

## FIRST LANGUAGE TRANSFER EFFECT ON ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH THIRD PERSON SINGULAR –S IN IVORIAN HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** This article reports the results of a classroom research exploring the effects of first language (L1) transfer on the acquisition of English Third Person Singular –s by some Ivorian high-school students learning English as a foreign language. Reading and writing tests showed sporadic omission and misplacement of the variants of this morpheme. In English, third person singular verbs conveniently end with either –s or –es in writing, respectively pronounced [-s], [-z] or [iz], depending on the verb's morpho-phonological environment. The results are discussed in the light of a number of didactical hypothesis, putting forward the effect of first language. The objective of this study is to determine the order of acquisition of these variants.

**Keywords:** interlanguage, third person singular –s, first language transfer, grammatical morpheme acquisition.

### L'IMPACT DE L'INTERFERENCE DE LA PREMIERE LANGUE DANS L'ACQUISITION DE LA TROISIEME PERSONNE DU SINGULIER–S EN ANGLAIS DANS LE CONTEXTE DES GRANDES ECOLES IVOIRIENNES

**Résumé :** Cet article rapporte les résultats d'une recherche pédagogique qui explore les effets de la première langue sur l'acquisition de la Troisième Personne du Singulier –s en anglais par quelques étudiants ivoiriens de grande école apprenant l'anglais comme langue étrangère. En anglais, les verbes à la troisième personne du singulier se terminent soit par –s ou –es à l'écrit, respectivement prononcés [-s], [-z] ou [-iz], selon l'environnement morpho-phonologique du verbe. Des tests de lecture et d'écriture ont montré des omissions sporadiques et des mauvais placements des variantes de ce morphème. Ces résultats sont examinés à la lumière d'un certain nombre d'hypothèses didactiques qui indexent l'impact de la première langue. L'objectif de cette étude est de déterminer l'ordre d'acquisition de ces variantes.

**Mots-clés :** interlangue, troisième personne du singulier –s, interférence de la langue première, acquisition des morphèmes grammaticaux.

### Introduction

According to previous literature (Brown 1981, Skehan 1989, Ellis 1983, etc.), acquisition of English as foreign language is a complex process, involving many interrelated factors among which linguistic environment. This includes, in the Ivorian context, the effects of previous languages, including native languages (L1) and French spoken as second language (L2). The data from this article show that things are not always simple as they may appear and the learner can progress without any effect from previous languages. The focus here is on morphemes, that are “grammatical item which does not contribute much to the meaning of sentences, including noun and verb inflections, articles, auxiliaries, copulas, and prepositions” (O'Grady *et al.*, 1993 p. 112). According to Brown (1981), morphemes are “the

smallest meaningful of language” (p. 33). Third Person singular -s (TPS-s) is a typical example. In English, verbs marked with third person singular subjects (he, she or it) are generally inflected with a morphological marker, conveniently noted -s or -es and pronounced [s] like in “takes”, [z] like in “comes” and [ɪz] like in “kisses”. These are variants of what are commonly referred to as verbal agreements. It is considered by English teachers as an introductory concept, because it is one of the basic grammatical rules. It is surprising that even high-level students still misuse this simple rule.

Take for instance the verb “to be” in the following comparison :

It's [-s] two o'clock.

Time's [-z] over.

Rather than using the correct form, some Ivorian students ~~pupils~~ would say :

It [-∅] two o'clock. (omission)

Time's [-s] over. (misplacement)

The morpho-phonological rules underlying the use of the TPS -s in oral and writing in writing and oral pronunciation is confusing for many Ivorian learners of English as foreign language. In both L1 and L2 acquisition research (O'Grady *et al.*, 1993, Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982, Brown 1981, Ellis 1985), studies assert that TPS -s morpheme is learned much later than the others (plural -s, progressive "ing", copula “to be”, auxiliary “to be”, articles (a /the), irregular past, possessive -s). According to the typology criteria presented by Dressler (1985), some languages apply inflection on the verb while other do not. In English, tense and agreement are grammatical categories that are realized by verb inflection. Further, classification of English consonants makes it clear that both [s] and [z] are alveolar (i.e. spoken with the tongue and ridge) and fricative. While the former is voiceless, the latter is voiced. Such sounds do exist in most Ivorian languages but quite never in word final, except Adioukrou according to ILA experts.<sup>1</sup> Because most Ivorian languages do not use consonant in word-final, one may fear an L1 negative transfer effect on TPS -s acquisition. This raises the following two questions: (1) How far national languages can improve or delay the acquisition of TPS-s ? (2) In what ways (frequency, quality and order) this is performed and actualised ?

