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EXPLORING THE ACQUISITION OF PROGRESSIVE FORMS IN ALBANIAN ESL LEARNERS (THE ACQUISITION OF PROGRESSIVE FORMS IN ALBANIAN ESL LEARNERS)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Albanian adult learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) acquire the progressive aspect, using the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) as the theoretical framework. The AH posits that the aspectual characteristics of verbs shape the acquisition of tense-aspect distinctions. The research aims to determine whether these learners follow universal developmental patterns in acquiring the progressive form. Data was collected from written tasks completed by Albanian undergraduate students (years 1-3). The analysis shows that while learners' use of the progressive marker "-ing" largely aligns with AH predictions, there are notable deviations, particularly the overextension of the marker to stative verbs. Learners predominantly use the progressive with activities, with limited and sporadic application to achievements and accomplishments, reflecting incomplete acquisition. These findings provide new insights into the application of the Aspect Hypothesis for Albanian learners and offer valuable recommendations for refining teaching methods and curriculum design in ESL education.

Key words: aspect hypothesis (AH), progressive aspect, English (L2), Albanian (L1)

INTRODUCTION

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has long been focused on how learners develop tense and aspect systems, with particular attention to temporality. Despite decades of study, the field continues to produce diverse theories offering various perspectives on the acquisition process. One such theory, the Aspect Hypothesis (AH), posits that the development of tense-aspect systems is heavily influenced by the inherent aspectual properties of verbs. However, the Aspect Hypothesis has not yet been studied from the perspective of Albanian learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), offering a unique opportunity to explore how this theory applies in a linguistic context where aspect is absent.

The Albanian language does not possess a grammatical category for aspect, including the progressive aspect. This lack of a progressive form may influence how Albanian learners acquire tense-aspect distinctions in English and could challenge the universal patterns predicted by the AH. This study aims to investigate whether Albanian ESL learners follow the predicted developmental sequences of the Aspect Hypothesis, particularly in their use of progressive forms.

By investigating how Albanian learners express progressive forms in English, this research seeks to provide new insights into the acquisition process and contribute to a deeper understanding of SLA. Additionally, it will examine whether the absence of aspect in the Albanian language affects the expected universal patterns of tense-aspect development proposed by the AH. This research not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also has the potential to inform ESL teaching methods, particularly for learners from languages without an aspectual distinction.

Understanding how learners from non-aspectual languages like Albanian acquire tense-aspect distinctions in English can significantly enhance our theoretical understanding of SLA across linguistic contexts. This study will, therefore, provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of the Aspect Hypothesis and offer new directions for cross-linguistic research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Aspect Hypothesis (AH) is considered “one of the most tested and researched hypotheses in second language acquisition and as one of the most influential hypotheses regarding tense and aspect in SLA” (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, p. 2). The hypothesis has “its roots in temporal semantics and initially was related to studies and research on child language acquisition.” Later, it extended to second language acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, pp. 192-3). This hypothesis emerged more than 40 years ago, initially by Roger Andersen in the 1980s, then followed by Bardovi-Harlig (1999), Li & Shirai (2000), Salaberry (2000), and other researchers.

In essence, the hypothesis has been described as a hypothesis that tests “the universal against the particular, where the universal is represented by the aspect hypothesis, while the particular by learners’ variables” (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, p. 2). It is postulated that a universal pattern is to be followed while the temporal systems of any language are learned based on the inherent semantic aspect of the verbs/predicates (Andersen 1991; Andersen & Shirai 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995). This universality is viewed from a perspective that intertwines the three grammatical categories of the verb, such as tense,

aspect, and lexical aspect, the three main constructs of the AH, through which similar sequences of development and marking of tense-aspect systems are predicted.

