A Processability Theory Study: Past -*ed* Acquisition in University Learners in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study is to see the Past –ed morphological acquisition which is placed on the Stage 2 of the Processability Theory (PT). The participants of this study were 26 university students in speaking classroom at Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University, Indonesia. The data, which was gathered from semi-structure individual interviews with several topics, were analysed using an Emergence Criterion (Pienemann, 1998). The present study found that all participants did not acquire the Past -ed on Stage 2 of English Developmental Stages. Several possible reasons were discussed in the study to find out why they were not able to produce Past –ed forms. However, the further research is also required due to the very limited research on this case.

Introduction

Pienemann (1998), in his Processability Theory (PT), claims that learners of a second language (L2) can only produce forms which they are able to process in sequences. This means that all learners follow certain language processing procedures. PT provides five stages of processing procedures for L2 acquisition: word/lemma access, category procedure, phrasal procedure, Sentence (S) procedure and Sub-clause procedure (Pienemann, 1998: 79). Learners acquire L2 by following certain procedures which constitute an assembly of components parts which follow an "implicational sequence" (Pienemann, 1998: 80). They can achieve the higher stage if they have passed the lower stage. Using predictions of the universal developmental stages in morphological and syntactical development derived from the PT, the language acquisition of L2 learners can be determined.

Researchers have done studies with various western participants who are non-native speakers of English. Håkansson, Pienemann, & Sayehli (2002) collected data from twenty German L2 learners with Swedish as their L1. The some structures of German and Swedish are same but not mutually intelligible. Surprisingly, the finding shows that Swedish learners of German do not transfer their L1 structure to the L2. Their performances in L2 follow stages of acquisition procedurally. In other words, learners of L2 can only produce forms which they can process procedurally. However, not many studies take Asian speakers, especially Indonesia, as the participants to see the process of English acquisition as their second language.

Regarding the universality of PT prediction, PT has been applied to all languages. Sakai (2007) tested the validity of the PT by collecting data from seven Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). They did communicative tasks in order to elicit data for interrogatives, word order and negation. The results showed that the PT was valid for

Japanese learners of English and they produced English structures predicted by PT. Salameh, Håkansson, & Nettelbladt (2004) investigated the grammatical development of 20 pre-school bilingual children who learnt two languages namely Swedish and Arabic. They were divided into two groups equally. The first group were allowed to use their L1 and another group did not use their L1. The result showed that both groups developed grammatical structure in the same implicational way which was in line with PT even though the development of the participants with their L1 was much slower in both languages. The study concluded that understanding the nature of L1 is essential in language processing development.

Therefore, the significant findings of all empirical research above confirm one of Processability Hypothesis, that is acquisition is sequential. In other words, learners of L2 can only produce the structures they can process in sequences.

If the PT is true in its claim that acquisition is sequential, PT should also be fit for investigating Indonesian students' processing procedures on L2 acquisition. The following study is to find out the acquisition of the Past –*ed* English morphological which is palced on the Stage 2 of PT English morphological development. This morpheme was chosen as it belongs to inflection which has different function (Collins & Hollo, 2000). The suffix –*ed* in the study has a function to form the Past Verbs in the Past Tense. Moreover, this English inflection rule does not exist in Bahasa. On the Processability Hierarchy of ESL (Pienemann, 2005; 1998), the position of the Past –*ed*, is labelled as the category procedure because no exchange of grammatical information is needed.

The researcher of the present study focuses only on the Past –*ed* acquisition as there has been very limited research on this category. Zhang & Widyastuti (2010) found that Indonesian participant, who had been studying one of post graduate courses in Australia for more than one year, was not able to produce Past –*ed.* The participant only produced two correct Past –*ed* form of nine tokens uttered. Another research on the Past –*ed* acquisition has ever done by Zhang, Liu & Bower (in preparation) on three Chinese students who had received formal training of L2. Surprisingly, all of them did not acquire Past –*ed* either.