Previous experimental research (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982, Brown 1981, etc.) have already provided answers of these questions as regard to English learning by native speakers. Yet, the shift of focus on individual English morpheme variant acquisition in a multilingual African context, compels the search for new answers. According to Ellis (1985), one of the contributions of such research is improvement of language teaching. This happens by proposing different models and hypotheses which can describe different acquisition phenomena and with the light of these, teachers can find solutions to learners' problems in language learning. Beyond learning difficulties, the scope here is teaching methodology indeed. The following study is organized into three parts : (1) A review of previous literature provides rationale from some theoretical assumptions. (2) The corpus of collected data is presented and analyzed. (3) The results are discussed by outlining some linguistic implications and teaching applications and tips, against a backdrop of accuracy and fluency.

<sup>1</sup> As reported from Professor Bogny Joseph (Institut de Linguistique Appliquée, ILA).

## 1. Methods

### 1.1 Context and subjects' selection

As a case study, the data have been collected during a 2-months longitudinal quantitative classroom research. The subjects came from different L1 background. By investigating learners with different L1 helped to check the L1 transfer effect hypothesis. Initially, the subjects were second year form BTS<sup>2</sup> students (N=40, table 6) from different L1, attending the same classroom at Pigier, a high-school in Plateau, Abidjan : 38 ivoirians and 2 non-Ivoirians (A Guinean and a Nigerian). The subjects were eventually limited to the Ivoirians. The results were collected at discrete points in November and December 2022. Among the 38 Ivoirians, only a few had acknowledged that they were actually able to speak their L1 (N=14) fluently while the rest of them were just able to speak French quietly as L1 (N=24).

|                       | N  | %      |
|-----------------------|----|--------|
| Native language as L1 | 14 | 36,84% |
| Adjoukrou             | 2  | 5,26%  |
| Baoulé                | 8  | 21,05% |
| Bété                  | 6  | 15,79% |
| Dida                  | 2  | 5,26%  |
| Gouro                 | 12 | 31,58% |
| Malinké/Dioula        | 8  | 21,05% |
| French language as L1 | 24 | 63,16% |
| Total                 | 38 | 100%   |

Table 1 : Subjects dominant L1

### 1.2 Procedures

Both groups (Native language as L1 speakers and French language as L1 speakers) of subjects were submitted a series of English reading and writing tests involving the use of TPS –s. These two linguistic skills are generally considered to be “more important” by most Ivorian English teachers. This tendency was confirmed by some experienced and trained colleague English teachers in Abidjan (N=24)<sup>3</sup>, who reported in a preliminary questionnaire (September 2022) that reading and writing skills should be scored higher than listening and speaking skills in English teaching.

|                           |   |       |
|---------------------------|---|-------|
| Listening                 | 1 | 12,5% |
| Speaking                  | 2 |       |
| Phonetics (pronunciation) | 0 |       |
| Reading                   | 5 | 87,5  |
| Grammar                   | 3 |       |
| Writing                   | 7 |       |
| Creative writing (Essay)  | 6 |       |
|                           | N | 24    |
|                           |   | 100%  |

Table 2 : Frequency of Teachers' Favorable Opinion for EFL Teaching Objectives

Most of the teachers seemed less concerned with the oral objectives (12,5% : speaking, listening and phonetics) than the scriptural ones (87,5% : reading, writing and creative writing), among teachers. So only reading and writing skills have been tested in this study.

<sup>2</sup> Brevet de Technicien Supérieur

<sup>3</sup> All were long experienced and trained colleague teachers.

