



The Effect of lexical Aspect on L2 Development of English Progressive by Yemeni learners

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study aims to test the Aspect Hypothesis by examining the role of lexical aspect on the development of the English progressive in 101 adult classroom Yemeni learners. The Aspect Hypothesis claims that language learners are affected by lexical aspectual classes of verbs (and predicates) when they use tense-aspect markings in their target language (Andersen & Shirai, 1994). While acquiring English as a L2, for instance, Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds (1995) and Lee (2001) found that learners tended to use the past tense marking -ed with verbs and predicates which semantically entail inherent endpoints (e.g. die and draw a picture) and add the progressive affix -ing to verbs which are semantically dynamic and durative (e.g. play and swim). All the subjects were university students with different majors from different levels. A language proficiency test was administered to the participants to place them at appropriate levels. Instrument for this research is a gap-filling task adapted from Al-thubaiti (2010). The task aimed at testing L2 learners' use of English progressive morphology in written production. The present study addresses two questions: (1) What is the distribution of the progressive marker used by low and advanced level learners in terms of the four lexical aspect categories: activities, accomplishments, achievements and states?; (2) to what degree does inherent lexical aspect affect the uses of progressive morphology. The results of this study show that Yemeni learners tend to use the present progressive more accurately as their L2 proficiency levels increase. However, the lexical aspect class plays a role on the acquisition of progressive morphology. Learners first use progressive form on activity verbs, eventually extending its use to the other aspectual classes of verbs. Moreover, L1 transfer plays a significant role in tense aspect marking. The current study adds to the body of research on L2 tense aspect by shedding light on the nature of the difficulties learners face when developing L2 tense aspect system.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, many studies on the acquisition of tense and aspect have been conducted. These studies focused on the semantic classes of verbs and their connections to the morphological encoding of time within an utterance or discourse. Eventually, the Aspect Hypothesis, a significant tense-aspect theory, was formulated as a result of this substantial research examining the semantic effect on language acquisition in great detail. Anderson & Shirai (1994, 1996), Anderson (1991), Shirai & Anderson (1995), and Robison formulated the so-called Aspect Hypothesis (1995). This hypothesis has been extensively examined and, for the most part, broadly accepted. It distinguishes between lexical and grammatical aspect, which are the linguistic mechanisms used to create tense-aspect, such as auxiliaries and morphemes, and the internal temporal features that exist within a verb and its arguments, and ultimately within the context indicated by a sentence. For the Aspect Hypothesis, which is said to be universal, the majority of studies have investigated the growth of language learners in many languages to confirm its universality. For instance, in the first language, Antinucci & Miller (1976), who explored both English and Italian, and Bronckart & Sinclair (1973), who considered French, investigated English and Italian respectively. Sharia and Anderson (1995) conducted research on English. This pattern has also been observed in Second Language Acquisition. Robinson (1990, 1995), Bardovi-Harlig (1998), Collins (1998), and Jabbari (1998), among others, have studied the acquisition of English. Andersen and Ramsay researched the acquisition of Spanish in 1991 and 1990, respectively. The research of Housen (1994) and Shirai and Kurono (1998) studies the acquisition of Dutch and Japanese, respectively.

Based on the Aspect Hypothesis, the present study intends to contribute to the corpus of research on the language acquisition of tense and aspect in the setting of L2. Consequently, I will explore the relevance of lexical aspect Yemeni learners' acquisition of present progressive morphology. To achieve this purpose, the study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What is the distribution of the progressive marker used by low and advanced learners in terms of the following lexical aspect categories: activities, accomplishments, achievements and statives?;
2. to what degree inherent lexical aspect affect the uses of progressive morphology

1- Literature Review

1.1. The Aspect Hypothesis

In the area of L2 tense aspect acquisition, the AH has yield robust cross- linguistic data. The AH provides prediction and an account of the relationships between grammatical and lexical aspect in L1 and L2 acquisition of tense and aspect system (Ayoun & Salaberry, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Comajoan, 2006). According to Anderson and Shiria (1994), the Aspect Hypothesis claims that “first and second language learners will initially be influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs or predicates in the acquisition of tense and aspect

markers associated with or affixed to these verbs” (p.133). Generally, the main descriptive claims of AH can be summarised as follows:

- Learners initially use past marking or perfective marking on telic predicates (accomplishments and achievements), eventually extending its use to activities and stative predicates.
- In languages that encode the perfective/imperfective distinction, imperfective past appears later than perfective past, and imperfective past marking begins with stative verbs and activity (both atelic), then extending to accomplishment and achievement verbs.
- In languages that have a progressive marking, initially it is used with activity predicates, then extending to accomplishment and achievement verbs. Progressive marking is not incorrectly overextended to stative verbs.

