

**The Acquisition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s in English: Exploring its  
use by L2 learners of English in written and oral register.**

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## **Abstract**

The acquisition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular inflection in English has been analyzed through different perspectives and theoretical frameworks in order to find a suitable explanation to understand why is one of the most difficult grammatical rules to acquire by English L1 and L2 learners. This study examines if timed written and oral register influences the production of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s in Present Tense by L2 learners of English. The main hypothesis presented in this study is that oral register provides with more errors when English L2 learners perform 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme-s as in written register, although the factor of time has a crucial role in order to verify or deny this statement. A study on the acquisition of the 3d person singular –s morpheme by l2 learners was conducted through the data collected from six children in the ages of 11 to 15, who were involved in a time limited story-telling task without any kind of instruction. The results were analyzed and studied in relation to the factor of time and to other specific linguistic concerns in order to establish a pattern of errors and their causes.

## **1. Introduction.**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular inflection in English is considered an introductory concept for second/foreign language learners as it is one of the first grammatical rules taught by teachers to L2 learners of English at an elementary level. According to Krashen (1982), English verbal agreement is commonly described as “easy” and the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s is considered to be one of the most understandable concepts to learn of English grammar. Although both researchers and ESL teachers seem to agree in the fact that the third person singular rule is very simple, there is some variability in its use by learners, and it seems that there are not so many students that apply the rule, even when referring to L2 learners with an advanced level of English (Hironymous, 1993).

The present study aims to test the observation that oral or “natural” register provides us with more instances of errors by L2 learners of a pre-intermediate level when using the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s than written register (Chafe, 1982). More precisely, the main purpose of the study is to analyze if timed written /oral production register has any effect on the use of grammatical 3<sup>rd</sup> person oral singular trying to establish a systematic pattern of errors and their causes. The study focuses on the grammatical structure of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s in declarative sentences with lexical verbs in the Present Tense, discarding negative(s) and interrogative(s) sentences. The Present Progressive as well as the Present Perfect forms are also discarded.

## 2. Third person singular and its properties in English and Spanish:

### A comparison.

The main difference between Spanish and English is that English has a very *poor inflectional system*. In English, Tense and Agreement are grammatical categories that are realized by verb inflection. Finite verb forms in English are those which carry Tense and they are morphologically marked as either Present or Past. Since English has no future inflected form of the verb, the English conjugation is reduced to these two inflected tenses (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1990). Almost all lexical or full English verbs have five different forms; *base form (play), the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (plays), the past tense (played, chose), the past participle (played, chosen) and the -ing (playing) form*. Concretely, this study focuses only on the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular form in the Present Tense. The following table illustrates the verb system in the English language in Present Tense. As can be seen, the base form of the verbs is the one used in all forms except in the third person singular form, which is the only person that carries inflection.

<b>Person and Number</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Present Simple 'Eat'</b>
1st sing.	I	eat
2nd sing.	You	eat
3rd sing.	He/She/It	eat-s
1st plur.	We	eat
2nd plur.	You	eat
3rd plur.	They	eat

**Figure 1** .Verb 'Eat' inflected in the Present Tense

The 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s is realized by three allomorphs which represent the three different pronunciations of it. The –s morpheme is pronounced in a different way depending on the voiced or the voiceless sound of the last syllable of the verb to which is added.

/ɪz/	After base forms ending in voiced or voiceless sibilants. In these cases, the –s from always ends in –es.	E.g. <i>pass-passes, push-pushes</i> and <i>catch – catches</i> .
/z/	After base forms ending in voiced sounds.	E.g. <i>call-calls, flee-flees,</i> and <i>try-tries</i> .
/s/	After base forms ending in voiceless sounds.	E.g. <i>cut-cuts, hop-hops,</i> and <i>lock-locks</i> .

**Figure 2.** The -s inflection pronunciation. Extracted from Quirk, R. Greembaum, S. (1990). *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*.

There are also some base forms that are considered to be irregular as they change the form when adding the morpheme –s. E.g. *do-does, try- tries, have-has* , or the –s form of the verb BE: *is* (Quirk & Greembaum, 1990).

Moving now to the Spanish inflectional system, Spanish presents a quite *rich inflectional system* in contrast with the English language. In Spanish, Tense is also realized by verb inflection as all the forms are morphologically inflected to express tense and agreement. In Spanish there are three different conjugations whose respective infinitives end in *-ar, -er* and *-ir* (Bruyne, 1995)

Person and number	Pronouns	Cantar 'to sing' [Present Simple]	Comer 'to eat' [Present Simple]	Vivir 'to live' [Present Simple]
1st sing.	Yo	cant-o	com-o	viv-o
2nd sing.	Tú	cant-as	com-es	viv-es
3rd sing.	Él/Ella	cant-a	com-e	viv-e
1st plur.	Nosotros/as	cant-amos	com-emos	viv-imos
2nd plur.	Vosotros/as	cant-áis	com-éis	viv-ís
3rd plur.	Ellos/as	cant-an	com-en	viv-en

**Figure 3.** The three types of Spanish conjugations.

As it can be observed, the vowels –a and –e correspond to the inflectional morphemes for the third person singular in present tense.

### **3. The acquisition of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular.**

The acquisition of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in English has extensively been studied both in the areas of first and second language acquisition, as well as from different theoretical frameworks (Brown, Dulay & Burt, 1973; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Hsieh, 2009; Bloom Paradis & Duncan, 2012).

From the perspective of first language acquisition, the acquisition of the 3rd person singular-*s* has been studied in relation to the order of acquisition of other morphemes as the present progressive-*ing*, the plural-*s*, the irregular past tense, the possessive- 's the copula *be*, the articles *a/an* and the and the auxiliary *be* (Brown, 1973).