Anyway, a year before investigation, as the subjects' English teacher, extensive lessons on the use of TPS –s have been exposed to the whole classrooms. These lessons were inspired from a various sources, including textbooks<sup>4</sup> and grammar manuals, namely Delepine (1991:9-11) :

#### LES DESINENCES VERBALES

La 3<sup>e</sup> personne du singulier du présent des verbes ordinaires se termine par une désinence à sifflante [z], [s], [iz] orthographiée -s ou -es. L'orthographe est -es quand le radical du verbe se termine par une sifflante ou une chuintante.

Ex. : Dress → dresses ; rush → rushes ; watch → watches ; relax → relaxes.

Dans les autres cas, on ajoute simplement un -s, que le radical soit terminé ou non par un -e (pour does et goes, voir, ci-dessous remarque 2).

Cette désinence se prononce de trois façons différentes :

1. [z] après une voyelle, c'est-à-dire un son vocalique quelle que soit l'orthographe (par exemple order ['ɔ:də], roar [rɔ:], sigh [saɪ], bow [baʊ], se terminent phonétiquement par des voyelles).

Exemples : Plays [pleɪz], lies [laɪz], stares [steəz], roars [rɔ:z], orders ['ɔ:dəz]. prefers [pri'fɜ:z], bows [baʊz], sighs [saɪz]

2. [z] ou [s] après une consonne autre que les sifflantes ou tes chuintantes, selon que c'est le plus facile [s] après une consonne sourde, [z] après une consonne sonore.

Exemples : [z] robs, adds, begs, loves, opens, dreams, travels (là encore on ne tient compte que de la prononciation : phonétiquement, hope et love se terminent par des consonnes). [s] hopes, waits, works, laughs

3. [ɪz] (orthographié -es) après une sifflante ou chuintante, afin de bien faire entendre la désinence.

Exemple : Dresses, whizzes, rushes, watches, relaxes, changes ['ʃeɪndʒɪz] (dans ce dernier cas l'e appartient au radical; de même pour : judges, manages, etc).

Aux verbes terminés par -th s'ajoute simplement un -s

Comparer : to bath - She baths [bɑ:ðz] the baby  
to bath - She bathes [beɪðz] in the lake  
to loathe - He loathes [ləʊðz] travelling by air

Pour ces deux derniers verbes l'e de la terminaison -thes ne se prononce pas, car les consonnes [ð] et [z] sont assez différentes pour qu'il soit possible de faire entendre distinctement le radical et la désinence sans intercaler de voyelle.

Remarques :

- (1) les règles de prononciation ci-dessus s'appliquent aussi aux pluriels et aux génitifs des noms, également terminés par [z], [s] ou [ɪz].
- (2) On ajoute -es à do et go : does [dʌz] goes [gəʊz]. Le premier est irrégulier phonétiquement.
- (3) Est également irrégulière phonétiquement la 3<sup>e</sup> personne du singulier de say [sei] : says [sɛz] (comparer avec lays [leɪz] et stays [steɪz] qui sont réguliers).
- (4) Bien prononcer les terminaisons -sts, -sks, sps. On doit entendre les deux -s : insists, asks, rishs, graps.

The subjects have been taught how to use TPS –s in both in writing and orally. They were told that modals (can, will, may, etc.) are exceptions of the rule. So the students have been submitted to two (2) tests respectively in November and December 2022, about a year

<sup>4</sup>Thomson and Martinet (1989:160).

after the lessons were delivered,

### 1.3 Task design

The tests reflected how English lessons are usually taught in Ivorian classrooms, i.e. essentially dedicated to reading comprehension generally approached through the study of grammar rules and translation. Each test required half an hour to complete and they consisted of 20 items per test marked 1 point per item. Every item required reading and writing skills in using TPS –s.

