

Underlying Knowledge vs. Surface Realization: A Study of Oral and Written Competence of the Third Person Singular -s in L2 English

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Abstract—This study was an attempt to analyze an elicited set of data from a second-language speaker of English. The informant was an Arab female student living in an English-speaking country who has had English-language training in an intensive English-language program for approximately one year. The purpose of the study was to identify the utterances, phrases, or dialogues that contain the use of the third-person singular -s (3SG -s) morpheme and investigate the patterns and reasons for the informant's use of 3SG -s in light of the missing surface inflection hypothesis (MSIH). The research examined the informant's underlying knowledge of the simple present tense to determine whether the resulting oral production reflected that knowledge. The study utilized two instruments to collect the data: a picture-based task and a sentence completion task. Although the results revealed no significant discrepancy between the informant's oral and written productions, the study offers explications from other instances in which the 3SG -s was incorrectly used or omitted. While additional tests are needed, the study provides insights for English-language teaching professionals and classroom practices.

Index Terms—third person singular -s, first language (L1), English as a second language (ESL), English language learners, teaching

I. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Errors in the acquisition of English morphological grammar by second-language (L2) learners are attributable to several reasons. Relative research in the field assumes that the differences between the first language (L1) and the second language are the primary reason for these errors. This is especially likely if the L1 has significant differences in its morphological system. Learners have an underlying knowledge and judgment of the proper functional use of grammatical tense. However, they show variable language productions regarding inflectional morphology by deleting the inflection or using an ungrammatical substitute for a given morpheme. This means that the underlying representation is correct, but the surface representation in actual speech does not reflect the underlying knowledge. This failure to produce correct language forms is due to difficulty in accessing the relevant items of inflection, particularly in oral production (White, 2010, p. 9). Learners have no difficulty in acquiring the base knowledge to use for making morphemes, but they are often unable to match this knowledge to its correct rule and function. The result is a tendency to resort to the simplest uninflected forms, which yields ungrammatical utterances.

One of these morphemes is the third-person singular -s (3SG -s). The 3SG -s is a morphological marker used to indicate the simple present tense with the subject pronouns “he,” “she,” and “it” and with singular nouns (e.g., “he makes,” “John runs”). English as a second language (ESL) learners whose L1 has a different inflectional system find a significant challenge in the acquisition of the 3SG -s in English. This paper focuses on the difficulties presented in using this morpheme (particularly by Arab ESL learners) and the underlying factors that contribute to this difficulty.

A. Challenges in Language Acquisition

As a fundamental grammatical rule in English, the 3SG -s is an essential morpheme for subject–verb agreement in the present tense. Among the challenging elements in learning English, the primary factors affecting the correct acquisition of this morpheme are the influence of the learner's L1, the learner's cognitive ability while learning, and the mastering of the phonological properties associated with this morpheme's position in a word. This influence could lead to inaccuracies in the learner's speech—a linguistic phenomenon known as interlanguage. Interlanguage is a linguistic system used by L2 learners in which their L2 speech has features of their native language and the target language. As a result of interlanguage, learners may omit some language features, such as the 3SG -s, in both spoken and written production, even if they have an explicit underlying knowledge of the correct grammatical rule (Lardiere, 1998; Ionin & Wexler, 2002). This discrepancy indicates that the issue lies with producing the language rather than understanding the grammatical rules. The current study explores whether the learner's underlying knowledge of linguistic rules influences their language production.

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B. Present Tense Inflectional Systems in English and Arabic

The 3SG -s morpheme is arguably the least accurately used morpheme by L2 learners (Shin & Milroy, 1999). In English, inflection of the verb is based on subject–verb agreement, and this includes adding the 3SG -s to the simple present verb as a prefix. For Arab ESL learners, a possible reason for omitting the 3SG -s is that Arabic has a richer inflectional morphology compared with English (Bolotin, 1995). This allows for freer word order in the sentence, which is not possible in English. The freer word order in Arabic permits switching between elements in the sentence without changing the meaning or, more importantly, the grammatical function. In addition, the grammatical relation between these elements is realized through morphological inflections rather than fixed word order. The following two sentences illustrate that different word order does not necessarily change the meaning:

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF FREE WORD ORDER IN ARABIC

	أحمد	يكتب	الرسالة
1.	'ʔahmad	jæktubu	ʔar:isælah
	Ahmad	writes	the letter
2.	يكتب	أحمد	الرسالة
	jæktubu	'ʔahmad	ʔar:isælah
	writes	Ahmad	the letter

Sentence (1) starts with the subject “Ahmad” followed by the verb /jæktubu/ (“he writes”), while sentence (2) starts with the verb followed by the subject. In Arabic, the subject and verb must agree on number, gender, person, and tense. This agreement is indicated by using a prefix attached to the verb root. In Table 1, the prefix "يـ" /jæ/ is attached to the root “katab” (“to write”) and is used in the present tense if the subject is a singular masculine. This prefix is one of four letters known as the “present tense letters,” which are ن، ب، ت، أ. A verb in the present tense must start with one of these four letters as a prefix. These letters are used differently in the present tense verb based on gender and person and whether the subject is singular, dual, or plural. This difference in inflectional systems between Arabic and English is considered a chief factor that interferes with the accuracy of ESL production.

C. Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis

One of the theoretical frameworks in second-language acquisition (SLA) that attempts to explain why ESL learners omit inflectional morphemes is the missing surface inflection hypothesis (MSIH). This hypothesis posits that while L2 learners possess the required underlying knowledge of grammatical rules, their language production often does not reflect that knowledge and, therefore, they fail to apply it in surface-level language, both spoken and written (Lardiere, 1998). The MSIH also posits that the omission of inflectional morphemes in L2 might be a performance issue rather than a lack of underlying knowledge of the inflectional rules, and this performance issue could be attributable to insufficient practice or processing constraints. In the case of the 3SG -s, omission can be attributed to several factors besides the learner’s L1 influence, including limited salience of the morpheme, similar phonological features of the base and the inflected verbs, and the complexity of the communicative situation (Lardiere, 1998).

Variable use of inflections can also be observed and explained by the MSIH. Learners may sometimes use the correct inflectional forms but at other times omit them or use them incorrectly, and this can occur in the same context. This inconsistency is indicative of the discrepancy between the learners’ underlying knowledge of the correct rule and their surface language production. Another observation is the differential acquisition of the inflectional forms: Learners tend to master the use of some inflectional morphemes compared with others, or they may acquire some morphemes earlier than others. As mentioned, this could be influenced by factors such as the salience of the morpheme, the frequency of use, or the degree of complexity surrounding a morpheme’s use (Haznedar & Schwartz, 1997; Goad et al., 2003).

D. Previous Studies on the Use of 3SG -s by Arab ESL Learners

Previous studies have analyzed the use of 3SG -s by Arab ESL learners. Muftah and Rafik-Galea (2013) adapted an error analysis method to investigate interlanguage errors in the simple present tense in English by adult Arab English-language learners, focusing on the use of 3SG -s. The researchers collected the data using two methods: a grammaticality judgment task (GJT) that involved grammatical and ungrammatical language forms, and an elicited written production task (EWPT). The purpose was to test the participants’ underlying knowledge of simple present tense rules. The findings revealed that the adult Arab ESL learners had difficulty mastering the use of 3SG -s because of L1 interference. A study by Btoosh (2019) focused on tense and aspect as used in the academic writing of Arab L2 learners of English. Btoosh investigated the omission or addition of the 3SG -s based on a comparative and quantitative measurement of learners’ corpus and a similar size native corpus. Among the study’s findings, inconsistency was found in language forms attributed to the omission or addition of the 3SG -s due to several factors, including limited exposure to correct L2 forms, language transfer, and overgeneralization. In another study, Khelalef and Frioui (2020) investigated errors in 3SG -s use by Algerian university students learning English. Their study employed a writing task, and the results revealed that intralingual transfer influenced the erroneous use of the simple present in the writing production of the students. The study also revealed that the most common error committed by students was omission of the 3SG -s. A study by Ahmed (2022) focused on the degree of competence of advanced Arab speakers of English in using the 3SG -s

and whether they continued to make errors using it. Ahmed's data collection methods involved writing task samples and a recorded speaking sample. The results showed that the advanced Arab learners of English still made errors in their writing, neglecting the use of the 3SG -s more than they did with the recorded speaking sample. These prior studies provide an understanding of the factors affecting the use of the 3SG -s by Arab ESL learners. However, only one study found in related literature that compared spoken and written production of the 3SG -s to investigate underlying knowledge against surface representation. The current study adds to the literature from a context of a Saudi ESL learner and provides an explication of how this morpheme is internalized and used.