After analyzing the acquisition of different morphemes by L1 speakers of English as a native language, it was found that the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular was acquired in a penultimate position, just before the auxiliary *be*.

1. Present Progressive <i>-ing</i>
2. Plural <i>-s</i>
3. Irregular Past Tense
4. Possessive <i>- 's</i>
5. Copula <i>be</i>
6. Articles <i>a /an</i> and <i>the</i>
7. Regular Past Tense <i>-ed</i>
8. 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular Present Tense <i>-s</i>
9. Auxiliary <i>be</i>

**Figure 4.** Order of Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes for L1 Learners of English.

This acquisition order of morphemes in English as L1 was also compared to the acquisition order of morphemes in English as L2 and it was suggested that there is a sequence of fourteen morphemes, which includes the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme *-s*, that are acquired in a different order between L1 and L2 learners of English (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Gass & Selinker, 1994). The following list shows the order of acquisition of some of these morphemes by L2 learners of English.

1. Plural <i>-s</i>
2. Present progressive <i>-ing</i>
3. Copula <i>be</i>
4. Auxiliary <i>be</i>
5. Articles <i>a /an</i> and <i>the</i>
6. Irregular Past Tense
7. Regular Past Tense <i>-ed</i>
8. 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular Present Tense <i>-s</i>
9. Possessive <i>- 's</i>

**Figure 5.** Order of Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes for L2 Learners of English

As far as the acquisition of morphemes by L2 learners is concerned, it was observed that as happened with L1 learners, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s was acquired in a penultimate position, but in this case before the possessive-*s* (Dulay and Burt, 1973 Krashen, 1982; Freeman, 1975; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001).

The differences observed in the order of acquisition of morphemes by L1 and L2 students of English were attributed to the fact that the group of L2 children who were tested in the experiment of the order of acquisition of morphemes were older than the group of L1 children speakers of English. Nevertheless, in both cases the acquisition of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular is claimed to occur very late which would demonstrate that, as Krashen suggested, this morpheme is one of the most difficult to acquire despite the fact that it is one of the easiest grammatical rules to learn (Krashen, 1982).

By the same token, the acquisition of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular-*s* in itself by L2 learners has been analyzed from a perspective of processing framework, as it is believed that input has a clear role in the development of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s by those learners of English. According to the Network Model (Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012), which was used to revise spontaneous speech samples collected from L2 learners of English, the acquisition of inflection depends on what is called “lexicon strength”. If the lexicon strength increases, it is easier for the learner to process the word and retrieve it. Consequently, the acquisition of the inflectional 3<sup>rd</sup> singular morpheme -s has to do with the frequency in which a verb occurs with this inflection in the input that the learner receives. In this way, learners/ children are expected to be more accurate when using verbs with the –s morpheme that tend to appear frequently in the input (high word frequency verbs) as Bloom, Paradis and Duncan (2012) proposed in their study.

From a morphosyntactic point of view (Hsieh, 2009), a collection of spontaneous speeches (from interviews and storytelling tasks) extracted from L2 learners of English demonstrated that English L2 children tended to use non-finite forms to replace finite forms in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s and that they knew how to use better the copula “be” than the verbal inflections. It was thought that L2 learners know about functional categories and features of tense and agreement but they have some problems with the realization of the surface morphology (Hsieh, 2009). In this study, Chinese learners of English performed better the copula *be* than the verbal inflections because of the positive transfer of their native language as in standard Written Chinese they use the copula *shi* which is very similar to the copula *be* in English. According to the results of his study, it was claimed that L2 learners of English acquired the forms of *be* before the inflectional morphology of the verb, especially those forms of *be* followed by a noun phrase.

The acquisition of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme-s by L2 learners has been also studied taking into consideration the typological proximity between the first and the second language being acquired (Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012). It has been considered that those learners with a rich inflecting L1 are more successful than those with an isolating (language with no inflection to indicate grammatical relationships) L1, especially when facing verbs that had a *high frequency lemma* in the input. Lemma frequency means the frequency or number of times that a verb appears in the learner’s input despite of its inflectional form. Thus, they are more successful when using those verbs that appear more in the input they receive with different inflectional forms (e.g. walks, walks, walked or walking.).

English L2 learners with a rich inflecting L1 are more predisposed to use the 3SG morpheme thanks to the positive transfer of the L1, since they are more used when inflecting verbs and it is easier for them to generalize rules. In the case of isolating L1 learners, they lack the knowledge that make possible the generalizations of third person singular morpheme –s. The same happens with learners with L1 with a larger lexicon. The possibility of a negative transfer from the L1 to the L2 has been also taken into consideration especially if L1 has not subject-verb agreement and tense marking .In consequence, it is probable that their L1 knowledge of tense and agreement features interfere in their performance of the L2 (Hsieh, 2009), as happened with Chinese learners of English in Hsieh’s study as they replaced inflectional verb forms for non-finite forms.

The acquisition of the 3rd person singular morpheme-s has also been studied from the point of view of Phonetics and Phonology, taken into consideration the effect that Phonetics has in English second language (L2) learners. More precisely, the consonants [s] and [z] are considered to be “continuants”, produced with continuous airflow through the mouth, thus it is assumed that the manner of articulation of these allomorphs is more likely to be kept and produced by L2 learners (Hsieh, 2009).

#### **4. Written vs. Oral register.**

A review on some relevant articles on the issue may help to admit or reject the standard assumption that learners produce more errors in oral rather than in written register (Chafe, 1982; Kenworthy, 2009). The factor of time is essential in order to understand how written and oral register works.