#### Test 1 (November, 15<sup>th</sup> 2022)

Find the correct TPS –s pronunciation ([-∅], [-s], [-z], [-iz]) of the infinitive in bracket and write in the blanks its right spelling.

|  | Pronunciation                 |                               |                               |                                | Spelling |
|--|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| 1. He (to write) a book.                             | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 2. He (to rush) to the door.                         | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 3. He (to take) them to the airport                  | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 4. Aya (to walk) to the farm.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 5. She (speak) to the farmer.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 6. Your perfume (to smell) nice.                     | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 7. Daniel (can) read English.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 8. She (go) to school.                               | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 9. Practice (to make) perfect                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 10. The early birds (to catch) the worm              | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 11. It's an ill wind that (To blow) nobody any good. | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 12. Familiarity (to breed) contempt                  | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 13. Bad (to travel) news fast                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 14. A rolling stone (to gather) no moss              | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 15. Every cloud (to have) a silver line.             | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 16. A new broom (sweep) clean                        | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 17. Nothing (succeed) like success                   | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 18. Bad news (travel) fast                           | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 19. God (help) them that help themselves             | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |
| 20. Dr. Tanoh (teach) English.                       | <input type="checkbox"/> [-∅] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-s] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-z] | <input type="checkbox"/> [-iz] | .....    |

Here are the expected answers :

- |                  |                    |                   |                    |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| (1) writes [-s]  | (6) smells [-z],   | (11) blows [-z],  | (16) sweep [-s]    |
| (2) rushes [-iz] | (7) can [-∅]       | (12) breeds [-s]  | (17) succeed [-s], |
| (3) takes [-s]   | (8) goes [-z]      | (13) travels [-z] | (18) travel [-z],  |
| (4) walks [-s]   | (9) makes [-s]     | (14) gathers [-z] | (19) help [-s],    |
| (5) speaks[-s]   | (10) catches [-iz] | (15) has [-z]     | (20) teach [-iz].  |

#### Test 2 (December, 13<sup>th</sup> 2022)

Turn the verbs in bracket into the correct form of the present simple and read them aloud (adapted from *Go for English, 6e, 2nde* and *Terminale* textbooks).

Mr. Salé (to be .....1) a taxi driver. On Mondays Mr. Salé (to go .....2) to the station first. He (to drive .....3) from his flat to the bridge. Then he (to drive .....4) over the bridge, (to turn .....5) left at the mosque. The station (to be .....6) between the mosque and the hospital. There are usually a lot of people on the train. He (to take .....7) there people to their houses, flats, or hotels. A rabbit (to live .....8) in a hole. It (to eat .....9) vegetables including carrots. It (to run .....10) fast.

*Cripwell, Kenneth and Keane, Jane.*

*Go for English 6è (1991:67, Unit 17, lesson 2)*

The poem (to include .....11) several important words which (to make.....12) us think of other ideas ... A heart (to make .....13) us think of love; a lion (to stand .....14) for strength [and dove (to represent .....15) peace].

*Cripwell, Kenneth and Keane, Jane.*

*Go for English 2nde (1993:53, Unit 5, lesson 8)*

ORBIS (to spend .....16) 90% of its time in developing countries, where the need for continuing education is most urgent. The organization also occasionally (to conduct .....17) programs in industrial nations such as Germany, France... So far, ORBIS (to have .....18) circled the globe three times, ... Whenever possible, ORBIS (to bring.....19) medical and technical supplies to donate to the country we're visiting. That (to be .....20) our mission.

*Cripwell, Kenneth and Keane, Jane.*

*Go for English Terminale (1993:108, Unit 8, lesson 2)*

Here are the expected answers :

- |                 |                |                      |                     |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| (1) is [-iz]    | (6) is [-z],   | (11) includes [-s],  | (16) spends [-z]    |
| (2) goes [-z]   | (7) takes [-s] | (12) makes [-s]      | (17) conducts [-s], |
| (3) drives [-z] | (8) lives [-z] | (13) makes [-s]      | (18) has [-z],      |
| (4) drives [-z] | (9) eats [-s]  | (14) stands [-z]     | (19) brings [-z],   |
| (5) turns [-z]  | (10) runs [-z] | (15) represents [-s] | (20) is [-iz].      |

## 2. Analysis of the results

Global average scores resulting from the tests can be summarized as below in terms of error type and frequency. Four types of errors were distinguished : oral or writing, omission and misplacement.