The former is used to locate “the time of the situation being talked about (event time) with respect to the time at which the speaker utters that sentence (speech time)” (Li & Shirai, 2000, p. 1). In general, almost all languages distinguish three absolute tenses: the past, the present, and the future: “when event time is before speech time, the past tense is used; when speech time is before event time, the future tense is used; and when the two overlap, the present tense is used” (Li & Shirai, 2000, p. 3). The second, also known as the viewpoint aspect, is used to denote “the different ways how speaker views the internal constituency of a situation” (Comrie, 1976, p. 3), generally either as perfect (view the situation from the outside) or imperfect (view the situation from the inside). The latter, “also known as situational aspect, inherent aspect or Aktionsart,” refers to characteristics inherent in the lexical items that describe the situations (Li & Shirai, 2000, p. 3).

In its simplest form, the Aspect Hypothesis predicts that the tense-aspect morphology in the initial stages of acquisition, particularly the past morphology, will be influenced by lexical categories. Meaning that “the verbal morphology will be attracted to and will occur with predicates with similar semantics” (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, p. 2). These lexical categories or the semantic meanings of the predicates have been classified and categorized differently in the studies concerned with the Aspect Hypothesis. The main lexical classifications employed in language acquisition include the Vendler Categories (States, Activities, Accomplishments, and Achievements)” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, pp. 213-14). Based on these classifications, the three central claims of the AH, which were later extended, are as follows:

- Perfective past occurs with telic predicates (predicates with inherent endpoints);
- Imperfective occurs with unbounded predicates;
- Progressive occurs with ongoing activities.

The three claims were further developed, from which more easily testable hypotheses were defined and constituting the Aspect Hypothesis. The hypotheses, according to Andersen & Shirai (1996), are as the following:

1. “Past marking (perfective) is used initially on achievements and accomplishments, then extending use to activities and statives.
2. Imperfective past appears later than perfective past, and imperfect past marking begins with statives, extending next to activities, then to accomplishments, and finally to achievements.
3. In languages that have progressive aspects, progressive marking begins with activities, and then extends to accomplishments and achievements.
4. Progressive markings are not incorrectly overextended to statives.” (p. 533)

These hypotheses have been tested in numerous languages, amongst which include English (Housen 2000), French (Collins 2002; Salaberry 1998), Spanish (Salaberry 2008), Japanese (Shirai & Kuroono 1998), from the perspective of either the first language (L1) and/or second language (L2). However, not all studies and researchers support its universality. Most of the studies that tested the hypotheses “either were fully consistent with the AH (such as Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish), or have supported it partially (Chinese, English, French, and Korean)” (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020, p. 8). The variables that affected whether the findings supported or counterevidence were language transfer, language input, learners' proficiency, and task effect. However, even though seen as separate factors, they all tend to simultaneously influence the language learning process.

METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this study is to examine the development of tense-aspect morphology in English as a second language (L2). Using a cross-sectional approach, the study analyzes two types of written tasks: a retelling of an animated silent movie and a personal narrative. By analyzing the language produced by L2 English learners, the study aims to explore the development of morphological markers across different lexical aspectual classes, taking into account varying proficiency levels and learner groups.

Materials

The corpus for this study is comprised of two tasks, both written compositions: one impersonal retelling task and one personal narrative. For the retell task, an excerpt from the movie *Up* by Pixar Animation Studios was selected, with a duration of 4 minutes and 32 seconds. The excerpt includes action sequences, simultaneous events, and shifts in setting, providing participants with opportunities to retell the story across different temporal frameworks. Silent films, such as the one used in this study, are commonly employed in research on the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) to eliminate the influence of listening comprehension. This approach ensures that participants rely solely on their language competence when narrating the events, without being influenced by the language used in the movie.

Participants

This study focuses on a specific group of learners: adult native speakers of Albanian enrolled in the Faculty of Education at the University “Fehmi Agani” in Gjakova. The participants are pursuing bachelor’s degrees in Primary Education and Pre-Primary Education and hail from five distinct cities in Kosovo: Gjakova, Peja, Deçan, Lipjan, and Skënderaj. All 27 participants, all female, are enrolled in English courses corresponding to their year of study: English I (first year), English II (second year), and English for Teaching (third year). These courses are part of the second semester in the 2023/2024 academic year.