E. Objectives of the Current Study

One of the foundational areas of grammatical competency in ESL acquisition, mastery of the simple present tense in English still poses challenges to Arab learners. The causes behind these challenges have been investigated, results have been drawn, and suggestions have been proffered. However, the core of this problem lies in the fact that the acquisition of the 3SG -s morpheme is influenced by both internal (underlying knowledge) and external (surface representation) factors. The internal factor is what learners internalize in their linguistic capacity as a result of their classroom learning process. In other words, their surface language production depends on the quality and quantity of pedagogical implementations they receive. The external factor is represented by whether there is an influence of L1 on the morphosyntactic and phonological acquisition of the 3SG -s. Considering both internal and external factors will provide a better understanding of the problem and can inform researchers and classroom practices—objectives that the current study has sought to achieve.

Given the current literature on the use of the 3SG -s by Arab ESL learners, it is evident that few studies have focused solely on using this morpheme, particularly in the Saudi context. Therefore, the current study sought to advance this area of SLA within the Saudi context and attempted to explicate factors leading to its erroneous use, as well as offer practical suggestions for tackling these challenges. Thus, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. Investigate whether the informant's underlying knowledge of the 3SG -s morpheme is reflected in her surface-level speech.
2. Analyze and explicate instances from the data, if any, containing errors in using the 3SG -s morpheme in different contexts.
3. Highlight pedagogical implications for ESL instructors and classroom practices in general.

II. METHODS

A. The Study Participant

The participant in this study was a 26-year-old Arab female student studying ESL in an intensive English program in the United States. At the time of data collection, she had had English-language training for approximately 15 months in addition to language exposure in real-world scenarios. The participant's age, as well as her length of exposure to English, made this participant a fit candidate for the purpose of the study.

The researcher opted for a single participant for several reasons. First, using a single participant permits a detailed, in-depth analysis of the interlanguage phenomenon and facilitates the exploration of other features that larger-scale studies might overlook. Second, since pedagogical practices in general, and language classrooms in specific, often focus on individual differences, it is useful to highlight and document unique features of an individual's SLA. Since SLA is an individualized learning process, the single-case experiment in this study can also help reveal the variability in differences in language acquisition and provide a contextualized understanding of specific factors affecting 3SG -s use. Third, working with a single participant makes it easier to use a variety of data collection instruments, and it can be more manageable for timing purposes, allowing researchers to obtain multifaceted data. Studies that use multiple participants may not offer this flexibility.

B. Data Collection

The data was collected using a picture-based task and a sentence completion task. The tasks were adopted from various resources, including Brown's and Abeywickrama's *Language Assessment* (2019), and they were modified to accommodate this study. The study incorporated both tasks because they provide a comprehensive assessment of proficiency level for 3SG -s use, which can help inform related research. Combining visual and linguistic elements can help assess multiple cognitive processes in one setting. This is especially true when using picture clues, which can stimulate the participant to produce natural and spontaneous grammatical structures without overly depending on prior knowledge. The sentence completion task, however, provides a more structured, controlled task for investigating interlanguage features (Gass et al., 2020). Combining both tools can provide insights into the participant's implicit and explicit knowledge. While the purpose of the study was to explore the participant's underlying knowledge of the 3SG -s against her actual surface production, the combination of both tasks enhances the validity of the obtained data. It allows for data triangulation as well as alleviation of participant anxiety that could result from using only one task, namely the sentence completion task (Gass & Mackey, 2013).

