

A Case Study on Indonesia EFL Learners Acquisition of Inflectional Morpheme –S in the Third Person Singular Present

R. Agus Budiharto*, Yanti Linarsih , Sri Widjajanti , Evha Nazalatus

*Madura University, Jl. Raya Panglegur KM 3,5 Pamekasan - Madura

*Corresponding Author Email: budiharto@unira.ac.id

Abstract. Inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular present becomes one of the most problematic morphemes that the L2 learners encounter while learning English. In spite of this fact, learners continued learning this bound morpheme in the initial phases of learning English no matter what their mother tongue is. The current investigation examined the factors, whether mother tongue interference or overgeneration, that Indonesia EFL learners encounter while acquiring the bound morpheme –s in the third person singular present. The participants were 30 Indonesia – speaking seventh grade middle school students who aged 12 and 13 years old. They comprised of 15 males and 15 females and have been studying at public school, SMPN 1 Galis – Pamekasan. Two instruments were used in this investigation, which were written and spoken outputs of the students in the form of presentation tasks. Pedagogical activities were prepared cautiously to guide the students to utilize every single personal pronoun. Spoken part of the activities was documented electronically and all occurrences of incorrect use of third person singular present morpheme –s calculated and so did written activities. The results suggest that the errors performed by students were largely by virtue of mother tongue interference and overgeneration was not much observed.

Keywords: EFL, Learners Acquisition, Inflectional Morpheme

1. INTRODUCTION

When learners are employing a language, they form sentences that are comprised mainly of words and every single word definitely consists of morphemes that become the pillar to uphold the word itself. However, if learners are not capable of employing them correctly it is likely to be hard to grasp. The morphemes – making process needs to apply divergent morphemes and to take them away, so that language can be modified and extended. In order to be grasped correctly when forming sentences both in written and oral productions, learners who have been learning a new language, in this case English, absolutely need to acquire the morphemes of the new language. Besides, they also need to possess capability of employing them correctly, i.e. having good aptitude in employing both lexical morphemes that can be categorized as nouns, adjectives, verbs or affixes and grammatical morphemes that become a set of functional words or inflections such as “-s”, “-ed”, and “-ing” [1].

Inflectional morphemes (e.g., -s, -ing, -ed) and derivational morphemes (e.g., -ment, -ly, -ness) constitute part of grammatical morphemes which become basic building blocks for English words, encoding a variety of concepts containing temporality, aspect, possession, person, and discourse features. By virtue of their importance, it becomes crucial for second language learners

(SLLs) to acquire them. In words of [2] although their high frequency and communicative necessity, however the grammatical morphemes acquisition has been acknowledged to be notoriously difficult for second language (L2) learners. Therefore, researchers of second language acquisition (SLA) have carried out a great deal of research on their acquisition. The morpheme that is going to be analyzed in this paper is inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular present. In words of [3] inflectional morphemes are defined as morphemes that do not create a new word when it is joined by a free morpheme. However, they are used to demonstrate whether a word belongs to singular or not, present form or past form, and whether it belongs a possessive form or not.

The inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular present constitutes one of the most challenging morphemes that the SLLs encounter while learning English. In spite of this fact, learners continued learning this bound morpheme in the initial phases of learning English no matter what their mother tongue is. The current study examines how Indonesia learners acquire the third person singular –s morpheme while learning English as Foreign Language (EFL). This study also enlightens a certain amount of reasons behind the difficulty that Indonesia learners meet while learning the morpheme. Hence, even though there are numerous

investigations regarding the acquisition of morpheme, however, no investigation to the command of the authors has investigated “the acquisition of inflectional morpheme *-s* in the third person singular present” focusing on Indonesia EFL learners.

2. TENSE AND AGREEMENT MARKINGS IN ENGLISH AND INDONESIA

Morphological markings in English embrace both inflectional morphemes (affixal inflections), for example the third person singular present morpheme *-s* and the regular past tense morpheme *-ed*, and uninflectional morphemes (suppletive inflections) for example the auxiliary or copula *be*. The marking *-s* can be inflected for person and tense (as exemplified in sentence a). The marking *-ed* can be inflected for tense (as exemplified in sentence b). The auxiliary *be* and copula *be* can be inflected for

both person and number (as exemplified in sentence c, d). Instances regarding abstract features and their surface forms can be described as follows:

- a. Zalfa always eats a biscuit at bedtime. *-s* → third person singular; simple present tense
- b. Zalfa walked home. “*-ed*” → 3rd person; simple past tense
- c. Zalfa is sleeping. “*is*” → 3rd person singular auxiliary; present progressive tense
- d. Zalfa is a nice girl. “*is*” → 3rd person singular copula; simple present tense

Strictly speaking, English has both tense and agreement features, whereas Indonesia language lacks both. Table 1 suggests the divergence between null morphemes (also called zero morphemes), described as cases in which the abstract feature is present while it is not obviously realized to the surface structure and the absence of morphemes, described as an instance in which the abstract feature is simply not present in the fundamental syntactic representation.