Some hypotheses suggest that time and technique may influence the production of grammatical errors committed by English L2 learners, especially when writing (Kenworthy, 2006). The study conducted by Kenworthy with sixteen English L2 intermediate-level students which consisted in writing some essays within the educational setting with a timed limited of 45 minutes and then doing the same task at home without limited time, revealed that the at-home essays were characterized as having fewer numbers of grammatical errors (Kenworthy, 2006). In the first case, students had to write an essay choosing a topic from a series of them and writing them in 45 minutes with pen and paper (the traditional way) under examination conditions. Some weeks later, students had to do the same task, but this time at home with a computer and with a period of time of one week.

Electronic technology played a fundamental role as there was a reduction of the spelling errors in the essays made at home due to computer programs that allow students to correct their spelling mistakes. *Subject-verb agreement*, *Word choice* and *Missing verbs* were the categories which presented more differences when comparing the two sets of writing-tasks, being the “at –home essays” longer pieces of work which presented fewer errors.

Students argued that they did not have time to go over their first assessment, while in the second one, they had spent between 15 to 60 minutes analyzing their writing-tasks.

Furthermore, they also argued that they felt some pressure as they had a limited time to write the first essay.

These students did not receive any corrective feedback about their writing-tasks made in the classroom before writing their second essay at home. However, their second compositions were better, not only in spelling but also in grammar. This would prove that English L2 learners know how to use additional time to go over their writing-tasks and produce fewer grammatical errors as well as to produce writing-tasks of a higher quality. It is not a matter of the method they use to do it (traditional method or technology), but a matter of the amount of time they have to do it (Kenworthy, 2006).

Some other crucial factors as *Integration* versus *Fragmentation* have been very important in order to establish and understand the main differences between written and oral discourse (Chafe, 1982).

From a syntactic perspective, there is great evidence to prove that oral discourse differs significantly from written discourse at a syntactic level, which is very useful in order to examine discourse conflicts between the structures of written text and oral discourses. On the one hand, written discourse is considered to be *complex, integrated, detached* and *explicit* (Chafe, 1982) due to the large frequency of grammatical structures as relative and subordinate clauses, participle and appositive phrases and also the passive verb constructions that are present in written texts.

Phrase and clause structure has been examined and it has been found that formal written speech had a higher number of participles, attributive adjectives, genitive subjects and objects, relative clauses and complement clauses and phrases.

On the other hand, oral discourse is considered to be more *implicit*, *fragmented* and *coordinated* for the high presence of coordinated conjunctions and active verb constructions characteristic of the oral speech. This idea is based on the study of “idea units” and the fact that oral speech is considered to be *fragmented* because these idea units are put together without connectives, so there is no integration of ideas and thought (Chafe, 1982).

The fact that the syntactic structures that are present in written discourse are integrated could influence the presence of fewer errors in written register than in oral register, as in writing there is more time to think about what it has to be written and there is also the possibility to correct the mistakes which has been produced as the writer is aware of what it has been said (Kenworthy, 2006). In the case of oral register, the discourse that is produced is spontaneous, which means that there is no time to think in great detail about what wants to be said. Therefore, the probability of committing mistakes without having the possibility of thinking about it is higher.

## **5. Methodology**

Six Catalan /Spanish bilingual students of English as a foreign language with a pre-intermediate level (A2) took part in this study, undertaken in their hometown, Sabadell. These students were aged between 11, 12 and 14, some of them being in their last year at the elementary school or in the third year at high school. All of them had studied at least two years of English at a private school, as well as the relevant years of English taught in primary school to children, which tend to be six. All of these subjects received three hours per week of instruction in English, in a private school. Only one of the subjects had spent a period of one month in England, in a summer camp. The other students had never lived or spent a large period of time in an English-speaking country.

The subjects were not tested with a placement test as they all study English in a private academy, where they take an exam at the beginning of the course to know what their level is. Then, they are put together according to their level in different classrooms. The data used in the study was collected through an elicited production task; a story telling task using a comic with a series of thirty pictures without dialogue (see appendix 1). The only instructions they received were to explain what they saw, without telling them the Tense they had to use, so as not to influence them. They could only ask questions or doubts about the plot of the story, in case they did not understand it or about vocabulary. The story was considered to be explained in Present Tense as it is very simple, and also it was thought to draw the attention of both children and teenagers. It is for this reason that a kind of comic which was not childish was used.



The students had to narrate the story they saw, first written and then orally in a limited time of 20 minutes in both cases. In the case of the oral task, the students were also recorded. The experiment was carried out in two different weeks; they took first the written part and then the oral.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Third person singular morpheme –s

Details on the results elicited from the data collected from the six subjects of the experiment are found in the six tables below. All the answers collected from each subject in the written and the oral tasks were transcribed in order to study with detail their answers (see appendix 2).

The following table indicates the total percentage of errors in the production of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme -s in the Present Tense in both written and oral register. The percentage reflects only the omission of the morpheme –s from the total of verbs used by the subjects, discarding those verbs in the negative form of the present tense and also in the past tense.

	<b>Written and Oral</b>
<b>Total Error Percentage</b>	73,3%

**Table 1.**Total error percentage in Written and Oral register.

As it can be observed, students failed when producing the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme -s in a 73 % of the cases

The table below shows the percentage of errors that students made specifically in each part of the task; in the written part and consequently in the oral part. In case of the written part, students failed in producing the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme-s in a 79'5% whereas in the oral part, they failed in a 67'6 % of the cases.

	<b>Written</b>	<b>Oral</b>
<b>Porcentaje of Errors</b>	79'5%	67,6%

**Table 2.** Percentage of errors specifically in Written and Oral register.

In this case, the following table presents the percentage of errors produced by each participant in the written and the oral task, individually. In the last line, the total percentage of errors made in written and then oral register is specified.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>N° Errors Written</b>	<b>N° Errors Oral</b>
Subject 1	48%	31%
Subject 2	88%	78%
Subject 3	86%	90%
Subject 4	93%	73%
Subject 5	90%	86%
Subject 6	77%	56%
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>79'5%</b>	<b>67'6%</b>

**Table 3.** Percentage of errors in Written and Oral register by each participant.

In this fourth table, a list of the verbs used by the participants with more number of errors in both written and oral register is presented. On the left, the type of verbs used by the subjects can be seen with the corresponding number of errors for each verb showed on the right.