(a). Picture-Based Task

For the picture-based task, the informant was presented with six pictures, and each picture depicted a series of events. The informant’s task was to orally narrate the sequence of events that the pictures showed. The task was untimed so that the informant would have an ample amount of time to look at each picture and then narrate the story as she looked at the pictures. The purpose was to stimulate the production of more natural speech and mitigate any anxiety or pressure as a result of a time limit. When presented with each picture, the informant was asked a question in the present tense to stimulate and elicit responses in the present tense. If she needed help with vocabulary, she could ask for which word to use. If it was a verb, she would only be provided with the base form of that verb, and she would have to conjugate it. The utterances were recorded and transcribed. The number of utterances was then calculated and recorded based on whether the 3SG -s was used correctly or omitted from the verbs.

(b). *Sentence-Completion Task*

In addition to the picture task, the informant was presented with a sentence completion task that consisted of four parts. The purpose of this part of data collection was to assess the informant’s underlying knowledge of the 3SG -s and compare it to her oral performance on the picture-based task. In the first part of this task, the informant was asked to complete sentences using non-conjugated verbs and use them to fill in the blanks with varied subjects in each sentence. The purpose was to determine whether using different subjects affected verb choices. Four verbs were used in this part, and they varied in being transitive and intransitive as well as dynamic and stative. In addition, the task varied the word-final phonology for each verb after adding the 3SG -s by the participant to determine whether addition or omission of the morpheme was influenced by phonological constraints. Table 2 details this process:

TABLE 2
DETAILS OF SENTENCE-COMPLETION TASK (PART 1)

Sentence	Type of subject	Type of verb	Word-final phonology after adding 3SG -s
1	Pronoun	Transitive-dynamic	/z/
2	Noun phrase-singular	intransitive-dynamic	/nz/
3	Gerund	Transitive-dynamic	/ɪz/
4	Noun phrase-plural	intransitive-stative	/vz/

In the second part of the sentence completion task, the informant was asked to form negative sentences where necessary using the verbs provided in the blanks. The purpose was to determine whether auxiliary verb choices in the simple present tense were matched with the correct subjects and if any other elements in the sentence influenced these choices. The informant was provided with four verbs to use, and each sentence included a different subject, as the focus here was on whether the 3SG -s was used or omitted when the negative auxiliary was present in the same sentence.

In the third part of this task, the informant was asked to form questions based on prompts and clues provided. The purpose was to determine whether the knowledge regarding question formation in the simple present tense varied from that of statements in both “wh-” and yes/no questions. This part consisted of four prompts, and the informant was asked to draft a question based on the information provided by the prompt. This part of the task also used varied subjects and question words to evaluate how the 3SG -s was used along with auxiliary verbs.

In the fourth part of the task, the informant was presented with seven sentences with varying degrees of structure and complexity and was asked to give the correct present tense form of the verb provided for each sentence. The purpose of this task was to test the informant’s knowledge of verbs in longer sentences as well as with noun–adjective combinations and plural nouns to determine whether this influenced the verb formation.

While some may argue that sentence completion tasks are metalinguistic in nature, they are useful in providing a controlled and uniform elicitation tool targeting specific grammatical forms; in this case, the 3SG -s. The data obtained from using this type of data collection tool is useful in exploring ESL learners’ underlying knowledge of grammatical rules and identifying where this knowledge of rules is internalized or lacking. In addition, utilizing this task can help minimize irrelevant factors posed by the picture-based task—which can influence how the 3SG -s is used—such as the informant’s lexical competence, her sentence-formation competence, and the context of the communication.

III. RESULTS

The main objective of the current study was to assess the informant’s underlying knowledge of the 3SG -s morpheme and assess whether this knowledge was accurately reflected in her actual surface-level speech. To achieve this, the study utilized two data collection instruments: a picture-based task to assess the informant’s surface representation of the morpheme, and a sentence completion task to assess her underlying knowledge. The findings from both tasks were analyzed to determine whether there were any discrepancies between the performances on the two tasks.

In the picture-based task, the informant produced a total of 35 sentences for the six pictures presented to her. Of these 35 sentences, six contained either omissions or incorrect applications of the 3SG -s morpheme in verbs. Most of the verbs she used in this task were in the simple present tense except for two verbs for which she used the simple past tense. In this task, the 3SG -s morpheme was correctly used approximately 82% of the time, indicating the informant’s high level of awareness of the rule.