(Andersen & Shirai 1996:533)

The prediction of the Aspect Hypothesis has been tested by many research scholars across different languages in L1 and L2 settings. In L1 acquisition of tense-aspect morphology, it seems that a large number of the studies in the literature are consistent with the AH prediction whereby young children are sensitive to the lexical aspect rather than tense when acquiring tense and aspect morphology. That is, children in the early stages of acquisition use perfective past marking with telic predicates (accomplishment and achievement), and imperfective marking on atelic (activities) (e.g., Chen & Shirai, 2010; Johnson & Fey 2006; Le, 1998; Shirai & Anderson, 1995; 2004; Shu, 2004; Weist et al and so on). Some studies, on the other hand, did not confirm the AH predictions due to some factors, namely language-specificity (e.g., Bertinetto's et al. 2015), individual differences and task variation (e.g., Bar-Shalom, 2004; Filiouchkina, 2004; Wanger, 2001; Olbishevskaya, 2004; Stoll, 2005).

Likewise, in L2 settings, the acquisition of tense and aspect as a second language has been examined by many researchers across several languages. The findings of previous studies are classified into two categories. Most of the studies revealed that there is a universality of the AH with regard to the spread of progressive marking across the aspectual classes. Shami used a fill-in-the-gap test and a two-option multiple choice task to analyse the development of the English past progressive with EFL Saudi students. The Aspect Hypothesis was supported since learners generally used the progressive –ing with activity verbs, followed by accomplishment. Sugaya and Shirai examined the effects of task type, L2 proficiency, and L1 transfer on the L2 acquisition of the Japanese progressive marker in an effort to explain why the progressive marker is most frequently used with activity verbs and rarely extended to stative verbs. Sixty-one advanced and beginner learners of Japanese from progressive and non-progressive languages participated in an oral task and an acceptability judgment test. The results showed that The exclusive use of the Japanese progressive marker "-teiru" with activity verbs had a

stronger impact on task type and L2 proficiency than L1 effects, which were restricted to novices (Sugaya and Shirai 30). More Specifically, the progressive marker was strongly attached with activity verbs for lower proficiency learners

Contrary to the Aspect Hypothesis, a number of studies have indicated that experienced L2 learners, rather than novices, demonstrate the archetypal link between action verbs (e.g., play) and the progressive marker. McManus analyzed a spoken narrative task and a sentence interpretation task by L2 French learners from two L1 backgrounds (English and German) and at two proficiency levels (advanced and beginner). The results revealed that as L2 proficiency rises, the number of prototypical pairings (e.g., activity-progressive) increases.

Upor made a similar observation when she used picture compositions to obtain written data from EFL instructed learners across three educational levels in Tanzania. It was found that the developmental pattern of the progressive did not match the Aspect Hypothesis prediction, as learners added the -ing to activities, then achievements, then accomplishment, and then overgeneralised it to stative verbs. This is in contrast to the Aspect Theory, which claims that L2 learners would attach the -ing to the following verbs in the following order: s: activity, accomplishment, achievement, and without extending to statives.

Few in-depth studies on the learning of tense and aspect by adult Arabic-speaking learners of English as a second language have been done in the Arabic language. According to the reviewed related literature, a few studies have been conducted to assess the acquisition of the English present progressive tense, with a specific focus on the AH. For instance, Mazyad's (1999) study investigated the acquisition of English tense and aspect on learners of English by using grammaticality judgment task, gap filling task and retelling task. Additionally, Alruwaili (2014) investigated the L2 acquisition of English aspectual system by Arabic-speaking learners and this study focused mainly on the L1 influence on the acquisition of English tense and aspect marking rather than the lexical aspect. Thus, it's worth addressing the strength of the AH on Yemeni learners of EFL for academic purposes in an instructional setting by using an elicitation task.