<b>Verbs Written</b>	<b>N° of Errors</b>	<b>Verbs Oral</b>	<b>N° of Errors</b>
Go	10	See	10
Leave	9	Leave	9
Enter	8	Go	8
See	8	Turn	8
Give	8	Enter	7
Get	5	Catch	5
Pay	4	Follow	5
Talk	3	Give	5
Do	3	Put	4
Stay	3	Take	3
Put	3	Disappear	3
Find	3		

**Table 4.** List of the verbs with more errors, including the number of errors specifically in Written and Oral register.

In this case, the set of the verbs that have showed up more errors in written and oral register have been listed. All the numbers of errors in written and oral register have been equaled in order to have a total number of errors in both register for each verb, which is showed in the table on the right.

<b>Verbs with more number of Errors Written and Oral</b>	<b>Total Errors Written and Oral</b>
Go	18
See	18
Leave	18
Enter	15
Give	10
Follow	11
Put	7

**Table 5.** List of the common verbs with more number of Errors in Written and Oral register.

## **6.2 Verb ‘to be’.**

As the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb *to be* is irregular, the results of its performance by the students have been classified in another section separated from the tables of the –s morpheme.

The total number of errors produced when using the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb *to be* are presented below, which in this case was an 12’5%, a considerably lower number compared with the production of errors of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme -s.

	<b>Verb ‘to be’ Written and Oral</b>
<b>Total Percentage of Errors</b>	12,5 %

**Table 6.** Total percentage of errors of the verb *to be* in Written and Oral register.

The following table shows the number of errors for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in Present tense of the verb *to be* produced in each register individually. As it can be seen, only two errors were produced when producing 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in Present Tense and affirmative in the written part whereas in the oral part, no ungrammatical errors were made.

<b>Verb 'to be'</b>	<b>Written</b>	<b>Oral</b>
<b>N° of Errors</b>	2/6	0/10

**Table 7.** Number of Errors in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb '*to be*' in Written and Oral register specifically.

## 7. Discussion.

The results show that students produce errors in the production of 3rd person singular morpheme -s when using the Present Tense to write and explain orally their stories and consequently all of them made errors as they omitted the –s morpheme of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in the vast majority of the verbs they used.

As general data, students failed when producing the 3rd person singular morpheme -s in a 73'3%. The errors that they produced included omission of the morpheme –s, as the most common error as well as the use of some verbs in past tense, although only errors related to the production of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular-s have been taken into consideration. The only verbs that have been counted as incorrect were the ones produced in present tense and in affirmative form, discarding negative forms and also past tense as mentioned before. Those verbs were considered incorrect as they were written in the base form, and not inflected with the -s morpheme of the 3rd person singular.

More concretely, students failed in producing the morpheme in a 79, 5 % in the written part whereas in the oral part they failed in a 67, 6%. Contrary to our expectations, it was found that students made fewer errors in the oral rather than in the written part. The verbs that showed more errors in the written and the oral part were: *Go* (18), *See* (18), *Leave* (18), *Enter* (15), *Follow* (11) *Give* (10) and *Put* (7). As has been mentioned before, the base form of the verbs is found in the majority of cases, as showed below.

Written examples:

(1). *The man **go** to the city and stay in front of a flat.*

(2). *The wizard **leave** the washing store with the men of the hat in the washing machine.*

(3). *Franklin **give** money to the man.*

(4). *He **enter** in a hole.*

Oral examples:

(5) *He **see** a rabbit and one light.*

(6) *He **turn on** the washing machine and he **leave** the house.*

(7) *The magician **catch** the rabbit and he **close** the washing machine.*

(8) *The man of the hat **follow** the magician.*

The observation expressed in the literature (Chafe, 1982; Kenworthy, 2006; Hsieh, 2009, Paradis & Duncan, 2012) concerning the fact that more errors are attested in oral register is not corroborated in this study since results showed that students produced fewer errors in the oral rather than in the written register. The unexpected results that more errors are found in the written part follows in a straightforward way from the assumption that time plays a crucial role in the distinction between oral and written register. Under time limit conditions, and with no extra planning, there is no reason why students should perform better in the written task considering that English L2 learners produce better written compositions if they do not have a limited time which makes them to do it quickly and with more pressure than if they do it in a more relaxed environment like at home, with the necessary time to revise their essays (Kenworthy, 2006). Thus, in the current study, it could be considered that students performed worse in the written part than in the oral one because of the lack of time, as only one of the participants had time to finish his story in the time established (20 minutes).

In the case of the oral art, they also had the same time as the written part, but they only spent five minutes (in general) to explain the story. Doing a kind of written task like the one

presented in this study with a limited time, prevented students from executing a more elaborated exercise, since they did not have enough time (according to their level) to write all that they wanted and to go over the exercise to see if there were grammatical errors to correct. Although it was taken into consideration that the lack of time could influence the results, both tasks (written and oral) had to be done in the same conditions. Thus, the written task could not be different from the oral one and students were not allowed to have more time when doing their writing- tasks. Having said that, the fact of having more errors in the written part than in the oral one could be directly related to the fact of a lack of time and, it is for this reason, that the results show the contrary of what was expected.

A very important aspect that arises from the analysis of the results is the observation that the same verb can be used grammatically and ungrammatically at the same time by the students, especially in written register as illustrated in the following examples.