For the sentence completion task, the total number of sentences presented to the informant across all four parts of the task was 19 sentences. Of these, only three instances revealed an omission or ungrammatical use of the 3SG *-s* morpheme. These three instances occurred in the third part of the task, which required the informant to formulate questions using prompts. In this task, the morpheme was correctly used approximately 84% of the time, also indicating a high level of accuracy.

Findings from both tasks were then analyzed to uncover any relationship between them indicating whether underlying knowledge was reflected in surface speech. Fisher's Exact Test was employed because of the small sample size of the study. This test was well-suited to the current study because the purpose was to compare categorical outcomes from both tasks (correct vs. incorrect). Figure 1 shows the frequencies of the correct-vs.-incorrect use of the 3SG *-s* morpheme from each task:

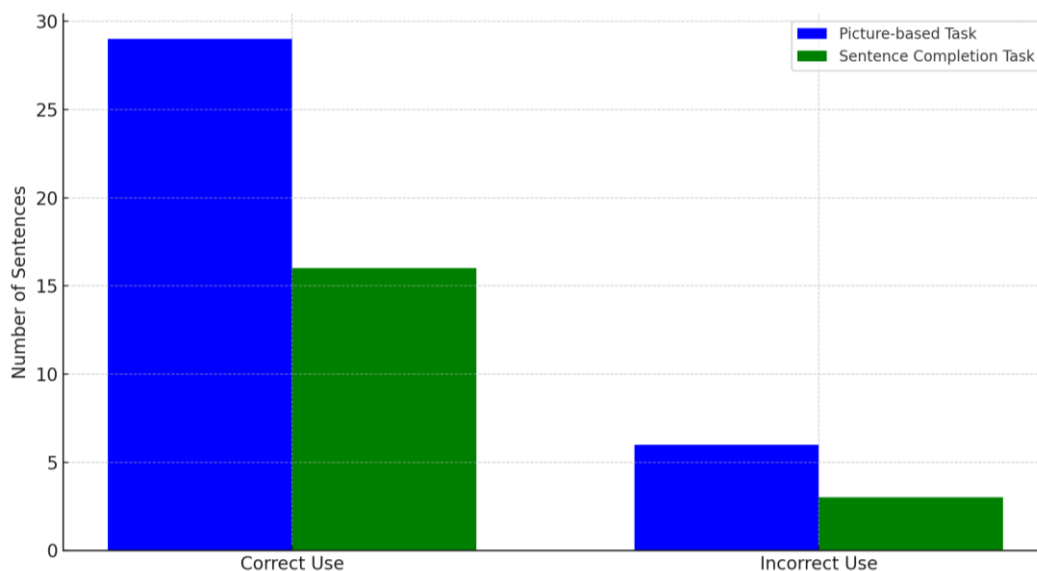


Figure 1. Comparison of Correct and Incorrect Use of the 3SG *-s* in Both Tasks

The results from Fisher's Exact Test revealed no statistically significant difference ($p = 1.0$) in the informant's use of the 3SG *-s* across the two tasks. Additionally, the odds ratio was 0.91, indicating that the probability of correctly using the 3SG *-s* morpheme was similar between both tasks.

The findings did not reveal a significant difference between the informant's underlying knowledge of the rule and her oral performance. Instead, they showed a similar consistency in using the 3SG *-s* across the two tasks, indicating a steady level of competence across the different contexts used in the experiments. This consistency implied that her underlying knowledge of the 3SG *-s* rules in English was reflected in her actual surface-level production. However, the data involved interesting instances in which the 3SG *-s* was either misapplied or omitted, and these are discussed in the next section.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Picture-Based Task

As the results revealed no statistically significant difference between underlying knowledge and surface representation of the 3SG *-s* morpheme, this section analyzes examples from the data that involved omission or incorrect use of the morpheme. In addition, a comparison is made against instances that were grammatically correct. These results are discussed in light of the MSIH.