1.2. The Definition of Tense and Aspect

In general, tense refers to a temporal deixis; the relation (present, past, or future) of an event or a situation to a reference time, usually the time of speech (Comrie, 1976). In other words, it locates a situation or an event in relation to some other time (such as speech time). Aspect, on the other hand, is not concerned with temporal deixis (i. e., it is nondeictic), but rather describes “the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976:3). To illustrate the difference between tense and aspect the following sentences will be considered. The difference between (1) and (2) is that of tense since the difference is between situation time in relation to speech time while the difference between (2) and (3) is one of *aspect* since the difference stems from how the action is viewed by the speaker. In sentence (2) the situation is viewed externally

as a whole completed without distinguishing any of its internal structure while in (3) it is viewed internally ongoing, with no reference to its initial and final points (Comrie 1976).

1. He plays football every day.
2. He played football yesterday.
3. He was playing football.

In short, tense usually places a particular situation in relation to the time of utterance (usually the time of speech), whereas aspect describes how it occurs over a period of time focusing on the internal properties of the event (Comrie 1976; Smith 1997; Chung & Timberlake 1985; Reichenbach 1947). Aspect is divided in to two categories: inherent (aspect) situation and (grammatical) viewpoint aspect.

1.3 Types of Aspect

1.3.1 Lexical Aspect

'Lexical aspect', which is also known as 'situational aspect' (Smith, 1983, 1997) and 'semantic aspect', (Comrie, 1976) refers to its chronological features inherent in the lexical items which describe a situation independent of tense or grammatical aspect such as telicity or durativity. Unlike grammatical aspect, lexical aspect is a universal feature or a property of the verb or predicate. Vendler (1967) classified verbs into four situation aspect categories: Statives, Activity, Accomplishment, and Achievement. Table 2.1 illustrates some examples of each category:

Table 2.1: Vendler's aspectual situation classes

State	Activity	Accomplishment	Achievement
Went	Run	Run a mile	Find something
Like	Write	Write a letter	Recognize something

Each of these classes can be characterized in terms of three universal primitive semantic features:

- (i) Telic which denotes having an inherent endpoint, e. g., build a villa, reach);
- (ii) Punctual which denotes having no duration, e. g., notice, finish;
- (iii) Dynamic which denotes activity and action,e. g., play, write) as opposed to static and unchanging ,e. g., like, want . Thus, whether a situation is:

a state: He knows the news

an activity : He runs quickly.

an achievement: He arrived first

or an accomplishment: He wrote a novel

is determined by the presence or absence of the above semantic features. These semantic features are mapped onto the above lexical aspectual categories using an adapted version of Andersen's semantic features description of lexical aspect, illustrated with our examples:

Table 1: Semantic Features of Lexical Aspectual Categories

(after Andersen, 1991)

Categories of Lexical Aspect	Semantic Features		
	Dynamic	Telic	Punctual
State: He knows the story	--	--	--
Activity: He runs a mile	x	--	--
Achievement: He arrived late	x	x	x
Accomplishment: He wrote a novel	x	x	--

1.3.2. Grammatical Aspect

'Grammatical aspect', which is also known as 'Viewpoint aspect' (Smith, 1983, 1997) is expressed by using overt grammatical markers such as auxiliaries or inflections associated morphosyntactically with the main verb (Salaberry 2008; Smith 1997). To illustrate, consider the aspectual interpretation of the following sentences, given in Arabic along with their English equivalents:

(I) a. mashat hindun ?ila al madrasati (perfective)

walked-PERF-3fsg Hind-NOM to-prep. the-school-GEN

'Hind walked to school'.

b. kaanat hindun tamshii ?la almadrasati (imperfective)

was-PERF-aux-fsg. Hind-NOM walk-IMP-3fsg to-prep. the-school-GEN.

'Hind was walking to school'.

c. mashat hindun fii al muntazahi (perfective)

walked-PERF-3fsg Hind-NOM in-prep the-park-GEN

'Hind walked in the park'.

(1a) presents a complete event that has a defined goal, or natural ending, and the information that the goal was reached. (1 b) presents a part of the same type of event, but does not indicate whether or not the goal was reached. Rather, it denotes that the event was in progress without information about its beginning or end, leaving doubt regarding its completion. (1c) presents a complete event that does have an inherent goal, and the information that the event was terminated. Therefore, grammatical aspect gives a full view in (1 a) and (1 c), but a partial view in (1 b). Hence, the perfective aspect in both languages looks at a situation as a whole with a beginning and an end, whereas the imperfective looks at a situation partially without an endpoint. From the above discussion, we conclude that grammatical aspect can be divided into two types:

(1) The perfective aspect (viewpoint): it refers to complete, closed, and bounded events (Comrie 1976). Comrie (1976) Smith (1997) pointed out that the perfective aspect views a situation in full including initial and final points.