### 2.1 Global results analysis

An answer was considered satisfactory when the TPS-s is correctly supplied. The following tables display the frequency of satisfactory (SA) and non-satisfactory (NS) answers. Non-answered questions were considered as non-satisfactory. Thus the subjects' copies have been classified according to the scores. Copies marked under 10 were considered NS while copies marked above 10 were considered SA.

|        | NS = 26<br>(68,42%) |       |        |       | SA = 12<br>(31,58%) |       |         |       | TOTAL |     |
|--------|---------------------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-----|
|        | 0 - 5               |       | 6 - 10 |       | 11 - 15             |       | 16 - 20 |       | N     | %   |
|        | N                   | %     | N      | %     | N                   | %     | N       | %     |       |     |
| Test 1 | 14                  | 36,84 | 12     | 31,58 | 8                   | 21,05 | 4       | 10,53 | 38    | 100 |

Table 3 : Test 1 global results

Observation 1 : There are more NS (68,42%) than SA (31,58%) answers in test 1 results. This clear higher frequency of unsatisfactory responses confirms the difficulty of TPS –s acquisition.

|  | NS = 27<br>(71,06%) |   |        |   | SA = 11<br>(28,94%) |   |         |   | TOTAL |   |
|--|---------------------|---|--------|---|---------------------|---|---------|---|-------|---|
|  | 0 - 5               |   | 6 - 10 |   | 11 - 15             |   | 16 - 20 |   | N     | % |
|  | N                   | % | N      | % | N                   | % | N       | % |       |   |
|  |                     |   |        |   |                     |   |         |   |       |   |

|        |    |       |    |       |   |       |   |      |    |     |
|--------|----|-------|----|-------|---|-------|---|------|----|-----|
| Test 2 | 13 | 34,22 | 14 | 36,84 | 9 | 23,68 | 2 | 5,26 | 38 | 100 |
|--------|----|-------|----|-------|---|-------|---|------|----|-----|

Table 4 : Test 2 global results

Observation 2 : NS answers increase only little from test 1 to 2. There are still more NS (71,06%) than SA (28,94%) answers in both tests.

| Omission (%) |        | Misplacement (%) |        |
|--------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| Test 1       | Test 2 | Test 1           | Test 2 |
| 65,3%        | 68,6%  | 34,7%            | 32,4%  |

Table 5 : TPS –s omission and misplacement frequency analysis

Observation 3 : There are quite more omission than misplacement errors found in both tests 1 and 2. Omission errors increase from test 1 to 2, while misplacement errors decrease. The tendency among the subjects is to omit TPS-s in test 1 and eventually to misproduce it in test 2. The problem is that not all subjects undergo the same patterns of errors.

### 2.2 L1 Transfer effect on TPS –s analysis

|        |         | Subjects with Native language as L1 (N=14) |              | Subjects with French language as L1 (N=24) |              |
|--------|---------|--|--------------|--|--------------|
|        |         | Omission                                   | Misplacement | Omission                                   | Misplacement |
| Test 1 | Reading | 24,2%                                      | 14,2%        | 22,1%                                      | 12,2%        |
|        | Writing | 44,5%                                      | 18,1%        | 44,3%                                      | 22,4%        |
|        | Total   | 68,7%                                      | 32,3%        | 66,4%                                      | 34,6%        |

Table 6: L1 transfer effects on type of errors frequency analysis in Test 1

|        |         | Subjects with Native language as L1 (N=14) |              | Subjects with French language as L1 (N=24) |              |
|--------|---------|--|--------------|--|--------------|
|        |         | Omission                                   | Misplacement | Omission                                   | Misplacement |
| Test 2 | Reading | 25,5%                                      | 8,4%         | 21,2%                                      | 12,6%        |
|        | Writing | 46,5%                                      | 19,6%        | 35,3%                                      | 32%          |
|        | Total   | 72%  | 28%          | 56,5%                                      | 44,6%        |

Table 7: L1 transfer effects on type of errors frequency analysis in Test 2

Observation 4 : In both tests, L1 have much effect on omission errors made in writing than in reading while misplacement errors are much affected in writing than in reading. Subjects with French language as L1 are slightly better at writing than reading. They globally progress faster from test 1 to 2. L1 transfer has an effect on both writing and reading but not so much to prevent progression. It is obvious that acquisition of TPS –s does not depend on L1 but on the subjects’ progressive grammatical consciousness. Cheap excuses like this are often given by the subjects to justify their errors : « Je comprends le texte mais la prononciation anglaise est si difficile. » (I understand the text but reading it aloud is so hard.). After the tests, a few subjects agreed that they would have found the appropriate answers if they only had to write them down instead of reading the sentences. In the end, all subjects proved relatively better proficiency in writing than reading. Error frequency surprisingly varied little across the students, but did much across language skills and showed the primacy of writing skill over reading skill.