TABLE 1. Divergence between Null Morphemes and Absence of Morphemes

Null morphemes	Absence of morphemes
English agreement feature	Absence of agreement feature in Indonesia
<i>I come to Surabaya.</i>	<i>Dia – tiba – di – Surabaya</i> <i>He – come – to – Surabaya</i>
1 st person , singular number , simple present tense	‘He comes to Surabaya’

With reference to the agreement feature, English verbs are inflected for the agreement feature, which is based on morphological system realized as inflectional bound morpheme *-s* with third-person singular pronouns. Yet, in Indonesia, there is no obvious reflection of the agreement person in Indonesia and English can be shown in Table 2.

feature, and verbs are not inflected for person. Contrasting with English, Indonesia verbs are not inflected to show 1st person ‘*saya*,’ 2nd person ‘*kamu*’ and 3rd person singular ‘*dia*’ and remain in the unchanged form. An instance of the verb, *come* with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd

TABLE 2. Verb Inflections Using Person In Indonesia And English

Person and Number	English Pronoun	Indonesia Pronoun	Simple present verb ‘ <i>come</i> ’	
			Indonesia	English
1 st person singular	I	Saya	Saya <i>tiba</i>	I <i>come</i>
2 nd person singular	You	Kamu	Kamu <i>tiba</i>	You <i>come</i>
3 rd person singular	He/She	Dia	Dia <i>tiba</i>	He <i>comes</i>

As can be perceived, the realization regarding tense and agreement features is divergent between Indonesia and English. In English, verbs are absolutely inflected for both tense and agreement. Indonesia has an impoverished morphological

system, and its verbs are not inflected to indicate those features. Besides, contextual information determines temporal interpretation, for example temporal adverbs, and the verb in Indonesia remains the same with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person. Overall,

Indonesia is tenseless language and has no obvious reflection regarding both tense and agreement features. Divergences in how abstract properties are realized towards their surface forms between Indonesia and English may perhaps bring on complications among Indonesia – speaking learners in acquiring morphological marking –s showing the third person singular present.

2.1 The Third Person Singular Present Morpheme –s

In words of [4] verbs in English marked with third person singular pronouns are generally inflected with the morphological marking –s, usually associated with either a number concord marking or verbal agreement. Even though the third person singular present –s morpheme is frequently associated with the simple present tense morpheme, if or not the morpheme actually carries tense at all has been much argued in the writings. Some experts such as [5] and [6] giving their reasons that the simple present tense is more often marked by morpheme –ing in the present progressive, with the –s morpheme marking generic aspect. However, although if it is deemed a transporter of tense or not, there is verbal agreement that –s morpheme can simply be marked by the third person singular of a verbal form and is not marked by any other subject. Additionally, it absolutely designates both number and person.

Studies maintain that the third person singular inflection, i.e. morpheme –s, seems to be regarded as an introductory notion for foreign language learners because [7] claims it becomes one of the initial grammatical rules taught by teachers to EFL learners in general at a very early phase of their language learning. [8] Affirms that though both researchers and EFL teachers look to agree in the actuality that the rule of third person singular morpheme –s is very straightforward, yet there is some variability in its utilization by learners, and it looks that no many students who apply the rule. [8] further contends that although L2/EFL learners possess an advanced level of English, they can meet some difficulties in mastering the use of third person singular morpheme –s. Concerning with learners' difficulties, there are two different types of difficulty learners face, i.e. the difficulty in internalizing a grammatical feature and the difficulty in acquiring the skill to use this feature correctly in communication. Based on [2] that most learners meet no difficulty in understanding the rule of third person singular morpheme –s, but they meet many difficulties to internalize this structure in using it correctly.

In study of [9], the author tested morpheme –s in the third person singular, morpheme –ed in the regular past, the copula “be”, and also investigate how Chinese students of English acquired these three morphemes. It is acknowledged that Chinese language has no tense or agreement marking. The subjects of the study were twenty Chinese-speaking learners who aged between 11 up to 14 years old and had been studying English as Second Language for 4 till 7 years. The results showed that simply 17% of the subjects employed morpheme –s in the third person singular correctly whereas 78% omitted it. The study attributes this failure to negative transfer. Moreover, learners' choice of uninflected verbs for third person singular personal pronouns used in simple present tense has been pointed as the most common lack in previous study too. To give one additional instance, some studies found out in EFL learners' written data that omission of inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular had a great deal higher numbers than other forms of incorrect usage. Additionally, subjects were observed to overgeneralize the morpheme –s to either first person singular or third person plural pronouns, but these instances were too infrequent to be statistically significant.