Throughout the picture tasks, the informant's general performance demonstrated that she was aware of using the correct verb form in the present tense when narrating the story even though she had not been prompted to use a specific tense before starting the task. The task was introduced with the first picture, which required the informant to describe a man's morning routine. Here, the goal was to stimulate the production of simple vocabulary items and sentence structure. Among the six sentences the informant produced for this picture, two sentences involved misusing the 3SG *-s* morpheme:

1. *The first thing, he *wokes* up at 7:00
2. *He eats his food... No! He *ates* his food

In Example 1, the 3SG *-s* morpheme was incorrectly applied to a past tense verb form, indicating overgeneralization of the rule. Similarly, Example 2 shows a self-correction by the informant from a correct verb form ("eats") to an incorrect one ("ates"). Both examples show that the informant was aware of which rule to use, but in this instance, she failed to retrieve the correct form. Such overgeneralization of the rule aligns with the MSIH—suggesting that

performance factors may interfere with surface production and result in misapplication of the rule—but it is not indicative of the informant's underlying knowledge of the 3SG *-s* rule. This knowledge is reflected in the other sentences in which the informant used the rule correctly for the remainder of the picture description:

3. He *takes* a shower... *wears* his clothes...*eats* his breakfast...and *goes* to his work.

In Example 3, the informant's awareness of the rule was consistent across all four verbs, demonstrating her ability to correctly apply her knowledge of the rule when performance factors, such as cognitive load or context complexity, are minimal.

The remaining five pictures of the task were more demanding on syntactical and lexical levels. That is, the events in the pictures, when narrated by the informant, required the use of more complex vocabulary items and sentence structures. The purpose was to determine whether using such complexity factors had an impact on her surface production. A total of 29 sentences were produced for these pictures. Among those sentences, four sentences revealed omission of the 3SG *-s* morpheme. The number of incorrect examples increased in most of the informant's sentences for these pictures. Examples include the following:

4. *The boy *try* to catch his friend...
5. *The farmer of the farm *find* him...
6. *...and then she *decide* to walk outside
7. *She *think* that...

These examples demonstrate that the informant overgeneralized the use of the base form of the verb in the sentences even though the subjects were all in the third-person singular. One reason for omitting the 3SG *-s* in all of the examples was the L1 influence. As mentioned, the use of the present tense in Arabic involves using four letters as prefixes, called حروف المضارعة, which means "the present tense letters" (أ، ي، ت، ن). These letters are attached at the beginning of the base present tense verb depending on the gender and person of the subject and whether the subject is singular, dual, or plural. For the third person, only one letter is used (ي/ج). This prefix is used with all subjects regardless of number (singular, dual, or plural) or gender (masculine or feminine) except in the singular and dual feminine, in which case ت/ت is used. Thus, the use of the prefix ي/ج in Arabic does not typically change by changing the third-person subject. In English, however, the use of the 3SG *-s* is dependent on which subject is used in the sentence. This difference between the informant's L1 and L2 could explain why she opted for the use of the simple form for most of the verbs. As the MSIH proposes, the lack of a corresponding form in the informant's L1 is a factor that contributes to such an error. Arabic does not inflect the present tense the same way English does. In fact, while English requires the use of a suffix in this case, Arabic requires the use of a prefix. This discrepancy in morphosyntactic positioning might have led to this type of error. In addition, the unmarked phonological properties of the 3SG *-s* morpheme could have made it more prone to omission. This can also lead to other possible factors that might have played a role in the informant's speech. For example, the informant may have prioritized the delivery of a correct meaning at the expense of producing accurate grammatical structures. This could have resulted from the cognitive load the informant underwent during the task. In conclusion, the analysis from the picture-based task shows that although the informant shows an understanding of the 3SG *-s* in less complex contexts, her errors in more demanding conditions can be attributed to L1 influence, cognitive load, and the morphosyntactic differences between Arabic and English. All these factors support MSIH about performance and surface representation in second language acquisition.

B. Sentence Completion Task

This task was presented to the informant in four questions. The informant was not notified in advance of either the contents or purpose of the task. In the first question, the informant was asked to complete four sentences using only one verb from a list of un conjugated verbs. The subjects used in the sentences were singular and plural to test the informant's judgment of when to use the 3SG *-s*. The informant answered all of the questions for this part correctly:

8. I don't often *play* tennis.
9. The barbershop *opens* in 30 minutes.
10. Smoking *causes* cancer.
11. My friends *live* in a small dorm.