### 2.3 TPS –s variants acquisition order

| -s     |    |        |    | -es    |    |        |    |
|--------|----|--------|----|--------|----|--------|----|
| Test 1 |    | Test 2 |    | Test 1 |    | Test 2 |    |
| NS     | SA | NS     | SA | NS     | SA | NS     | SA |
| 68     | 32 | 62     | 38 | 56     | 44 | 58     | 42 |

Table 8 : Table 8 : Writing TPS –s acquisition order

Observation 5 : In writing, subjects’ progress goes faster with –s than with –es. The variant –s is acquired before the variant –es.

| [-s]   |    |        |    | [-z]   |    |        |    | [-iz]  |        |
|--------|----|--------|----|--------|----|--------|----|--------|--------|
| Test 1 |    | Test 2 |    | Test 1 |    | Test 2 |    | Test 1 | Test 2 |
| NS     | SA | NS     | SA | NS     | SA | NS     | SA | NS     | SA     |
| 52     | 48 | 35     | 65 | 66     | 44 | 45     | 55 | 66     | 34     |

Table 9 : Reading TPS –s acquisition order

Observation 6 : In reading, subjects’ progress goes in this way : [-iz] first, [-s] second and [-z] last. Looking at acquisition rate, it is clear that [-z] is globally the most difficult variant to acquire.

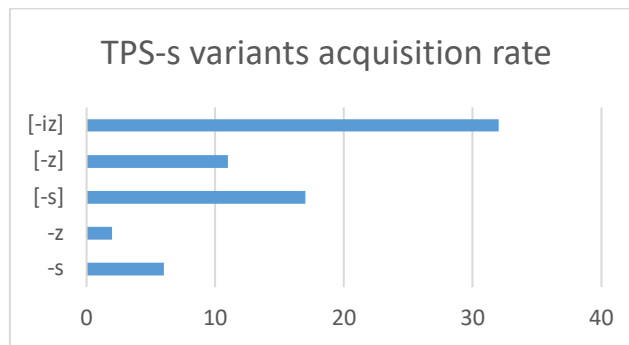


Table 10 : Global TPS –s acquisition order

## 3. Discussion

The results derived above have some linguistic implications (1) and teaching applications (2) as well.

### 3.1 Linguistic implications

The data can be discussed from a metaoperational grammar (MOG) view, an approach that recommends that linguistic analysis should be based on relationship between the units of the utterance. To build a relationship is to bring the linguistic units together for the specific purpose of creating a certain meaning. Learning a language is learning to build relationship naturally. TPS –s is an example of predicative relation, binding the subject and the verb. By correctly processing TPS-s, the subjects creates some complex relationships embodied in its morphophonemic realisation. TPS-s acts as an operator, converting verbs into predicate, in actual acts of speech.<sup>5</sup> This is how for instance MOG explains the

<sup>5</sup> A verb is said to be a predicate when it is grammaticalized, i.e.when it is introduced in piece of discourse. It may appear with explicit form (e.g. with the TPS –s : -s, es, [-s], [-z], [-iz]) or implicit as in; « I learn[Ø].



difference between these two sentences<sup>6</sup> :

- (1) Daniel reads English.
- (2) Daniel can read English (Test 1, Q. 7)

In the former sentence, “reads” is introduced as the predicate of the subject “Daniel”. The TPS -s ([s]) signals this grammatical structuring process. TPS -s is not needed in the latter sentence ([Ø]), because the modal “can” already creates the expected grammatical process. Let us consider where this can take us in our effort to account for TPS-s acquisition. The general interlanguage adopted by the subjects in this study goes from “bare verbal notion” to grammatical structure, i.e. from omission to placement, via misplacement (e.g.: he take → he takez → he takes). The subjects’ acquisition route starts off with the “notion” and eventually goes up to the “predicate” (phase 1). It is tempting to think that language acquisition has a natural route, starting up in the extra-linguistic (the referential domain) and going through the metalinguistic domain. It is predictable that more complex use of the verbs (i.e. “phase 2”) will be acquired at later stages.