(2) The imperfective aspect: it views a situation partially including neither initial nor final points (Smith 1997). Therefore, it does not indicate whether the event has been actually completed or not but it indicates that it was in progress at some point in time.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants were 101 Yemeni Arabic learners of English. All the participants are university students from different levels, with different majors. A biographic questionnaire was administered to the subjects to collect information on each person's background such as their age, their level, their exposure to English. They were male and female students, and their ages range from 19 to 41 years. They belonged to three levels, elementary, intermediate and advanced based on their performance on the Cloze test.

2.2. Instruments

Instrument for this research is a production task. It is a gap filling task aimed at testing L2 learners' use of verbal morphology in written production and more specifically the use of progressive morphology. In this task, 12 test items out of 38 target sentences on the GFT (three items per aspectual category) were constructed to provide obligatory present progressive contexts for the subjects to supply the correct target tense form of the verb in brackets. The other 26 sentences on the same GFT are filler items targeting either present or past

Additionally, it make the comparison among the participants easier based on the same criteria, which otherwise might be less clear.

2.3. Procedure

A Google form link was provided for the participants to answer the gap filling tasks as well as the Cloze test. The participants were asked to comprehend the sentences and respond as a native speaker might do. They were told to complete the test in half an hour; however, since the test was online, it was difficult to set a specific time to complete the test. Therefore, every participant varies in the time adequate for consulting their intuitions. The instructions were made very clear at the top of the page and examples were provided to show subjects how to supply the correct verbs.

2.4. Analysis

In order to examine the use of the progressive responses, non-progressive responses and the distribution of the progressive marking across the four aspectual classes by all level learners, the elicited data from Yemeni learner were analyzed quantitatively and means, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages are used. SPSS 22 for Windows was used to carry out the distributional analysis of the appropriate and inappropriate use of the simple past markings. Chi square tests were conducted to test the influence of lexical aspect on the use of present progressive tense forms with different proficiency levels (elementary, Intermediate and advanced levels) .

2.5. Results

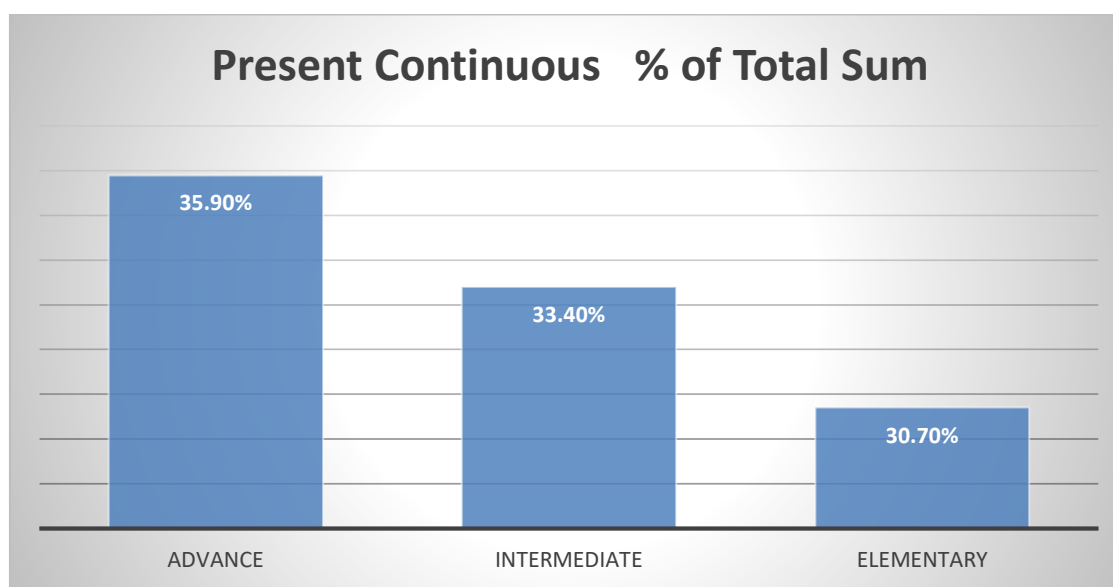
In this section, results of the present study are presented and the analysis of these results consists of two parts: (1) the overall use of present progressive tense; (2) the distribution of the progressive marker by the four lexical aspectual classes across the proficiency levels of the learners.