The group consists of 12 first-year students, 9 second-year students, and 6 third-year students, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years old. The participants' primary exposure to English has been through formal education in primary and secondary school, as well as through media such as television and the Internet. None of the participants have lived in an English-speaking country, and the classroom serves as their main environment for engaging in English.

The session for eliciting language samples took place at the end of the second semester, at the conclusion of the 2023/2024 academic year. The data collection was organized by year, resulting in three distinct groups: Group 1 (first year), Group 2 (second year), and Group 3 (third year).

Data Collection

The data collection took place in school environments and was conducted at the Faculty of Education building at the University “Fehmi Agani” in Gjakova. The process spanned five working days, with each session lasting approximately 70 minutes (00:01:10)—40 minutes for the first task and 30 minutes for the second task. At the start of each session, participants were given a brief overview of the procedure, and any questions were addressed before the timed

tasks began. The time spent explaining the study and providing instructions was not included in the recorded session time.

Only the two-timed tasks related to data elicitation were measured. In the first phase, participants watched a short, animated film twice and were asked to retell the story from a witness's perspective immediately afterward. They had the opportunity to ask for help with vocabulary or seek clarification on any uncertainties during the writing process. After a brief break, the second phase involved participants writing about either the happiest or worst day of their lives, with minimal instructions given apart from vocabulary assistance when requested. Additionally, the L2 English learners were asked to complete a questionnaire to gather information about their learner variables. This questionnaire collected demographic data, academic background, language exposure, and their willingness to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

The primary focus of data analysis in this study has been on verbs, verb phrases, and their morphology. The analysis proceeded in three phases: coding, analysis of all verbal constructions, and interpretation. In the initial coding stage, the texts were segmented into sentences, and verbs along with verb phrases were identified.

Subsequently, coding and classification occurred at two levels: verb forms and lexical aspectual classes. At the verb forms level, morphological properties and tenses were coded using specific tags. At the lexical aspectual class level, verbs were tagged based on their lexical aspectual properties. During the first phase, verbs were categorized by their morphological properties and tense, while in the second phase, they were classified into Vendler's (1967) verb classes based on their aspectual properties.

In the second phase, an across-category analysis approach was adopted, following the methodology used in various studies on the Aspect Hypothesis by linguists such as Salaberry (1999) and Bardovi-Harlig (2000, 2002). This approach focuses on identifying the distribution and frequency of morphemes across different aspectual classes, answering the key question: "Where do morphemes occur?" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002, p. 134). It calculates the distribution of morphemes within each aspectual lexical class, specifically quantifying "the sum of all the predicates that occur with a given morpheme across aspectual categories" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002, p. 134). For example, the analysis might compute the percentage of progressive forms occurring with stative verbs. Each verb token is counted, and the results are presented through both raw scores and percentages to provide a comprehensive view of verb usage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results extracted from the research, focusing on the distribution of verb forms across the four lexical aspectual classes based on Vendler's (1967) classification. The across-category analysis specifically examines the state of verbal morphology and how progressive forms (both past and present) are distributed across these aspectual categories in the L2 English dataset. The analysis concentrates solely on the progressive verb forms, investigating their usage patterns across the various verb classes to understand the development of tense-aspect morphology among Albanian ESL learners.

The English Dataset Overview

This section shows the results from the analyzed L2 English learners' written compositions. The first was the one where the participants had to watch a silent animated movie and narrate the story they watched, whereas, for the second written composition, the participants were asked to write a story about a day in their lives. The difference between the two assignments is that, in the former, the participants' language depended on the actions in the movie they watched. In contrast, for the latter, the participants' language was dependent on what they chose to express and narrate from their lives.