The present study answers two questions. The first question is: are university students of 2nd semester at Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University able to produce Past –*ed* which is on Stage 2 of PT after being drilled on Past –*ed* during the semester? The second question is: why do they produce Past –*ed* successfully or why do they fail in producing Past –*ed*? The findings of this study might be useful for those who will continue to do research on the English acquisition among Indonesians.

Methods

The participants of the study are 26 university students majoring English at Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University in Indonesia, who enrolled at one Speaking 2 Unit. All participants have been learning English for more than 8 years in formal education in Indonesia. Only one participant had experienced travelling abroad. All of them rarely speak English on campus, even in the classrooms. During joining Speaking 2, they were drilled some practices on Past –*ed*.

The data was collected through communicative tasks in natural semi-structure interviews (Selinger & Shohamy, 1989) on 23 June 2014. The interviews were conducted separately among participants. As the speaking skill levels of the participants are different, the treatments of each participant were different. The interviews were conducted in only one

task. That was by interviewing about their past activities lasting around 10 minutes. However, during the conversation, the questions were developed based on the participants' talks.

The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed using a NCH software, a computer program used to listen recordings in which the speed of the voices can be adjusted. The transcription data were then transferred into an obligatory context table of Past –*ed* linguistic morphemes.

The obligatory context of the linguistic features above, then, was analysed using an Emergence Criteria to see the participants' acquisition in ESL by analysing at least four tokens contexts produced for the obligatory context (Pienemann, 1998). Tokens are defined as all repetitions made by the learners in obligatory contexts (Kilani-Schoch and Dressler, 2002 cited in Pallotti, 2007), for example, the participant repeated the word *chairs* four times so it was counted four tokens but was only counted as one type of obligatory context. Tokens are chosen to see the real presentation of the morpheme productions (Pica, 1984 cited in Pallotti, 2007).

To increase the reliability of the study, transcription was checked twice by different people. Unclear utterances were checked with participants to make sure the utterances transcribed were the same as what the participants said. Besides, one other researcher analysed the data and reached the same conclusion as the researcher of this study.

Results

The first research question of the study is: are university students of 4th semester able to produce Past –*ed* which is on Stage 2 of PT? The data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Past –*ed* production on 26 university students majoring English in Indonesia

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Past –*ed* production	0/6	0/4	0/3	0/9	0/1	0/3	1/ 2	0/3	0/2

Participant	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Past –*ed* Production	0/5	0/4	0/4	0/3	0/7	0/3	0/8	0/4	0/2

Participant	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Past –*ed* production	0/0	0/2	0/4	0/0	0/4	0/5	0/0	0/0

From the Table 1 above, it can be seen that all participants produced tokens in various numbers but only one participant who was able to supply the obligatory context, the Past –*ed.*

Among the 26 participants, only participant number 7 produced one past –*ed* form (*I have good experience when I participated PORDA*). However, this participant did not produce sufficient Past –*ed* required. He only produced one obligatory context form of 2 tokens. By applying the emergence criterion, the data gathered from participant number 7 still did not meet the requirement. The emergence criterion is used to see the emergence production of

the each obligatory context observed by counting at least four tokens (Pienemann, 1998; and Kilani-Schoch and Dressler, 2002 cited in Pallotti, 2007). As the researcher set four tokens in each obligatory context, the participant number 7 was not able to produce the correct form of past *–ed.*

The other participants absolutely were not able to produce correct form of Past *–ed* even though they varied in numbers of tokens. Four participants did not supply any tokens in Past form, i.e. participants number 19, 22, 25, and 26. The others produced between one to nine tokens. Therefore, by considering the emergence criterion, none of the participants in this study produced Past *–ed* form correctly.

The second question of the study is: why do they produce Past *–ed* successfully or why do they fail in producing Past *–ed*? As explained before that all participants failed in providing Past *–ed* form in the obligatory context. To answer this question, some information backgrounds of the participants were taken into account. All participants spoke Bahasa the most in their daily conversation both at home and campus. This becomes the most essential factor affecting the English morphological acquisition.

