

The Form of the English Present Continuous in the Interlanguage of Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Diversos estudios en el área de la adquisición del inglés como segunda lengua o como lengua extranjera han demostrado que el presente continuo inglés presenta tres formas diferentes en el interlenguaje de los aprendices. Una forma es la forma estándar «verbo auxiliar + V-ing», otra sigue la estructura «V-ing», donde no aparece el verbo auxiliar, y, una tercera forma es aquella en la que no se utiliza el morfema «-ing» («verbo auxiliar + V»). El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar si alguna de estas formas aparece en nuestro corpus y, en caso afirmativo, establecer unos criterios de uso de cada una de ellas.

Las tres conclusiones de este estudio son:

- Las formas del presente continuo del inglés como lengua extranjera son las mismas que las encontradas en inglés como primera y segunda lengua.
- El uso de estas tres formas demuestra que el aprendizaje no se produce de manera uniforme.
- La instrucción puede tener un efecto positivo en la adquisición de la forma del presente continuo.

Introduction

Errors in the acquisition of tenses have always been acknowledged in the literature of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (see, for instance, Perren & Trim (eds.) (1971), Edström (1973), Chamot (1978 and 1979) and Abraham (1984)). In this line, some SLA pieces of research have focused on the acquisition of English tenses from the point of view of the acquisition of tense forms. Such studies analyse, for instance, whether learners use the «s» of the present third person singular, whether the «-ing» ending is added to the infinitive to form the progressive aspect or whether the correct form of a verb is used after an auxiliary.

In the same line, the present study analyses the form of the English present continuous tense in a foreign language learning context. Three forms for the present continuous have been reported in the literature of SLA research¹, namely, the form «**auxiliary verb + V-ing**»², which corresponds to standard usage, the form «**V-ing**» in which the auxiliary does not appear and, finally, «**auxiliary verb + V**» in which the morpheme «-ing» is not added to the base form of the verb. The objective in this paper is to analyse whether any of these forms appear in the data, and if they do, which ones are used and at which stage in the study.

The study

The form of the present continuous is analysed in the oral production of 20 subjects, all of them learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Barcelona, who were studied longitudinally during a whole school year. All the subjects had a similar level of proficiency in English (false-beginners) and belonged to four different schools in Barcelona and its surroundings³.

The subjects' production was elicited by means of an informal conversation with the researcher which took place once a month. One of the tasks included in the conversation was the description of a photograph in which several people were performing different actions. Because of the context, most forms of the present continuous were produced in this task.

Data analysis

A first analysis of the data shows that the three forms which have been mentioned above are produced by the subjects from the beginning of the study. However, this does not mean that each of the subjects uses the three forms during all the school year. Far from that, several patterns of usage were observed depending on both the time of the interview and the subject. This is the reason why two perspectives have been followed in the study of the data. On the one hand, a longitudinal analysis of the data has been carried out to show the overall patterns of usage that the form of the present continuous follows during the nine months of instruction in EFL. On the other hand, a qualitative analysis of the production of each

subject has also been undertaken in order to analyse individual variation in the form of this tense. Results from both points of view appear in what follows.

The data show that after one month of instruction, when the subjects are interviewed for the first time, 40% of the subjects do not use any of the forms of the present continuous that have been mentioned above. This result is already expected, since the present continuous has not been presented in the English class at this stage. Alternative constructions are used instead, e.g.

S4⁴: A girl of ... a girl ... take the piano ... a men ... write a ... write⁵.

S12: There are ... another man and another woman looking the T. watching the T.V., there is a ... a ... girl ... going ... exit.

When the present continuous is used by the subjects, the three forms appear from the beginning of the study, although never produced by only one subject:

S2: There are three, four mens, four mens, one it's it's switch on the light, another it's it's looking a girl.

S16: ... a girl in ... in your ... bueno ... reading book.

S8: The dog is eating ... the brothers are ... the ... yes ... are writing in a paper.

However, the form that is produced by most subjects is «no aux + V-ing». This may be the result of considering the morpheme «-ing» as a clear marking of the progressive aspect.

At time 2 of the study, that is, after two months of instruction in English, the present continuous has already been introduced in class. Consequently, more subjects use this tense now and 55% of them produce at least one instance of the correct form «aux + V-ing». However, these correct instances are usually produced together with one or two of the other forms, that is, either «no aux + V-ing» or «aux + V». More instances of the former still appear, although the form «aux + V» appears more often than at time 1.

The number of students who produce correct forms increases at time 3 (65% of the subjects), probably as a result of instruction. A relevant change takes place at this time, since more students use the form

«aux + V» instead of «no aux + V-ing», a pattern which will be kept until the end of the study when only one of the subjects produces the form «no aux + V-ing». This means that the importance of the morpheme «-ing» as a marker of the progressive is replaced by the use of the auxiliary verb. The explanation may lie in the fact that, since there seems to be a tendency on the part of EFL teachers to draw the students' attention to the auxiliary, which is usually forgotten during the first stages, the auxiliary is finally used correctly but not the morpheme «-ing». This aspect, however, should be analysed bearing in mind factors such as teacher talk, correction in class and remedial work if one wants to reach less tentative conclusions. Moreover, the linguistic and extra-linguistic context should also be taken into account. A rough analysis of the data shows that the harder the effort on the pronunciation of the infinitive or the higher the attention paid to meaning, the higher the chance of coming across the base form of the verb instead of «V-ing».