Some studies revealed that third person singular present morpheme –s occupied the uppermost rate in terms of complexity of language acquisition [10]. Moreover, innumerable assumptions were put forward that what may be the potential factors for mother tongue (MT) learners [11]. There is seemingly lack of researches handling the continuing argument of what are the primary causes of possessing complexity in acquiring third person singular present morpheme –s. For this reason, the present study aims to examine the Indonesia EFL learners' difficulty when learning target language and to figure out the potential factors causing the learners hard to acquire third person singular present morpheme –s.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The descriptive method and the qualitative research approach were used in the analysis of the acquisition regarding inflectional morpheme (IM)–s in the third person singular present (TPSP) in the written and oral production of Indonesia – speaking seventh grade middle school students.

3.1. Research question

Does Indonesia language as Indonesia learners' mother tongue (L1) deeply affect acquisition of inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular present?

3.2. Participants

The participants were 30 Indonesia – speaking seventh grade middle school students who aged 12 and 13 years old. They comprised of 15 males and 15 females and have been studying at public school; SMPN 1 Galis – Pamekasan. The middle school students have been studying materials of English, including simple present tense, for a year. They had English as Target Language instruction for four hours every week. All subjects lived in the same region, Galis – Pamekasan, had similar social, and educational backgrounds. The subjects have never been took part in any extracurricular activity of English language except in the school.

3.3. Data collection and instruments

In the present study, the first data was the participants’ oral output that was gained through a classroom activity and the second data was the participants’ written output in the form of

presentation tasks. Both the subjects’ written and oral output were used together since it was not adequate to analyze data gained from merely one of them in terms of the inflectional morpheme –s acquisition.

3.4. Procedure

The classroom teacher gave presentation and practice sessions regarding the simple present tense unit concerning with “Day-to-Day Routine Activities”. After completing this activity, the teacher pedagogically performed “Subjects Does What” as a positive activity for the participants (as seen in Table 3). By implementing this activity, the participants got chances to make the various verbs on the day-to-day routine activities chart with all subject pronouns as well as the English target morpheme, viz; third person singular present –s. The participants were asked to make 5 sentences dealing with the day-to-day routine activities.

TABLE 3. *Day-to-Day Routine Activities*

Subjects	Does	What
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Each participant was given every chance to employ as many as possible of subject pronouns such as *he, she*, or the name of the participant’s family, friends even neighbors (in Subjects column) with the English simple present verbs referring to the action of the day-to-day routines activities (in Does column). Before the participants gave their written work results to the class, the teacher prepared a best digital voice recorder to record their oral output by interviewing them individual by individual. In this interview session, all participants were asked to be engaged in a conversation, it is regarding day-to-day routine activities, with the teacher. While performing the conversation, they were asked some questions related to the daily activities and answered them spontaneously.

with the performance of their day-to-day routines activities but also the various subject pronouns. After having carried out the research, it was found that the participants used inflectional morpheme –s in the third person singular present incorrectly such as;

- My mother *work* in office today
- Kiki *cook* in kitchen today
- Ahsan *feed* his cat
- Ardi *play* football
- My uncle *watch* motoGp
- Bintang *swim* in the pool
- Bening *sleep* in the badroom
- My brother *have* many cats

As mentioned previously that Indonesia language has an impoverished morphological system, its verbs are not inflected for agreement features. Due to the absence of verbal agreement in Indonesia language, the students were likely to drop the inflectional morpheme –s, as in ‘Ardi *play* football’, ‘Bintang *swim* in the pool’. The students should use “plays” as opposed to “play” or “swims” as opposed to “swim” yet the students do not attach morpheme –s in the verb “play” or “swim” as verbs

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The elicited participants’ written task

The purpose of this task is to provide written contexts for the use of target morphemes, viz: third-person singular present –s attached in verbs. Moreover, the participants were given many chances to write not only the various verbs that are associated

in Indonesia language are not inflected to show 1st person 'saya,' 2nd person 'kamu' and 3rd person singular 'dia' and the verbs remain in the same form.