(9) *The receptionist **takes out** a gun and “segrest” rabbits and he says to Queen that he **goes out**, the he **go** back [...].*

(10) *The receptionist **say** he was a magician. He **says** there is one circus of magicians.*

(11) *The men **see** out of the window. The tall men **sees** the men in the picture.*



The fact of producing a correct verb in some cases and at the same time producing the same verb incorrectly could be related to the notion of *lexicon strength* or the number of times that a learner uses a word and, as a consequence, how the word leaves a trace in the learner's lexicon (Blom, Paradis & Duncan, 2012). The more times a word appears in the input of the learner, the easier for the learner to produce the word and increase his/her lexicon strength. Thus, it can be interpreted that verbs such as *go, say or see* which are the ones that have been produced correctly by them (and at the same time incorrectly), are the ones which appear with more frequency in the input that these learners receive, since they appear more times in both written and oral register. Furthermore, the fact of producing these same verbs correctly and incorrectly at the same time proves that students have not really acquired the rule of the 3rd person singular in present tense, because if they had acquired it correctly, they would always produce these verbs properly. In consequence, it seems that if students knew the 3rd person singular of these verbs, it is because they have received them many times in their input and they remember them. Therefore, this would explain why students seem to be more successful when using these verbs which could be considered to be *high word frequency verbs*.

Another important aspect that has also been studied is the ungrammaticality of 3rd person singular produced in a specific case of a singular verb with a plural noun. This case has a straightforward explanation, as it seems that the student (the only one who did it) had a problem with the Noun, which was mistakenly assumed to be singular.

Although it is a problem of inflection, these specific case was not considered to be incorrect as it was taken for granted that the learner tried to write in present simple and his mistake was related to the plural of a noun, which should be another matter of discussion. The case has been illustrated below.

(12) *The tall men **sees** the men of the picture.*

The same student also confused a singular subject for a plural subject. In this case, the sentences were grammatically correct, but they were not counted as correct because it was considered that the learner wanted to write the subject in singular. Again, he mistakenly assumed to be singular, although the subject was written in plural and the verb too.

(13) *The tall **men follow** the other men.*

(14) *The **men put** clothes inside the washing machine.*

(15) *The **men have** a surprise.*

By observing errors 13, 14 and 15; it seems obvious that he confuses the singular noun 'man' for the plural noun 'men'. It is for that reason that his answers were considered incorrect.

Some other errors on vocabulary and the type of verb used included verbs as *speak* for *talk*, *fall down* for *drown*, "*segrest*" for *kidnap*, *pass* for *give*, *catch* for *take*, *watch* for *see* and *start* for *turn on*.

The correct answers for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme -s in written and oral register were *goes, sees, takes out, says, gives, looks, leaves and thinks*. There were no verbs predisposed, so all of the correct verbs that the participants used were accepted to the extent that they made sense in the context of the story. These are some of the correct answers for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme -s.

(16) *The magician **goes** to dry and clean shop.*

(17) *The receptionist **takes out** a gun and kidnap rabbits and he says to Queen that he goes out.*

(18) *One day a little man went to a washing center and he **says** he was a wizard, the receptionist **says** he give a lot of money if he **says** from where were the rabbits.*

(19) *He **says** there is one circus of magicians. The other day, when he **goes** to the street, he **looks** the man with the car and he **looks** to the window and he see the man and he **thinks** he is looking for him. Then when he **goes** to the dirty clean and put her clothes in the washing up [...]The man **gives** money. And the other man **leaves**.*

The correct verbs produced by the students of this experiment could also be explained due to the role of phonetics. The manner of articulation of the sounds [s] and [z] is more likely to be produced by L2 learners of English (Hsieh, 2009). When analyzing the correct verbs produced in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in the present study, it has been observed that all of them end in the sound [s] or [z].

- Goes: /'gəʊz/
- Says: /'seɪz/

- Sees: /'si:z/
- Thinks: /'θɪŋks/
- Looks: /'lʊks/

It seems that those forms ending in [S] and [Z] sounds and not in [IZ] sound are easier to remember and consequently easier to produce by the participants of this study, probably as Hsieh (2009) said due to the continuous airflow what makes these verbs easier to produce.

Individual factors such as the exposure to the foreign language, could also influence in the correct use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s. Subject 1 was the only one who was able to produce 3rd person singular -s in both registers; seven verbs in the written part and fifteen in the oral part, a part from the verb to be.

<b>Children Age: 11-14</b>	<b>N° correct verbs –s morpheme: Written</b>	<b>N° correct verbs –s morpheme : Oral</b>	<b>Correct verbs Written</b>	<b>Correct verbs Oral</b>
Subject 1	7/27	15/32	<i>-S MORPHEME:</i> says, goes	<i>-S MORPHEME:</i> goes, says, gives looks, leaves, and thinks.  <i>Verb TO BE:</i> is.

This student had spent three months in a summer campsite where he was exposed to the English language at least 10 hours a day as all the activities of the campsite were done in English, with instructors that spoke English to children. It has been demonstrated that the exposure to English influence L2 learner's development of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme –s in obligatory contexts (E. Blom, J. Paradis and T.S Duncan, 2012).

Thus, being exposed to English during a period of time in contrast with the other subjects who had never been abroad could influence a better performance of the 3rd person singular morpheme -s in both written and oral register by this subject.

Another factor that could influence the production or non-production of the 3rd person singular morpheme -s is the kind of task designed to carry out the experiment. The task was very wide in the sense that requirements were not asked, since the activity was consciously prepared to be used in both registers without any kind of instruction so as to avoid any clue through which they could guess what the experiment was about. It was thought to do the written part before the oral one just to give them the chance to become comfortable with the comic. In this way, there were more possibilities for them to produce fewer errors in the oral, as they already knew what to say since they had done the written part before. But, by the same reason, they could make the same errors that in the written part, as they did not have time to review their written tasks. However, this kind of task was chosen in order to present some difficulties to the students, as the main purpose of this study was to observe errors, thus it was necessary a task with a sufficient level of difficulty which allowed producing errors. It is for that reason, that the comic was long and with an unclear story.

