one academic year has been examined, no experimental study has been done, and only the present situation has been defined.

Population and Sampling

The universe of the research is composed of students who are studying at the Düzce University Preparatory Unit in the 2014-2015 academic year. The sample of the research consists of 48 preparatory class students who were recorded with video cameras or voice recorders during the exam in the speaking section of three midterm examinations made during this academic year.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants by Level, Frequency and Percentage

Level	f	%
A1	15	32
A2	15	32
B1	18	36
Total	48	100

When Table 1 is examined, it can be seen that exam records of 48 students from A1, A2 and B1 levels were examined. 15 of these students were at A1 level, 13 of them were at A2 level and 18 of these students were at B1 level.

Collection of Data

The results of this research were collected during the first, second and third midterm exams held in Düzce University Hakime Erciyas School of Foreign Languages in 2014-2015 academic year by recording the students' speaking exams with video cameras and sound recorders.

Analysis of Data

In the scope of the research, the data qualitative data obtained by recording the students' speaking exams were coded and interpreted according to the previously defined themes according to the

descriptive analysis approach. In the analysis of the qualitative data of the study, following procedures were conducted in the light of the methods for validity and reliability in qualitative research:

Validity of the Research

In the scope of the research, the speaking exams of the students were recorded with the help of video camera sound recorder. The recorded data is written down in the original form without skipping any data. One hundred thirty-two (132) page texts consisting of the written texts of the exams were read in detail. Expert examination has been applied to the creation of the themes of the research data and interpretation of the obtained data. According to the expert's opinion, the research has been re-edited. No changes were made to the raw data and researchers stuck to the data during the data analysis. Expressions indicating students' use of simple past tense are given directly in the quotations.

Reliability of the Research

The written format of the research records are read more than once for each theme. In the interpretation of research data, continuous comparison with the results of the studies of acquisition of morphemes and simple past tense to avoid any subjective hypothesis that might arise from the researcher was made and clear and correct coding of the data was provided. It was determined that the obtained data were placed in appropriate themes. The sound recordings taken during the examinations and the documents in which these records are written are kept for the purpose of subjecting them to a review process when necessary.

FINDINGS

According to the data obtained from the analysis of the utterances of students, it was found that 33 out of 48 students used simple past forms in their utterances. However; 15 students avoided using simple past forms even if they had been asked questions that prompted using simple past. In addition, it was found that 33 students formed 130 sentences with simple past in total.

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of correct use, misuse or lack of use and overuse of simple past forms in the utterances produced by the students whose exams were recorded for this study:

Table 2: Findings Related to Three Midterms Together

	f	%
Correct use	42	32,3
Misuse / Lack of Use	74	56,9
Overuse	14	10,8
Total	130	100

As can be seen in Table 2, 42 sentences with 32,3 percentage were correctly used in terms of simple past tense while 74 sentences with 56.9 percentage had somehow erroneous usage pertaining to simple past. 10,8 percent of the utterances with 14 frequency, however; they had simple past structures where they needn't have been used. Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of correct use, misuse or lack of use and overuse of simple past forms in the utterances produced by the students during the first midterm exam:

Table 3: Findings Related to First Midterm

	f	%
Correct Use	13	28,8
Misuse / Lack of Use	30	66,6
Overuse	2	4,6
Total	45	100

Table 3 shows that in the first midterm exam, 13 sentences with 28,8 percentage were correctly used in terms of simple past tense while 30 sentences with 66,6 percentage had somehow erroneous usage pertaining to simple past. 4,6 percent of the utterances with 2 frequency, however; they had simple past structures where they needn't have been used. Here are some of the examples of the erroneous sentences uttered by the students during the oral exam:

Student: After (.) I child, we don't have big build. Everywhere (.) tree and flowers but now (.) no any tree. (.) I was school by bus but after we go to, we want to; we went school (0.3)

Teacher : What did you eat?

Student: I eat döner.

Student : Yeah. I start use this year for school. Before I wasn't use e-mail because it was not necessary for high school but in university I start it, to e-mail.

Student : I have, I was have an e-mail but I don't use e-mail with my friends or something else.

Teacher: How was your placement test?

Student : It is good.

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of correct use, misuse or lack of use and overuse of simple past forms in the utterances produced by the students during the second midterm exam:

Table 4: Findings Related to Second Midterm

	f	%
Correct Use	12	38,7
Misuse / Lack of Use	18	58
Overuse	1	3,3
Total	31	100

As can be seen in Table 4, in the second midterm exam, 12 sentences with 38,7 percentage were correctly used in terms of simple past tense while 18 sentences with 58 percentage had somehow erroneous usage pertaining to simple past. 3,3 percent of the utterances with only 1 frequency, however; they had simple past structures where they needn't have been used. Here are some of the examples of the erroneous sentences uttered by the students during the oral exam:

Student: But I can swim when I was child.

