

УДК 372.881.111.1

ББК 74.268.1 Англ

ОСОБЕННОСТИ УСВОЕНИЯ СОГЛАСОВАНИЯ СКАЗУЕМОГО С ПОДЛЕЖАЩИМ ИЗУЧАЮЩИМИ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК

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В статье рассматривается вероятное объяснение трудностям, которые обучающиеся испытывают в процессе изучения согласования подлежащего и сказуемого в английском языке. Поднимается вопрос актуальности использования результатов исследований для разработки рекомендаций по обучению иностранному языку.

Ключевые слова: усвоение второго языка, второй язык, морфология, согласование подлежащего со сказуемым, очерёдность усвоения морфем, Английский язык как иностранный.

THE ACQUISITION OF SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: THE CASE OF THIRD-PERSON SINGULAR –S

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The article provides a potential explanation for the difficulties that English language learners encounter regarding subject-verb agreement from the perspective of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The attention is drawn to the issue of how research findings can be used to develop some implications for foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Second language acquisition (SLA), second language (L2), morphology, subject-verb agreement, morpheme order studies, English as a foreign language (EFL).

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) provides us with valuable insight into how second languages are learnt. Although it may seem that the field of SLA is inextricably interwoven with language didactics, it is important to understand that these two fields are separate and have their own research agenda. The research in the field of SLA views learning from the learner's own perspective and focuses on the psychological and cognitive processes that the learners' mind undergoes through while acquiring a language [Gass, Selinker, 2008]. Such a perspective is drastically different from the one that has been traditionally taken by language teachers, namely concentrating on a learning environment and its constituent elements such as teaching materials, instruction, curriculum, etc. However, the research findings in the field of SLA have influenced the study of language pedagogy leading to a major switch from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach and the emergence of new teaching methods and techniques. The course in SLA has been included in many teacher training programs at the university level all over the world, which only underlines the importance of studying the process of language acquisition.

In Russia, however, the field of SLA is rarely being referred to as a separate and well-established discipline, neither is its material covered by the students studying didactics. As a result, the practitioners are often unaware of the key principles underlying the process of language learning, although it has been a long time since the communicative approach with a focus on a learner was accepted as a dominant framework for language teaching. By raising awareness of key concepts

and ideas underlying this discipline, the teachers may start handling some situations differently. For instance, it can help the teachers realize that the errors made by students do not necessarily indicate the lack of grammar or language aptitude; neither should they be seen as the robust evidence of imperfect teaching instruction. It is plausible that the explanation is much simpler and is attributed to the fact that not all the structures and constructions are acquired at the same speed and ease.

Subject-verb agreement (SVA) is considered to be one of the most challenging structures for the learners acquiring a foreign language. The difficulties that the L2 learners experience in relation to SVA may be attributed to the complexity of inflectional morphology specific to some languages. English, however, has extremely poor inflectional system governed by a simple SVA rule: the verb receives suffix –s when the subject is in third person singular. In spite of a seeming clarity and simplicity of the rule, the learners with a wide range of first languages experience difficulties with the acquisition of 3rd person singular suffix – s.

The aim of this article is to provide an explanation for the difficulties that the learners encounter in the process of acquiring subject-verb agreement in English by providing a review of research in the field of SLA and analyzing the morphological status of the verbal suffix – s.

The idea that some elements of the language can be easier or harder to acquire for learners with different language background was first introduced with the emergence of the developmental stages in the acquisition of morpho-syntax, that were first discovered by Brown [Brown, 1973] in relation to the first language acquisition. However, later the findings were applied to SLA by Dulay & Burt [Dulay, Burt, 1974] who found that similar patterns of development occur between groups of children with different language backgrounds. Subsequent morpheme-order studies [Krashen, 1977], only confirmed the existence of a natural order of SLA for adult learners with different L1s acquiring language in different settings. The results of the studies are summarized and compared below (Table 1).