The fact of being a “free” task has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, subjects could have more freedom to write and say what they wanted, so they had the option not to risk using those grammatical constructions they considered most difficult, especially in the written task. In this sense, they had the option to avoid making mistakes.

On the other hand, students were not completely concentrated because they do not have specific instructions, so they focused more on understanding and telling the story rather than in writing it properly as they did not have instructions to follow. Those students who took part in the study have English lessons in an academy and during the course they had proved that they were able to do quite well the exercises they were asked to do; in present, past or present perfect, but always with specific instructions. Perhaps, if the task had been one of *filling-in the blanks* with specific orders of what to do, they would have been aware that they were being tested and they could have done a better task, taking into consideration grammatical rules.

Now, let's focus on the verb '*to be*'. Even though the subjects of this experiment got wrong in a 79'5% when producing the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular –s morpheme, the results when using the 3<sup>rd</sup> singular of the verb *to be* were considerably different since the percentage of errors was 12'5 %. The only errors were produced in the written part, where out of six instances of the verb *to be*, two were ungrammatical. These errors have been showed below, although they have not been considered important for the study. As for the oral part, no ungrammatical cases were found.

(20) *The wizard is disappear* instead of *the wizard disappears*.

(21) *He was a wizard* instead of *He is a wizard*.

The following examples show some of the correct answers that were found in both written and oral register.

(22) *He is* in a washing machine.

(23) *The car is in front of the flat and in the flat one man see for the window.*

(24) *The man is very surprised.*

(25) *There is a big house and in the house are two mens.*

These good results for the presence of the verb *to be* can be explained due to the influence that the L1 has in the performance of the L2 by those learners (Hsieh, 2009). Comparing the results of Hsieh's study with the ones collected for this study, it has been proved that there are clear similarities concerning the use of the verb *to be* by the participants. In Spanish or Catalan the 3rd person singular form of the verb *ser /estar* (Sp. *el / ella es* Cat. *ell /ella és*) is also very similar to the form of the 3rd person singular form in English (*he/ she is*) since it only changes a vowel. In consequence, by establishing this similarity, it could be assumed that Spanish or Catalan learners of English also acquire the verb *to be* before the verbal inflections of English, as the results show that there is a considerably better performance of the 3rd person singular when using the verb *to be* rather than when using the -s morpheme.

## 8. Conclusion.

The acquisition of the 3rd person singular –s morpheme in English has been considered as one of the easiest rules to learn, but as opposed, one of the most difficult to apply by L2 learners of English (Krashen, 1982). As has been observed through this study, the main purpose was to test that L2 learners produce errors when dealing with 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in Present Tense and consequently, that they produce more errors in the oral rather than in the written register, although the results of the study have not corroborated the initial hypothesis. In this study, the acquisition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme-s by L2 learners has been analyzed in relation to other studies which provided different perspectives on the topic. For example, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular by L2 learners has been analyzed from a morphosyntactic perspective concerning the replacement of inflectional forms by non- inflectional forms; it has been also analyzed taking into consideration the typological proximity of the first and second language and also from the perspective of a processing framework and the effect of input and finally from a phonetic perspective considering the role of the [s] and [z] sounds when performing the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. Differences between written and oral register have been also investigated considering the essential role of time and its influence, especially in written compositions and other factors as the integration or fragmentation of these discourses.



As a result of the current study, it is possible to conclude that the initial hypothesis that oral register would provide with more instances of errors than written register has not been fulfilled because of the important variable of time, which has not allowed a better performance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular by English L2 learners, especially in the written register. A comparative analysis between the studies previously done on the topic and the current study has been done in order to establish some points of coincidence so as to justify the results obtained in it. In view of the complexity of this topic and despite all the studies that have been done about it, it is clearly a very interesting topic which deserves to continue to be researched.