2.5.1. The Overall Use of the Present Progressive Tense

The present progressive responses and non responses by all the three groups were also analyzed statistically to gauge the learners' general production ability of the present progressive morphology .An examination of the overall use of the present progressive tense by learners across the three levels indicated that the advanced-level learners used the present progressive tense in the intended contexts higher than the elementary and intermediate-level learners with percentage of 35.9%.The intermediate level-learners used the present progressive tense higher than elementary level- learners (35.9% and 30.7% respectively).In general, as learners progress to higher levels, there is a relative improvement in their usage of the present progressive morphology. Table 1 and figure1 illustrate the overall use of the present progressive morphology in the intended contexts by learners across the three levels

Table 1: Distribution of percentage use of present progressive by learners in the gap filling task

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of Total Sum
Advance	30	7.53	1.717	35.9%
Intermediate	34	6.18	1.314	35.9%
Elementary	37	5.22	2.275	30.7%
Total	101	6.23	2.044	100.0%

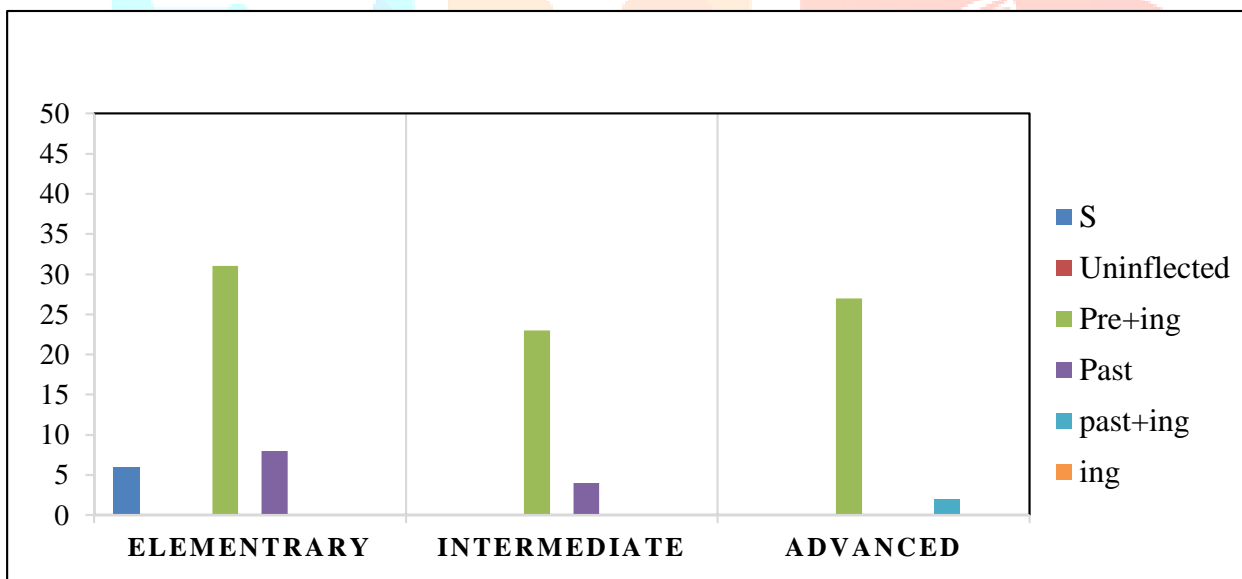
**Figure 1: Distribution of percentage use of present progressive by learners in the gap filling task**

Statistically, the one way ANOVA test revealed that there was a significant difference between groups in the use of present progressive morphology. The results obtained from this test indicated that the differences were significant ($F = 13.281$) and $p = .000$. Post hoc Tukey HSD results also indicated that there were significant differences in the use of the present progressive between the three groups.