Student: How happened I don't know (h)

Student: They are just began life with hopes.

Teacher: Why not? What did you do?

Student: Because, I went to go to friend.

Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of correct use, misuse or lack of use and overuse of simple past forms in the utterances produced by the students during the third midterm exam:

Table 5: Findings Related to Third Midterm

	f	%
Correct Use	17	29,8
Misuse / Lack of Use	26	48,1
Overuse	11	22,1
Total	54	100

Table 5 shows that in the third midterm exam, 17 sentences with 29,8 percentage were correctly used in terms of simple past tense while 26 sentences with 48,1 percentage had somehow erroneous usage pertaining to simple past. 22,1 percent of the utterances with 11 frequency, however; they had simple past structures where they needn't have been used. Here are some of the examples of the erroneous sentences uttered by the students during the oral exam:

Student: I know Bilge. We are same course last year. I know Alper er. I guess. we are same high school. one or two year. but I don't me. I didn't meet Alper.

Student: I wasn't think about my fail so I was fast while speaking.

Student: I'm forgot.

Teacher: You didn't really? What about listening? Did you understand?

Student : Yes I am.

Table 6 shows the changes in the utterances throughout three midterms in terms of frequency of the statements that include simple past forms with correct, misuse and overuse.

Table 6: Change With Respect to Frequency

	Correct	Misuse	Overuse	f
1st	13	30	2	45
2nd	12	18	1	31
3rd	17	26	11	54
Total	42	74	14	130

As can be understood from Table 6, the number of the correct utterances, which started with the frequency of 13, decreased to 12 in the second midterm, but that number increased to 17 in the third midterm exam. Similarly, the number of the incorrect utterances, starting with the frequency of 30, decreased to 18 in the second midterm, but that number increased to 26 in the third midterm exam. As for the last midterm exam, the number of the utterances in which simple past forms were used unnecessarily, which starts with the frequency of 2, decreased to 1 in the second midterm, but that number increased to 11. These figures, however; does not give a clear idea of the tendency of the change. To understand this, it is needed to look at the changes in terms of percentage.

Table 7 shows the changes in the utterances throughout three midterms in terms of percentage of the statements that include simple past forms with correct, misuse and overuse.

Table 7: Change With Respect to Percentage

	Correct	Misuse	Overuse	Total %
1st	28,8	66,6	4,6	100
2nd	38,7	58	3,3	100
3rd	29,8	48,1	22,1	100

As can be understood from Table 7, the percentage of the correct utterances, which started with the percentage of 28,8, increased to 38,7 in the second midterm, but that percentage decreased to 29,8 in the third midterm exam. However; the percentage of the incorrect utterances, starting with the percentage of 66,6, decreased to 58 in the second midterm, and that percentage continued to decrease with the percentage of 48,1 in the third midterm exam. As for the last midterm exam, the percentage of the overused utterances, starting with the percentage of 4,6, decreased to 3,3 in the second midterm, and but that percentage increased dramatically with the percentage of 22,1 in the third midterm exam.

DISCUSSION

Within the scope of this study, it was tried to find out whether the simple past tense use of university preparatory class students changed in a positive or negative manner. Since the data of the study were taken out of three different midterm exams that were taken by the participants at different times, it can be said that this study focuses on the development of simple past tense use within time in a longitudinal fashion.



As the findings of the research suggest, the number of utterances with simple tense increased as time passed and students improved their proficiency. This means students become braver in producing sentences referring to the past. Students tend to produce more incorrect utterances initially. However, towards the end of the year, the percentage of correct uses tends to increase. This tendency shows that the intake of the simple past tense forms improves in time. In the 3rd midterm exam, however, students tend to use simple past forms more than needed. This reflects the fashion of overgeneralization errors, which shows that learners apply the rules they have learnt to the environments where it is inappropriate to use them.

As Touchie (1986) indicated, these errors happen when the learner extensively uses a form in places where it should not be applied. Thus, it can be concluded that the participants of this research first made lots of erroneous use regarding the simple past forms, then they reduced the misused forms, nonetheless; in the third midterm exam they started to overgeneralize the simple past forms and used them in the environments where they actually need not have used. It can also be said that if these kinds of errors are not treated properly, they may lead to fossilization of these errors, thereby making it impossible to fix them in a constructive manner.

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