From both written compositions, Text I and Text II, 760 sentences have been identified, from which 1,090 verb tokens have been analyzed. There is a higher number of sentences in Text I compared to Text II; as a result, the number of verb tokens is higher in Text I as well. Overall, the number of sentences decreased across the three years, from the first to the third year. The written compositions of the participants attending Year 1 have the highest number of sentences and verb tokens, indicating a rich and detailed use of verbs in both texts. Year 2 shows a decrease in the number of sentences and the number of verb tokens compared to Year 1, indicating shorter and less detailed texts. Similarly, the written compositions of Year 3, show a decrease in the number of sentences and verb tokens and have the lowest numbers concerning sentences and verb tokens, which reflects more concise compositions. The table below represents the raw numbers of the identified sentences and verb tokens produced by the participants each year (Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3) and each text (Text I and Text II).

Table 1. The overall usage in L2 English

Year	Tense	Text I	Text II	TOTAL
Year 1	Past Tense	223	150	373
	Progressive	26	16	42
	Present Tense	18	30	48
	TOTAL	267	196	463
Year 2	Past Tense	155	67	222
	Progressive	10	7	17
	Present Tense	22	25	47
	TOTAL	187	99	286
Year 3	Past Tense	109	76	185
	Progressive	14	9	23
	Present Tense	3	10	13
	TOTAL	126	95	221

	Past Tense	487	293	780
	Progressive	50	32	82
	Present Tense	43	65	108
TOTAL	TOTAL	580	390	970

Consequently, from the total verb tokens of 1087, only 82 of them are analyzed separately based on the verbal forms that have been encountered.

The Usage of Progressive Forms in L2 English

The progressive verb forms, either in past or present temporal spheres, are the least used verbal forms in the written compositions of L2 English. The total verbal count of the progressive forms is 82 and comprises 8.45% of all the produced verb tokens that are taken under consideration for testing the aspect hypothesis.

In general, the progressive verbal forms do not have a uniform distribution across the four lexical aspectual classes. The progressive forms have been mostly used with the aspectual class of Activities with a total of 75 verb tokens, compromising 91.46% of all the verb tokens in progressive forms. The other two classes show an insignificant verb count, where States have a total of 5 verb counts (6.10%), while Achievements and Activities each emerge with 1 verb token only, each compromising 1.22% of the produced verb tokens. The emphasis, particularly on Activities while using the progressive forms indicated that generally the participants unconsciously link progressive forms with events or processes that are in progress and do not have any clear endpoints. Even though the general verb tokens represent a uniform distribution, when the written compositions are analyzed separately the inside trends differ on a certain level. For example, the order in which the lexical classes appear on the written composition of Year 1 are ranked as the following, where Activities (92.86%) lead, followed by States (4.76%) and Achievements (2.38%), while Accomplishments (0%) do not have any instance at all. In the written compositions of the Year 2, the class of Activities (82.35%) leads, followed by State (17.65%), whereas for Achievements (0%) and Accomplishments (0%) no verb token has emerged. On the other hand, for the texts in Year 3, Activities (95.65%) lead, followed by Accomplishments (4.35%), while for States (0%) and Achievements (0%) there are not any instances. Nevertheless, even though the inside trends change across the three years, the main class that is associated with the progressive forms remains the class of Activities. The table below represents the count for each verb token for each year (Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3) across both texts, Text I and Text II, within the four lexical aspectual classes. The percentages are based on the overall total count of verb tokens used in progressive forms, in present or past temporal spheres.