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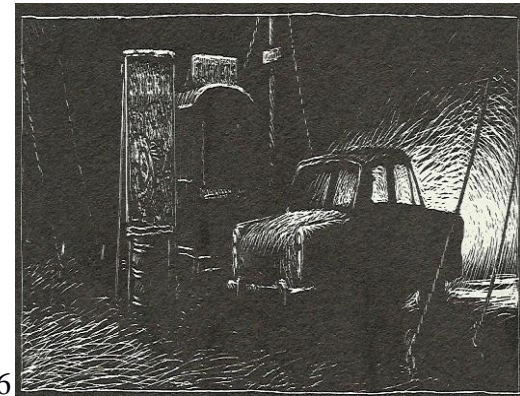
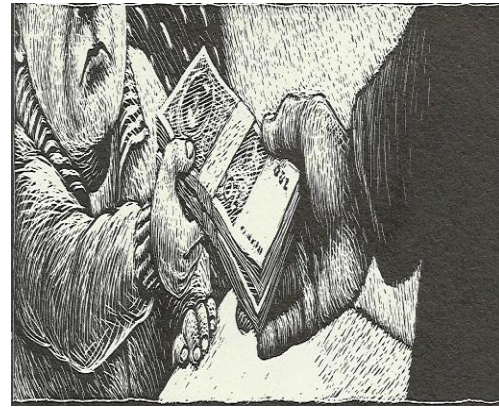
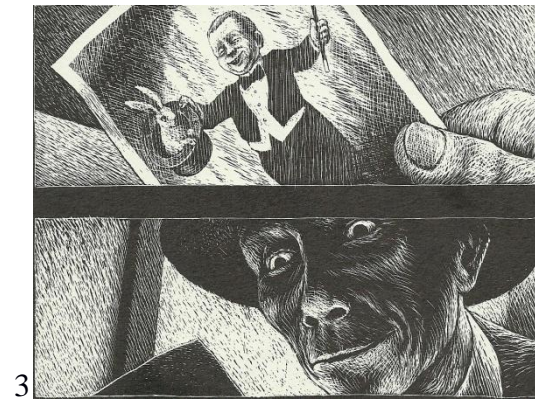
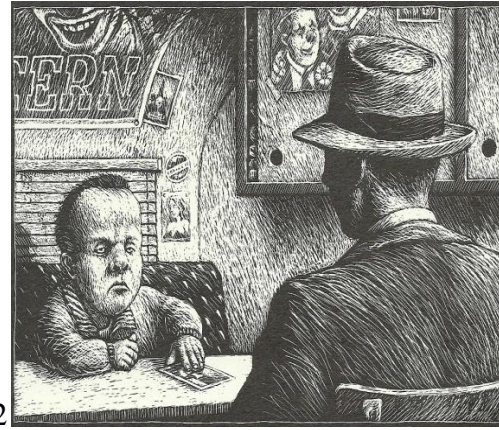
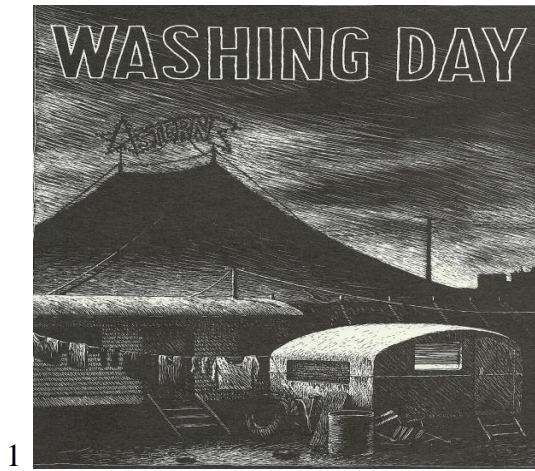
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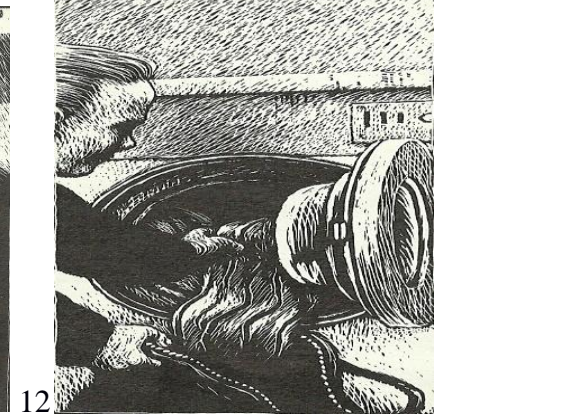
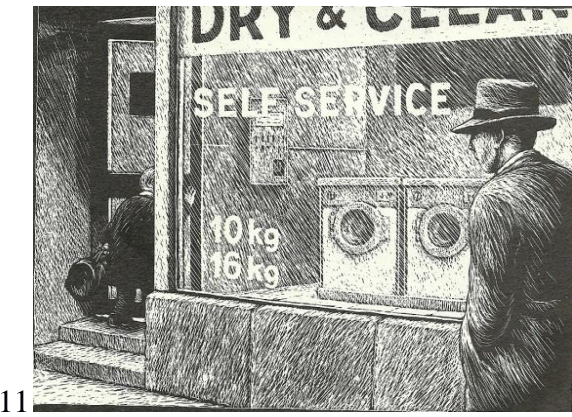
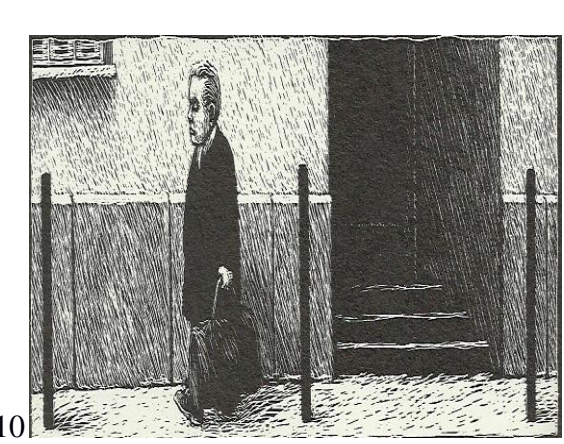