2.5.2 Use of Progressive Marking According to Lexical Aspectual Classes

This section presents the findings of the appropriate use of progressive marker across the lexical aspectual classes. Lexical aspect was found to play a significant role in progressive marking. The GFT data on the present progressive tense indicated that the simultaneous recurrence of aspect marking and activity verbs was mainly the result of a skewing in the distribution of progressive marking. All learners in the different three groups tended to associate the progressive marker most with activity verbs. However, the use of the aspect marking '-pre+ing' with activity verbs was significant for the elementary and intermediate level groups. The cell value of chi square test for activity 'pre+ing' alone accounts for overall significant of (χ^2 (28, N = 404 = 34.36, P < 0.001) and (χ^2 (28, N = 404 = 29.43, P < 0.000) for elementary and intermediate level groups respectively. However, with increasing level of proficiency in the advanced level group, progressive marking was extended uniformly to all other aspectual classes of verbs regardless of their inherent semantics. As a result, this is consistent with the Research Hypothesis. The following figures (2, 3, 4) represent the distribution of the progressive marking across the lexical aspectual classes.

Figure2: Total number of cases-Activities



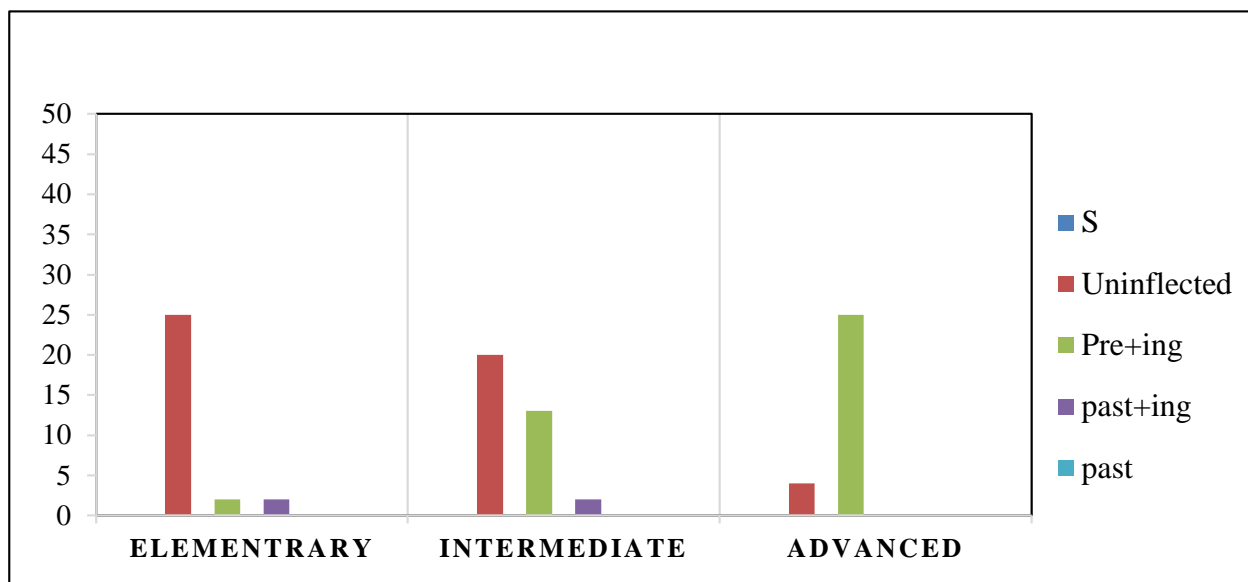


Figure3: Total number of cases-Statives

From the figure above, it is clearly noted that the elementary and intermediate level learners did not supply the progressive marking (pre+ing) more with stative verbs though the context is present progressive. On the other hand, the advanced level learners mark verbs with the correct target tense form (pre+ing) and spread it from its concentration on activities into statives.