Examples:

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Notion :  | *She make her homework (omission of TPS -s)       |
|           | * She makiz her homework (misplacement of TPS -s) |
| Phase 1 : | She makes her homework.                           |
| Phase 2 : | She is making her homework.                       |

The use of the bare verbal notion by the subjects in (1) indicates a clear lack of grammatical consciousness. Subjects go wrong at this stage probably because they focus on language contents than language form. They use (write or read) “she make” instead of “she makes” to refer to the concrete activity of “making”. They eventually succeed in the next stage (phase 1) by attempting to convert their perception of the extra-linguistic world into appropriate grammatical concepts. The process may sometimes take time before they are able to process readily every concept into grammatical categories. Doing so, they begin to distinguish between nouns and subjects, verb and predicate.

### **3.2 Teaching applications**

#### *-Limits of drills in EFL acquisition*

The tests in this study are all based on drills. In classroom situation, high-school Ivorian English learners still have to face drills even in this time of communicative language teaching. A drill is used in EFL to learn basic writing and reading skills and improve accuracy. It is a useful technique to introduce new grammar rules, but the learners will fail to use them in a creative way. Their production will remain fallow, consisting of a stumbling directory of sentences soon forgotten. The results showed limited development in TPS –s acquisition. Practice of TPS –s through drills does not builds up the weightings, response strengths and so on that determine how the rule is processed. Probably more communicative lessons and tests would be more efficient in TPS –s acquisition.

#### *-Teaching TPS –s rules effectively*

Thanks to new pedagogical practices known as training by skills<sup>7</sup> whose application to the pedagogy of foreign languages is communicative language teaching (CLT), the volume of

<sup>6</sup>Space and time constraints prevents us from dealing deeper with all offshoots and scope of this linguistic model.

<sup>7</sup>In French, Formation par compétence

verbal exchanges in English classes has increased considerably, while exposing linguistic deficiencies of various kinds. The new teaching method is marked by freedom of speech, the main thing is to be understood without paying too much attention to certain norms of the target language. A new generation of uninhibited and motivated learners has emerged, but the quality of English spoken by these learners is still far from satisfactory, at least concerning writing skills. During early stages, we think it is better to tolerate learners' production. This would help them focus on meaning before form. This recognition of the normal and even useful status of errors in the use of the TPS-s would be effective because of a small impact on the meaning of the statements. If the learner's use of TPS contains only minor error (e.g. saying [-is] instead of [-iz]), expansion is not necessary. The risk with too much expansion is to create affective barriers and to unconsciously focus the learner on form, at the expense of acquisition. It is no longer a question of mastering the target language perfectly with perfect grammar and an impeccable accent but above all of being operational thanks to a sufficient pragmatic background. Errors made in the practice of the TPS-s are tolerable from an educational point of view based on the hypothesis of interlanguage. It is a theory that considers errors as a necessary step in the learning process of a L2/E (Selinker 1972, Ellis 1991).

Focusing on fluency rather than accuracy at any stages is the best way for quicker acquisition. That is natural use of language. EFL teachers should allow free expression, focused on meaning and not form at any stage, but with some balance at advanced stages. Learners can then be encouraged to respond in an open manner and participate in open dialogues, both in terms of writing and speaking exercises. Opportunities to practice TPS –s can be provided by the teachers, for instances, by using simple wh-questions. There would be the learners' expected answers.

- (1) Teacher : Who walks to the mosque.  
Learner : Ali walks to the mosque
- (2) Teacher : Why is he always late.  
Learner : Because he misses the bus.