Table 1 – Order of L1 and L2 Acquisition of English Morphemes

L1A, Brown (1973)	Child L2A, Dulay & Burt (1974)	Adult L2A, Bailey, Madden, & Krashen (1974)
1. present progressive – <i>ing</i>	1. articles <i>the, a</i>	1. present progressive – <i>ing</i>
2. <i>in, on</i>	2. copula <i>am, is, are</i>	2. plural -s
3. plural -s	3. present progressive – <i>ing</i>	3. contracted copula
4. irregular past tense forms	4. plural -s	4. articles <i>the, a</i>
5. possessive – ‘s	5. auxiliary <i>be</i>	5. irregular past tense forms
6. uncontracted copula <i>am, is, are</i>	6. regular past tense <i>-ed</i>	6. possessive – ‘s
7. articles <i>the, a</i>	7. irregular past tense forms	7. contracted auxiliary
8. regular past tense <i>-ed</i>	8. long plural <i>-es</i>	8. 3 rd person singular -s
9. 3 rd person singular -s	9. possessive – ‘s	
11. auxiliary <i>be</i>	10. 3 rd person singular -s	
12. contracted copula		

As it follows from the table, the sequence of the stages is not identical, though there are some common trends in the trajectory of the acquisition. However, what seems to be of the greatest importance for the current paper is that third person singular -s comes at the bottom of the list in most cases.

The discussion of the morpheme order studies provides the researchers and educators with a key idea that subject-verb agreement, or specifically third person singular -s is one of the hardest morphemes to acquire for 2L learners of English. A partial answer to the question of why it happens to be so lies in the fact that there is a

variety of factors that may either facilitate or impede the acquisition of linguistic features.

Many studies in the field of SLA aimed at investigating the reasons why the learners experience problems with this morpheme and specifically why they frequently omit verbal inflection in their speech. However, it arose new debates since the nature of this omission has been treated differently by the researchers. While some linguists [Meisel, 1997; Eubank, 1997] addressed the optionality in the use of agreement morphology as an evidence for impairment of functional category of agreement in learners' interlanguage system, other researchers [Prevost, White, 2000; Zobl, Liceras, 1994; Ionin, Wexler 2002] argued that the functional categories are indeed specified in the learners' L2 grammars, thus the lack of overt morphology should not be attributed to feature impairment. Moreover, the latter states that it rather indicates problems with mapping from existing features to their surface morphological representations.

The author of this article holds the opinion that the learners possess the category of agreement, however, might experience difficulties with mapping the feature with the corresponding morphology when it's needed. There are robust findings in favour of this approach. Numerous studies [Zobl, Liceras, 1994; Lardiere, 1999; Ionin, Wexler, 2002] have demonstrated that L2 learners use suppletive inflection – the use of be copula and auxiliary forms with more accuracy and at a significantly higher rate than affixal inflection. These findings lead us to the conclusion that an agreement mechanism cannot be impaired since the L2 learners have mastered the suppletive agreement paradigm prior to affixational. If there was a place for impairment of the whole category, then the learners would not have demonstrated high accuracy rate with performance on copula and auxiliary be. Thus the category of agreement might be present in learners' mental grammar or in other words the learners possess the relevant competence; however, it not transferred to their performance in all the instances.

Unfortunately, there is no accepted explanation for the ongoing mapping problem, as well as a methodology that can be used as a treatment for it. One

potential explanation is that the affixal status of the verbal suffix -s makes it difficult to acquire. The researchers distinguish several factors that can either impede or facilitate the process of morpheme's acquisition: phonological visibility, frequency in the input and semantic transparency.