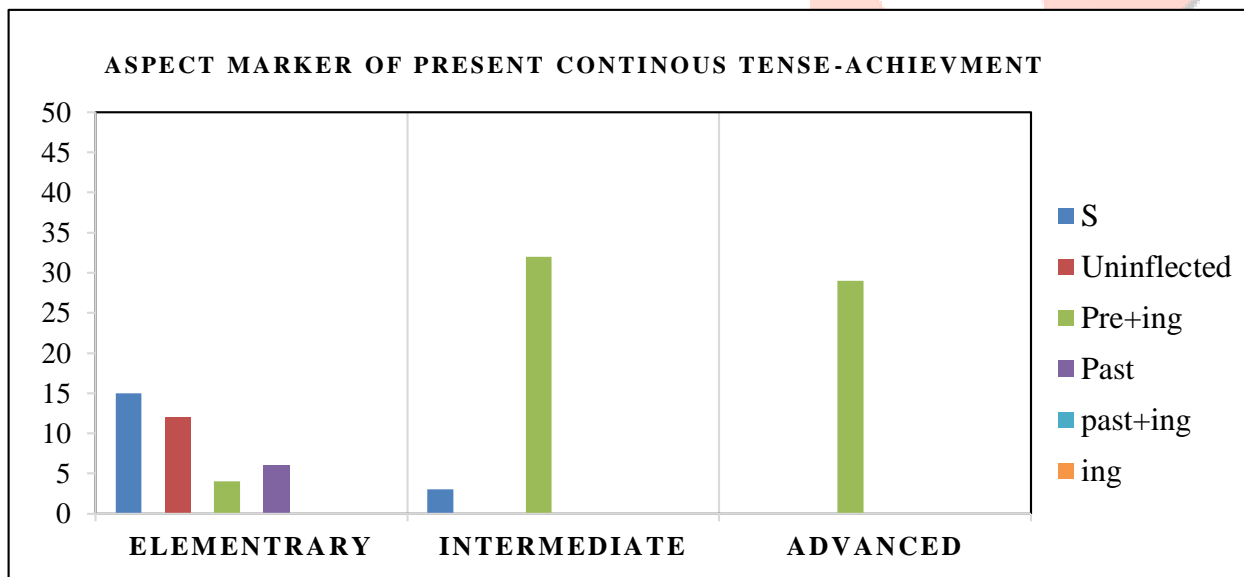


Figure4: Total number of cases-Achievements

It clearly appeared that elementary level learners did not attach the progressive marking more frequently with achievements, whereas intermediate and advanced level students mark verbs with the progressive form and spread it from its concentration on activities into achievements.

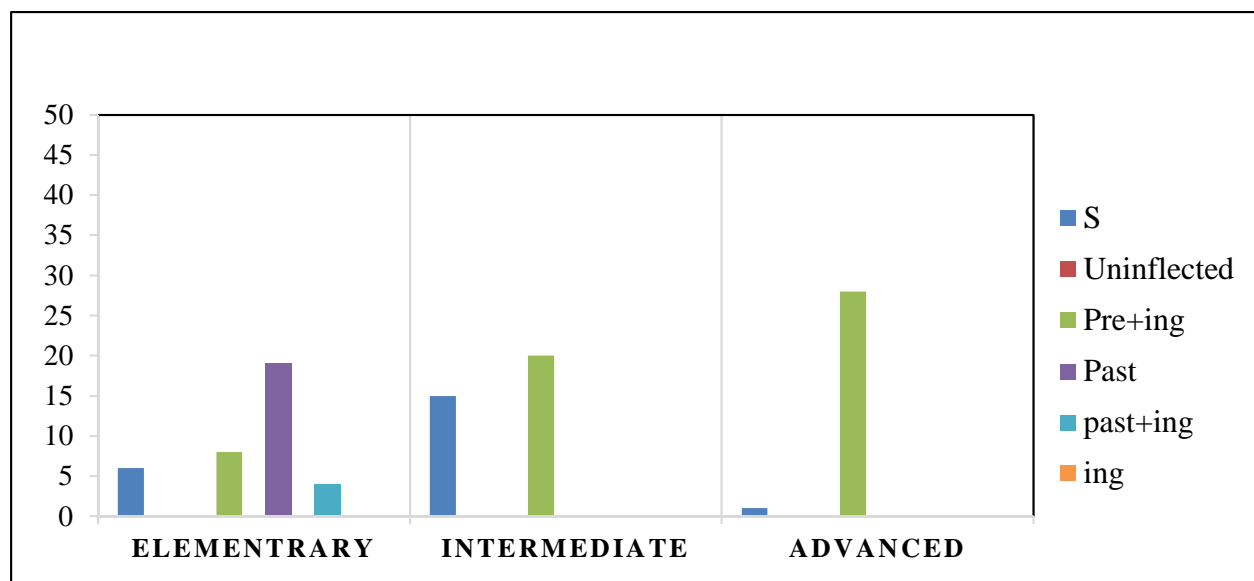


Figure4: Total number of cases-Accomplishments

Similar to the earlier findings, elementary level learners did not spread the correct progressive form on accomplishments. However, intermediate and advanced level learners mark verbs with the progressive form and spread it from its concentration on activities into accomplishments.