The teacher may ask questions like:

- (3) Teacher : How much does a suit cost?  
Learner : It costs 100 cfa
- (4) What is the price reduction on underwear this week?  
It is of 10%.
- (5) What time does the store close?  
It closes at 4 p.m.

Accuracy without fluency is not useful in the same way that fluency without accuracy is also not useful. A good mixture – biased towards the needs of the student – is the ideal way to go. The focus has to be on the learner and understanding their motivation for taking the course. To that end, the teacher should be clear about whether activities are designed to build accuracy or fluency. If fluency is what he is after, then he should not keep stopping students if they make mistakes. Creating exercises that replicate real-world situations is a great way to achieve this whatever language you're delivering. Language teachers who concentrate on fluency help their students to express themselves in English. They pay more attention to meaning and context and are less concerned with grammatical errors. Many teachers believe that fluency is a goal worth striving towards only with students who are at a fairly advanced level. Other teachers, strong in the belief that the learning of a language is about communication, feel that fluency should be the main goal in their teaching and that it

should be practiced right from the start. More teachers that are traditional tend to give accuracy greater importance while more liberal teachers tend towards fluency. Often a rigid educational system where tests and exams are the focus, will have students (and their traditional teachers) believe that language accuracy is what matters most, and giving the “correct” answers often becomes an obsession. Students who have been taught this way can complete any grammar gap-fill you care to give them, but will struggle to order a coffee in a real English speaking situation. On the other hand, a more communicative approach will produce students who can converse at length on almost any subject but could well make horrendous spelling and grammatical mistakes in their writing.

In the end, however, it really boils down to the needs of the student. In your EFL lessons, (1) try not to focus on accuracy to the detriment of fluency. (2) Allow sufficient time for fluency activities, and this includes time for adequate preparation on the part of your students. You still need to scaffold the activity but you don’t need to give them step-by-step instructions for what they should say. If your activity is appropriate and relevant for your students, this should actually come naturally to your students, as they will have a purpose for communicating. In the classroom, when planning a speaking activity, consider whether you will be assessing your students on accuracy or fluency and stick to that decision. If you choose to focus on fluency, don’t stop your students if they make mistakes but if you are aiming for accuracy then make sure your students are producing accurate language.

In a nutshell, both accuracy and fluency are important in the classroom, and one should not be sacrificed for the other. This may sound simple and logical, but it is not easy to incorporate elements of both accuracy and fluency into a single lesson, often with the result that students don’t get the benefit of practising either. Teachers should make sure there are opportunities for both types of activities in their lessons.

## Conclusion

The results of this study show in what ways (rate, quality and order) the English Third Person Singular –s is acquired and practiced in a High School classroom where communicative language teaching approach is sometimes mixed with traditional methods of teaching. Error frequency and type surprisingly varied little across the subjects, according to L1 origin but did much across language skills and showed the primacy of writing skill over reading skill. In other words, acquisition progress is less influenced by the learners’ first language than their pedagogical experience. First language transfer (native-like or French-like) has only little effect on grammatical morpheme acquisition. The high frequency of unsatisfactory (about 70%) responses confirms the difficulty of TPS –s acquisition. There are quite more omission than misplacement errors. The tendency among the subjects is to omit TPS-s at early stage and eventually to misproduce it latter stage. Native-based first language have much effect on omission errors made in writing than in reading while misplacement errors are much affected by French-based first language in writing than in reading. So first language transfer has an effect on both writing and reading but not so much to prevent progression. It is obvious that acquisition of TPS –s does not depend on L1 but on the subjects’ progressive grammatical consciousness. Rather than simply memorising all the regular and exceptional use of TPS-s, the subjects have formulated a general rule that adds –s, -es, [-s], [-z] or [-iz] to the verb stem if necessary. This hypothetical rule can produce mistake forms providing clear signs of subjects’ attempts to construct grammatical rules. In writing, subjects’ progress goes faster with –s than with –es. In reading, [-iz] and [-s] are first mastered before [-z]. Though this study covers learning of English phonology and

morphology, it still echoes the centrality of grammar in language learning. For acquiring a new language means acquiring its rules.

Finally, excelling in drill tests represents but a small part of language competence. True acquisition comes from performance in real situations that are non-exam focused.

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