Phonological visibility of morphological information is reported to play a crucial role in the acquisition of particular structures. Epstein et al. [Epstein, 1996] suggest that the omission of -s may be due to a reduction of phonemes or clusters in word-final position. Ionin and Wexler [Ionin, Wexler, 2002] aimed at testing the hypothesis and looked at the L2 learners' production of irregular inflection, which requires a change to the stem rather than simple affixation. If the use of third person singular -s was related to the phonetic visibility of the affix, higher production of -s with irregular verbs would be expected, which was not the case according to the obtained findings. Another argument that can be used against the hypothesis that omission of affixal inflection is phonological comes from the comparison of plural -s and the morpheme under discussion. If omission of third person -s were due to reduction of word-final phonemes, we would expect similar difficulties to occur for plural -s. However, the findings of all the morpheme order studies illustrate that plural -s is acquired earlier than third person singular -s. The findings of the study by Ionin and Wexler discussed earlier in the section parallels those of the developmental as they show that the plural -s is omitted in only 11% of obligatory contexts, opposed to 58% omission rate of third-person singular -s in thematic-verb contexts. This suggests that -s omission is not purely phonological in nature and there should be other factors contributing to a complex status of this morpheme.

Another factor that is claimed to facilitate the development in L2 acquisition is frequency. The developmental sequences studies provide evidence that can be used both in favor and against the simple frequency explanation. On the one hand, the comparison of the frequency rate at which the visually identical plural -s and 3rd person singular -s are used, demonstrates that that plural -s that comes at the top of the list is more frequently used than verbal -s which is at bottom of the list. On the other hand, Pienemann and Johnston's study [Pienemann, Johnston, 1986] on the

implication of morphosyntax stages for language teaching found that the learners could not acquire the features they were not developmentally ready for, regardless of different factors including frequency at which the target construction appears in the input.

Another important factor is related to semantic transparency. Functional morphemes, as opposed to semantically salient content morphemes, generally lack clear-cut meaning hence, they are noticed less and acquired latter by L2 learners [Conti, 2017]. However, even functional morphemes can be divided into 2 groups: those that possess relatively straightforward meaning, and those which meaning is subtle or unclear. If we look at the case of third-person singular -s we will see that it is a form with low communicative value. Ellis has argued that “relations that are not salient or essential for understanding the meaning of an utterance are otherwise only picked up very slowly, if at all [Ellis, 1994, p. 175]. Taking into consideration the factor of semantic transparency it becomes clear why the plural -s precedes third-person singular -s in the natural order list – the meaning of an affix marking plurality is far more clear-cut than those of verbal affix.

What seems to be more realistic is that these factors are not isolated and all of them come into play together attributing to the difficulties that the learners experience while mastering subject-verb agreement in English.

As it was mentioned earlier in the article, it seems only logical that the research findings should inform language teaching. The teachers can make good use of what the field of SLA suggests about the learning process. The theoretical underpinnings concerning the process of the acquisition of the verbal suffix –s presented in the article provide considerations for teaching implications, namely that the material can give rise to considerable difficulties for the learners. The importance of morpheme-order studies does not imply the necessity of changing the whole sequence in which the material is presented in the textbooks; this idea is simply not feasible. It seems more reasonable to bear in mind that the structures that tend to come at the end of the morpheme-order lists or be prone to the factors impeding the acquisition need extra attention in a teaching process. The focus on forms should not be limited purely to

providing corrective feedback, especially concerning that the recasts, which are most commonly used by a teacher in classroom settings, are proven to be an inefficient form of correction. The research findings show that they are rarely being processed by the learners as corrections at all, but rather as a simple repetition of a student's answer. Thus, the teachers have to make sure that all the corrections are processed by the students. It is important not to be afraid of bringing back the focus on grammar. Even explicit grammar teaching that is usually not favoured by the practitioners within the communicative approach should take place for learners to master relevant structures. Explicit teaching is not about rule formation and drilling exercises. The teachers can always make a difference by contextualizing grammar teaching and making the process more meaningful and still focus on the form.

To conclude, the process of studying subject-verb agreement may be rather time-consuming since it may be reasonable to apply more intensive teaching concerning the structure under consideration at different levels of language proficiency for learners to perform better with the production of correct subject-verb agreement pattern.

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