Another examples of incorrect use of the third person singular present morpheme *-s* are :

- Fatin *studies* in school every day
- Mrs Mini teacher student in school today
- Rani *swimming* every Sunday
- Farhan *lates* go school
- My father *like* to *rides* bycycle
- My teacher *will teaches* me about English lesson
- My grandmother *studys* to be a chef
- Fanny *invite* me to *watches* movie in Bioskop
- My uncle *wash's* the car
- My sister *eat's* meat every Saturday
- Saiful *eat's* soto in the restaurant

Some students were lack of mastering the third person singular present morpheme *-s* usage. They were also It makes them difficult to attach inflectional morpheme *-s* to the verbs as in "My father *like* to *rides* bycycle" (*like* to *rides* should be *likes* to *ride*), "My uncle *wash's* the car" (*wash's* should be *washes*). Besides they were not good at the rule of attaching the target morpheme for certain verbs as in "Fatin *studies* in school every day" (*studies* should be *studies*). Moreover, the student seemingly faced the complication to apply to apply the rules of English as Target Language and attempted to reduce his / her linguistics burden by overgeneralizing the rule with the third person singular present morpheme *-s* as in "My teacher *will teaches* [*teach*] me about English lesson" and "Fanny invite me to *watches* [*watch*] movie in Bioskop"

4. 2 The elicited participants' oral task

Each individual student was engaged in a conversation with the teacher. The conversation topic covered regarding the day-to-day routine activities. While performing the conversation, they were asked some questions related to the daily activities and answered them spontaneously. A sample of the conversation is shown below:

Example

Teacher: How are you today ?

Student : I am fine, thank you, and you Sir?

Teacher: Fine too, by the way do you have breakfast before going to school ?

Student : Emm.....I not breakfast if I want go to school

Teacher : Oh... I see, how about your father ?

Does he have breakfast before going to his office ? [present tense, verbal agreement]

Student : Yes... My father have [*has*] breakfast before to his office.

Teacher : Does your father go to his office by bicycle ? [present tense, verbal agreement]

Student : No.. My father go [*goes*] to office use [*by*] motorcycle

In the spontaneous talk, the student seemed to be not aware of using the correct inflectional morpheme *-s* to the verbs such as "have" and "go". This erroneous use of the target morpheme was affected by the student's mother tongue rule. Because in Indonesia language does not have the rule of adding suffix *-s* to the verbs. Accordingly, the student omitted the target morpheme from the verb.

5. CONCLUSION

According to [12] that investigation on L2 morpheme acquisition has revealed that the third person singular present tense inflection brings on persistent complications for learners even at more advanced stages of aptitude. Therefore, it is not astonishing that the participants of this investigation, although they have ever studied materials of English, including simple present tense yet they were complicated in acquiring the inflectional morpheme *-s* in the third person singular present. It means that they have not yet completely absorbed the use of the third person singular present morpheme *-s*. Moreover, the complication of the acquisition of the third person singular present morpheme *-s* resulting in erroneous sentences may be associated with negative transfer. This means that Indonesia students are greatly affected by the previous command of their mother tongue.

REFERENCES

- [1] G. Yule, *The Study of Language*, Third Edit. New York: Cambridge university press, 2006.
- [2] P. Robinson and N. C. Ellis, *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- [3] G. Yule, *The Study of Language*, Seventh Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2020.
- [4] V. E. Johnson, J. G. de Villiers, and H. N. Seymour, "Agreement without understanding? The case of third person singular/s," *First Lang.*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 317-330, 2005.

- [5] J. D. Bobaljik, "Realizing Germanic Inflection: Why Morphology Does Not Drive Syntax," *J. Comp. Ger. Linguist.*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 129–167, 2002.
- [6] U. Sauerland, "The present tense is vacuous," *Snippets*, vol. 6, no. 11, pp. 12–13, 2002.
- [7] S. D. Krashen, "Principles and practice in second language acquisition," pp. 1–111, 1982.
- [8] J. L. Hieronymus, "ASCII phonetic symbols for the world's languages: Worldbet," *J. Int. Phon. Assoc.*, vol. 23, p. 72, 1993.
- [9] F.-T. Hsieh, "The acquisition of English agreement/tense morphology and copula be by L1-Chinese-speaking learners," in *Papers from the Lancaster University Postgraduate Conference in Linguistics & Language Teaching*, 2009, vol. 3, pp. 45–59.
- [10] T. Vanderweide, W. O'Grady, M. Aronoff, and J. Rees-Miller, *Study Guide for Contemporary Linguistics*. Macmillan, 2004.
- [11] T. Beyer and C. L. Hudson Kam, "Some cues are stronger than others: The (non) interpretation of 3rd person present—s as a tense marker by 6-and 7-year-olds," *First Lang.*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 208–227, 2009.
- [12] M. Celce-Murcia, D. Larsen-Freeman, and H. A. Williams, *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Newbury House Rowley, MA, 1983.