Discussion

The Past *–ed* acquisition of all participants in the study indicates a significant phenomenon why the participants have not acquired the Past *–ed*. There are some possible reasons why all participants in this study failed in producing Past *–ed* form.

The first reason is that their L1 might have interfered to their L2. Their L1 is Bahasa, in which tense and inflections do not exist, only markers (Chaer, 2003). To express past events, there are some lexical markers such as *kemarin* (*yesterday*), and *yang lalu* (*ago/last*). This may be the reason why most participants used Present Verb (Verb 1) in their speaking even though the contexts of the conversations were in past. For example, the participant number 4 in this study said …*yesterday… we wash the carpet and we clean the window and clean the floor clean the floor the door and we do together…* (line 13-17). From the utterances above, it can be seen that in expressing activities in the past, the participant did not apply the rules of forming the Past Regular Verb *–ed* in English. The word *clean*, for example, in Bahasa is translated as *membersihkan*. This is used for expressing activity of *cleaning* which can be happened in the past, present or future. In other words, the verbs forms in Bahasa are not changed even though the speakers express in different time.

Related to the L1 interference on the L2 acquisition, L2 learners do not transfer their L1 (Dulay & Burt, 1974). Hawkins & Liszka (2007) who gathered data from three advanced ESL learners whose different L1, namely Chinese, Japanese, and German, found that Chinese learners could not produce past tense in English because of the absence of this feature in Chinese. In contrast, the past tense existed in both Japanese and German, and both participants could produce this feature. In other words, learners were deficit to produce past verbs if their L1 was absent of it. It might be applicable to the Indonesian learners of ESL as Bahasa does not have tense.

The second possible reason is the participants' preference in using other forms such as irregular verb and nominal verb to regular past Past *–ed.* Participant number 2, for example, said *I got some new experience* instead of saying *I gained some new experience*. Participant number 8 said …*because in small group we became more explore.* The change of irregular verb *became* into *explored* (…*we explored more…*) would make the sentence more effective.

Besides, some participants frequently used nominal verbs. For example, Participant 9 said ...*because there are many friends who are talk...*instead of saying *many friends talked*. However, to analyse closely the relationship between the learners' preference in choosing verbs and the English acquisition, further research is required.

The third possible reason why the participants did not acquire the Past –*ed* is motivation in practising their knowledge in Past -*ed*. From the daily discussion with friends and in the classroom, they admitted that when they spoke English, they paid less attention on the rules. Their principle is that as long as their speaking partners understand what they were saying, it was enough. For example, when the participant number 1 said *two months ago,...when my father got sick my brother start to care of my father...make my father have good relationship with my brother and my father said to me he is happy..., she* paid less attention on the rules of forming the Past –*ed.* She sometimes changes the verbs into present. However, to find out a valid explanation about the motivation of using the Past –*ed* and the English acquisition, further research is needed.

The last possible reason is the participants have lacked of knowledge in English structure. Even though the given questions were in past contexts, the participants replied mostly in nominal sentence, present, progressive and passive forms. Participant 14, for example, told her bad experience during one of units in her study. She said "...*every I study CMD...I late because I print my material...sometimes I collect my mapping first because I am in the first group so I have to collect the material first..*". Another example is from Participant 12. She told about a moment when she met her boyfriend for the first time. She said "...*in cafe...at that time...I with my friend...we talk together and then my friend bullying me...*" The choosing of the word *bullying* was because she often used this word when she spoke Bahasa and she did not change the form of *bullying* in appropriate English structure. Similarly to the second and third possible reasons of the absence of the Past –*ed* production, the last possible reason also require further research.

Conclusion

All participants in this study have not acquired the Past –*ed*. They were not able to produce numbers of obligatory context required. Some of them were able to produce tokens even though they mostly uttered in wrong forms. To find out more reasons why Indonesian learners have not acquired the Past –*ed* in English, further research is needed with respect of some possible predicted reasons such as the L1 interference on the L2, more irregular past verbs produced, motivation and lack of English structure understanding. The findings of this research would also be used to develop some strategies in teaching English in large classrooms in the next research.

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