From time 4 to the last meeting, the percentage of subjects who use the correct form of the present continuous increases (80% at time 4 and 85% from time 5 until the end). As has been mentioned above, more subjects use «aux + V» than «no aux + V-ing» from time 4 until the end of the study. Most of the subjects still produce the correct instances together with the incorrect forms:

S5: The girl ... is open the door and the grandmother and the ... and the woman are ... washing television. (...) She ... she is ... read a the ... the letter.

S19: They ... they they watching TV and this man is ... is ... write a letter. (..) This girl is reading a magazine or a book.

Just a few subjects always stick to one or two of the forms, as we shall see in the analysis of individual variation.

Another relevant change that needs mentioning takes place towards the end of the school year. Some of the subjects use the English simple present tense instead of the present continuous to refer to the present moment. Even if the cause for this substitution does not concern us here, the effect on the data that is being analysed is important. Just as in the first interview, although for other reasons, some subjects do not produce any of the three forms of the present continuous in the last interviews. Nevertheless, the percentage of subjects with the correct form is higher than at time.1. Individual production, therefore, must also be analysed in order to complete these results.

The individual study of the subjects' production shows that only 1 of the 20 subjects produces the correct form of the present continuous with no other variants from the beginning to the end of the study. Four other subjects also use the correct form from the very beginning, although in these cases there are a few instances of the form «aux + V» in one of the interviews and one instance of «no aux + V-ing». This means that only 25% of the subjects start their 1st year of B.U.P. with the correct form of the present continuous and, what is more important, keep it until the end of the school year.

Most subjects in the study (60%) produce the three forms at least at two of the meetings or alternate between them during all the study. Therefore, there exists individual variation in each interview and also variation across interviews. The subjects keep going backwards and forwards in the sense that, for instance, they produce «no aux + V-ing» or «aux + V» together with the correct form at one time, then use the correct form at the following time and go back to «no aux + V-ing» or «aux + V» together with the correct form at the next meeting. An example of this kind of behaviour is the following:

S4 (time 2): A men and a girl talking a piano. (...) This girl is ... writing a book, reading a book, sorry. (...) He's listen ... to ... his his wife says.

S4 (time 3): She is ... watching television. (...) This man is writing.

S4 (time 5): They are reading a book, the wife are reading a book and his ... handbag are ... are listen to her.

From the point of view of language teaching, the relevant aspect in such cases is to analyse whether at the end of the year students have acquired the correct form or, on the contrary, keep using the correct form together with one or two wrong forms. From the 20 subjects analysed in this study, 8 subjects use only the correct form towards the end of the school year⁶. A study of the 20 subjects in the following year would show whether instruction has in fact a delayed effect, as some scholars claim, or, on the contrary, would prove that it is not wholly effective in the acquisition of the form of the present continuous.

Finally, little variation appears in 15% of the subjects, since they stick to one of the two wrong forms («aux + V» (1 subject) and «no aux + V-ing» (1 subject)), or use the combination «correct» and «no aux + V-ing» (1 subject) consistently. Actually, if we bear in mind that, according

to the results, only 2 of the subjects never produce the correct form of the present continuous, the positive role of instruction must be acknowledged without any further analysis, as has been suggested above.

The results which have been analysed here show, therefore, that the form «aux + V-ing» of the present continuous is acquired in the first year of B.U.P., although there is also a strong tendency to use «aux + V» instead. This form is used more often than the construction «no aux + V-ing», which appears in earlier stages of acquisition. The alternation between the three forms is a relevant aspect that appears in the data, since it shows that there exists variation in language learning.

Conclusions

Several conclusions come to light in view of these results. To begin with, both the three forms that have been observed in the IL of the subjects and the fact that learners use more than one of the forms have also been reported in other SLA studies. An interesting study in this line is Wagner-Gough (1978). The researcher analyses the form of verbs, focussing on the acquisition of the progressive, as part of a longitudinal study of the English of a Persian child in the States. The learner expressed the English progressive either as the construction «no aux + V-ing» or as «aux + V». It is interesting to remark that both instances have also been found in first language acquisition. From a morphological point of view, therefore, the subject's form of the progressive is the same as that of first language learners. As has been seen above, our learners of EFL are no exception to the general patterns reported in the literature. This piece of research shows, then, that the form of the present continuous in a foreign language learning context follows the same patterns of acquisition as in first and second language acquisition.

Secondly, the data in this study corroborate the statement that language learning is not a straightforward line. Some of the subjects keep going backwards and forwards in their use of the form of the English present continuous in the sense that, as has been explained, they use a wrong form, they produce the correct one at the following session and use the wrong one again. This fact has also been acknowledged by many SLA researchers (see Kellerman (1987)). Once again, then, the findings in this study conform to what has been observed in other pieces of research.

Finally, another relevant conclusion that can be put forward from the results in this study is that instruction seems to have a positive effect in some of the subjects. Since English is a foreign language in Barcelona, most students have no other chances to hear and use English than in the English class. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out above, not all the subjects use the correct form at the end of the study, after nine months of class. This means either that the acquisition of this form is slow or that instruction alone is not enough. Further analyses which took instruction variables into account would be needed to reach conclusions about this issue.

One hopes that this study may contribute to the field of foreign language acquisition studies, since foreign languages have not been analysed as thoroughly as second languages. It may also help those teachers of EFL who often come across forms of the present continuous which they do not teach in class!

NOTES

1. See Wagner-Gough (1978) above all.
2. The letter V stands for the base form of the verb. From now on, «auxiliary verb» will appear as «aux» to avoid long formulae.
3. The subjects had started their 1st year of B.U.P. when the study began.
4. S stands for «subject». The number that follows it is a code to avoid using the subject's name.
5. Notice that mistakes have been kept in the transcription of the data.
6. One of them, though, uses the correct form from the very beginning, since he had already acquired it before the study began.

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