Table II: The spread of the progressive forms in L2 English

		<i>Progressive Forms</i>					
		<i>Text I</i>		<i>Text II</i>		<i>TOTAL</i>	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
<i>Year 1</i>	<i>States</i>	1	2.38%	1	2.38%	2	4.76%

		<i>Activities</i>	24	57.14%	15	35.71%	39	92.86%
		<i>Achievements</i>	1	2.38%	0	0.00%	1	2.38%
		<i>Accomplishments</i>	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
		TOTAL	26	61.90%	16	38.10%	42	100.00%
		<i>States</i>	2	11.76%	1	5.88%	3	17.65%
		<i>Activities</i>	8	47.06%	6	35.29%	14	82.35%
		<i>Achievements</i>	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
		<i>Accomplishments</i>	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
	Year 2	TOTAL	10	58.82%	7	41.18%	17	100.00%
		<i>States</i>	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
		<i>Activities</i>	13	56.52%	9	39.13%	22	95.65%
		<i>Achievements</i>	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
	Year 3	<i>Accomplishments</i>	1	4.35%	0	0.00%	1	4.35%
		TOTAL	14	60.87%	9	39.13%	23	100.00%
		<i>States</i>	3	3.66%	2	2.44%	5	6.10%
		<i>Activities</i>	45	54.88%	30	36.59%	75	91.46%
	TOTAL	<i>Achievements</i>	1	1.22%	0	0.00%	1	1.22%
		<i>Accomplishments</i>	1	1.22%	0	0.00%	1	1.22%
		TOTAL	50	60.98%	32	39.02%	82	100.00%

The progressive forms are not fully aligned with the predictions of the aspect hypothesis. Particularly, with the proposition that the progressive ought to occur with activities and extend to telic verbs (accomplishments and achievement verbs). The overall observed pattern used with the progressive forms follows the sequences below:

Overall: Activities (91.46%) → States (6.10%) → Achievements (1.22%)
→ Accomplishments (1.22%)

Year 1: Activities (92.86%) → States (4.76%) → Achievements (2.38%)

Year 2: Activities (82.35%) → States (17.56%)

Year 3: Activities (95.56%) → Accomplishments (4.35%)

The usage of progressive forms with the lexical class of activities across the three groups is fully aligned with the predictions of the aspect hypothesis. As the level of proficiency increases, the usage rate of the progressive forms with activities increases as well. Contrary to the postulated pattern, L2 English learners have shown sequences where the progressive has also been used with states (even though the usage rate is not high compared to the total verbal tokens). The usage of progressive with states was also reported by Robison (1990) where it was stated that progressive forms can overextend to states, however, other studies focusing on progressive forms have not reported similar results. The telic predicates (accomplishments and achievements) which ought to be used after the progressive is spread to activities, emerge sporadically only across Year 1 and Year 3. The lexical class of achievements only appears in Year 1, while the class of accomplishments emerges in Year 3. Even when the sequences are compared between the two tasks, Text I and Text II, similar sequences have been observed which means that the task type has not affected the way how progressive morphology has been used by L2 English learners. Consequently, based on these results, it can be postulated that the learners are influenced by the lexical aspect, however, they are still in the process of language development, which can be proved by the sporadic appearance of accomplishments and achievements.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study offers valuable insights into how Albanian learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) acquire the progressive aspect, particularly in relation to the Aspect Hypothesis (AH). While the use of progressive forms with activities aligns with the AH, deviations such as the overextension of the progressive marker to states were observed. The sporadic appearance of telic verbs (accomplishments and achievements) suggests that learners are still in the process of developing a full understanding of the progressive aspect. These findings underscore the influence of lexical aspect on tense-aspect acquisition but also highlight specific challenges for Albanian learners due to their native language's lack of aspectual categories.

Limitations

The study's cross-sectional design offers only a snapshot of learners' development, making it difficult to track changes over time. Additionally, the limited participant pool restricts the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse group, as well as incorporating oral data, would provide a more comprehensive view of learners' tense-aspect acquisition.

Recommendations

Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to track learners' development over time. Expanding the participant pool to include learners from different age groups and educational backgrounds would enhance generalizability. Including both written and oral data in future studies is recommended to capture a more complete picture of learners' use of the progressive aspect. Finally, research into the effects of explicit instruction on aspect acquisition would provide valuable insights for ESL curriculum design.

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