To summarize, the results obtained from the GFT data revealed that low level learners show a bias association of the progressive marking with activities with tense being neglected. This result indicates that the lexical aspect affects learners' inflectional choices within the confines of target-like tense distinctions. On the other hand, high level learners spread the correct target tense form (i.e., pre+ing) uniformly to all aspectual verbs regardless of their inherent semantics. Thus, this finding is in line with the predication of the Aspect Hypothesis.

3. Discussion

With respect to the research questions mentioned earlier, the present study found that the distribution of the English progressive marking among low and advanced levels learners supports to some extent the Aspect Hypothesis as a chi-square test revealed a significant association between activity verbs with the progressive -ing marker across the three levels of proficiency.. Yemeni Learners tended to supply the progressive marker on activity verbs (15.5%) more than accomplishment, achievement and stative verbs. The tendency to affiliate the progressives marking with activity verbs decreased with rising of proficiency levels. So, giving support to several earlier studies (for example, Sugaya and Shirai,Shami), this study found that the predicted link between verb types and verbal morphology is strongest at the early stages of L2 development. This finding confirms the predication Aspect Hypothesis as the effect of lexical aspect was more visible in the beginners' production of the progressive tense than the advanced groups

The observed task effects in tense-aspect acquisition works may explain the lack of sensitivity to lexical aspect in the early stages, as stated by Shirai (22) and Sugaya and Shirai (30). Furthermore, participants in studies testing the Aspect Hypothesis aren't always categorised accurately according to their level of proficiency, which leads to conflicting reports on the most sensitive developmental stage to lexical aspect influence. Another explanation for the difference between the findings of this work and previous works is that the low learners in this study may have had limited form-meaning mappings, expecting each progressive marker to signify "action-in-progress," (Andersen and Shirai, "Discourse Motivations" 143) as opposed to the more advanced learners, who would form multiple form-meanings for the progressive marker. Learners who understand the progressive marker in its various forms can apply it to all verb types. At the advanced level, less common categories like achievements and stative verbs were increasingly supplied with a -ing, indicating that the distribution of the progressive morpheme will become less skewed over time.

The difference in type-token ratio is another factor that could explain the reported variations in frequency effects in relation to proficiency level in this study. In this study, the low level learners add the progressive marker to a limited type of frequently used activity verbs. In contrast, the advanced level learners add the progressive marking to various verb types in the task. The variance in their use of verbs that are highly connected with the progressive aspect in spoken English can then be explained by the difference in type-token ratios between the two learner groups.

To summarize, the findings of this study indicated that the lexical aspect had an effect on the acquisition of English temporal morphology of the progressive marking by Yemeni EFL learners. More specifically, results revealed that learners first use the progressive form on activity verbs and then extended the use to other aspectual classes of verbs. In the analysis of the data obtained from the learners in all the levels, it is clearly noted that there was a higher percentage of appropriate use of progressive linked with learners of higher levels.

4. Conclusion

Drawing on the Aspect Hypothesis, the present study examines how the use of English progressive morphology change as learners' proficiency levels increase in the target language and to what extent lexical aspectual class influences the use of progressive. Using a cloze task as a gap filling task, the finding of this study revealed that learners' accurate use of progressive morphology increases as they become more proficient in their target language. However, lexical aspect was found to play an important role in tense-aspect marking even among students at more advanced levels, which is consistent with the predication of the Aspect Hypothesis. The results indicated that the association between the progressive form and activity verbs was statistically significant, indicating that low learners frequently used the progressive form with activity verbs and even the high learners showed a preference for associating the progressive with activity verbs first, before the other verbs.

Pedagogical implications

Researching the theoretical discussions on L2 tense-aspect, this study sheds light on some implications for instruction of L2 tense-aspect system. The findings of this study suggest that when teaching English forms teachers should not be limited to explicit instruction. Moreover, teachers should be selective whereby they have to use different teaching techniques and strategies that can meet the different needs of students. For instance, task-based language teaching and communicative approaches are seen to be of great use to teach students how to use the structures in adequate and appropriate way, for EFL learners have to get exposed more to the L2. (Fontivros-Malana, 2018).

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