For the second part, the informant was given a list of four un conjugated verbs as well, and she was asked to put them in four sentences where the negative may be necessary. The purpose of this task was to test the informant on the auxiliaries for negation with different subjects. The informant answered all of the questions correctly:

12. At Bub's, they *make* delicious burgers.
13. Some people *don't believe* the news.
14. Arabic *doesn't read* from left to right.
15. Vegetarians *don't eat* meat.

In the third part, the informant was asked to formulate four questions based on prompts about John and his family. This part targets the use of "wh-" and yes/no questions in the present tense along with the auxiliaries "do" and "does." using different subjects. The informant failed to form grammatically correct questions in three of the questions, either omitting or using the wrong auxiliary. However, she formed one grammatical question, opting for the present tense of *BE* instead of using the main verb included in the prompt "does," as in Example 18:

16. *Do your brother go to the library?

17. *Which a class does you go every day?
18. What's your father's job?
19. *Where your grandparents live?

Interestingly, the informant used the auxiliary verbs “do” and “does” correctly in the second part of the task (with negatives) but failed to do so in the third part (with interrogatives). This suggests the informant had internalized the subject–verb agreement rule in the present tense but that her surface-level production in question formation was hindered. Compared with question formulation, the second part of the task was less challenging and required lower cognitive processing. The informant did not have to structure a new sentence but simply had to match the correct auxiliary verb based on the subject. However, formulating questions was more syntactically demanding, requiring the correct placement and inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb. Moreover, since Arabic only requires question words with no auxiliaries when forming questions, this suggests that L1 interference might have caused the errors.

For the last part of this task, the informant was asked to conjugate the verbs and fill in the blanks with the correct form based on the subject of the sentence. This last part focused on the use of the 3SG *-s* in longer sentences as well as with noun–adjective combinations and adverbs of time in three of the sentences. The informant answered all of the sentences correctly. In Example 23, however, she opted for the simple past tense instead of the present:

20. College towns *bring* students from different places.
21. When I wear these shoes, my feet *start* to hurt.
22. Ali *walks* to work every day.
23. Their Halloween costumes *sparkled* all over the place.
24. The little girl *reads* a book about animals most of the time.
25. He *expects* to graduate next semester.
26. All the students *want* their grades to be high.

Based on her written performance, which aligned with her spontaneous oral performance, the informant seemed to have the required knowledge of the 3SG *-s* and was aware of its rules (except for the question–formation exercise). This suggests general conformity between the underlying knowledge and the surface representation despite a few instances where accurate usage was lacking due to contextual constraints and L1 influence.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the use of the 3SG *-s* morpheme by an Arab L2 speaker of English, comparing her underlying knowledge of the morpheme against her oral production. As determined by Fisher's Exact Test, the results revealed no significant differences between her oral and written performances. This suggests that her knowledge of the rules was reflected in her actual speech. However, the findings revealed some instances in which accurate performance was lacking in both tasks. These examples were accounted for in light of the MSIH, which posits that negative transfer from a learner's L1 as well as performance factors can contribute to errors in the target language.

This study's findings have useful implications for language-teaching professionals and can help inform classroom practices. Inflectional morphology in English still poses a challenge to ESL learners, especially those whose L1s have different morphological structures. This type of grammatical feature in learning English as a second language should be explicitly taught through targeted instruction that reinforces the internalization of the rules. Learners may nevertheless face challenges in applying their knowledge in more cognitively demanding contexts. Thus, it is also important to accompany explicit grammar instruction with opportunities for learners to practice applying what they have learned in authentic contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights to the field, several shortcomings must be acknowledged. First, generalizing the study findings is partly restricted by the small sample size. Since the study involved only a single participant, the results might not be representative of all Arab ESL learners. Additionally, because of time limitations, the study employed only two tasks in testing the informant's morphosyntactic knowledge and use of the 3SG *-s* morpheme. Relying solely on these tasks may not provide a complete picture of the informant's linguistic competence in this particular area.

In future studies, the tasks could be expanded for use on a larger sample of Arab ESL learners. In addition, employing similar tasks over a longer period of time would provide deeper insights into how the 3SG *-s* and similar morphological features are used by learners. Moreover, teaching strategies could benefit from understanding the cognitive process observed from using similar tasks and pinpointing problematic areas in learners' performance as a result of these tasks.

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