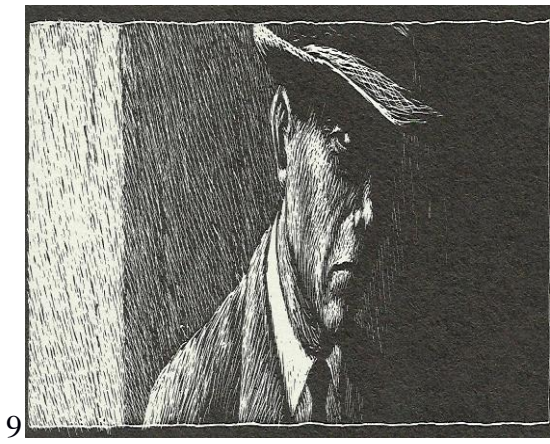
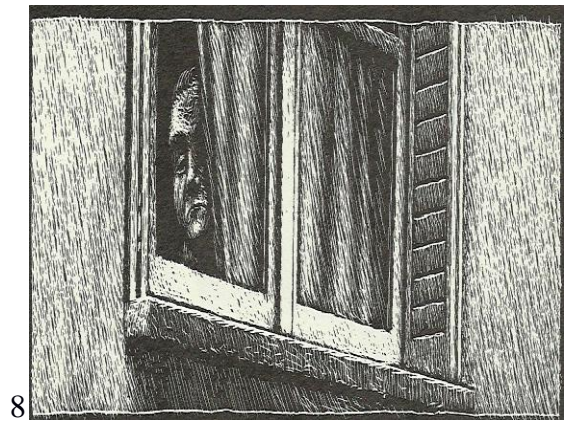
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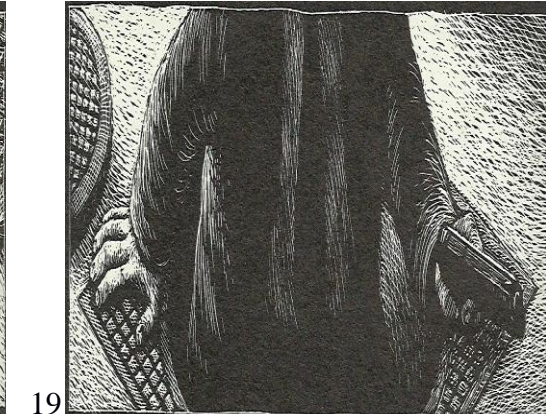
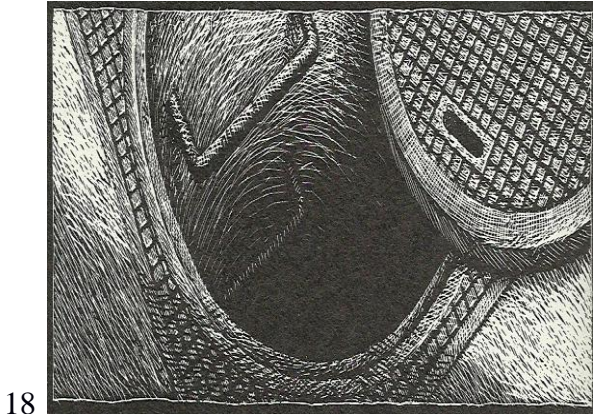
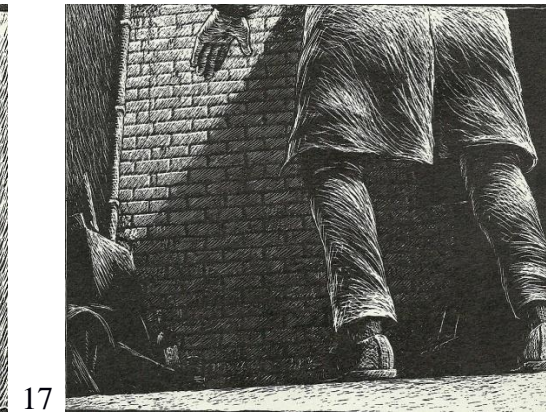
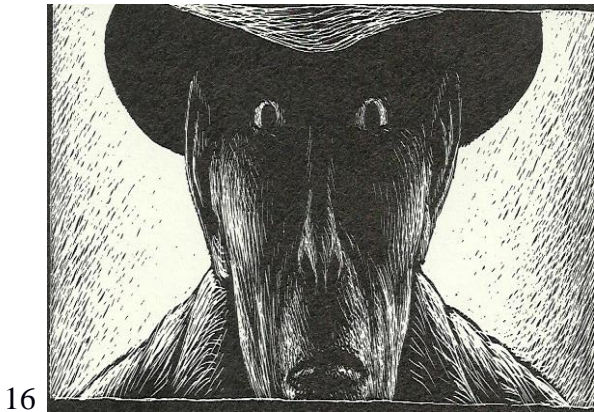
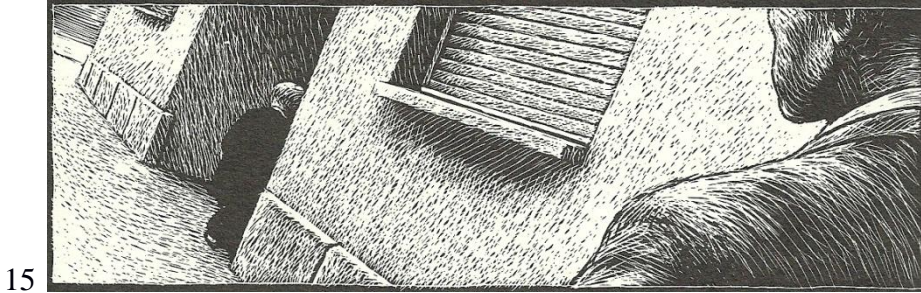
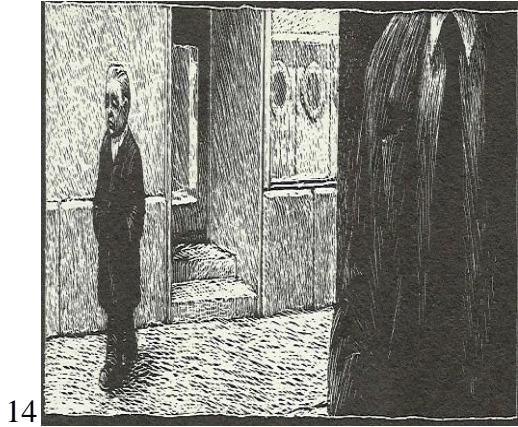
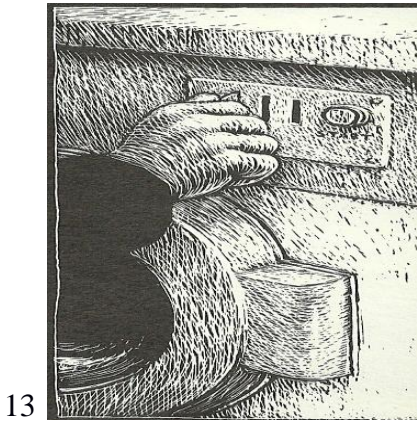
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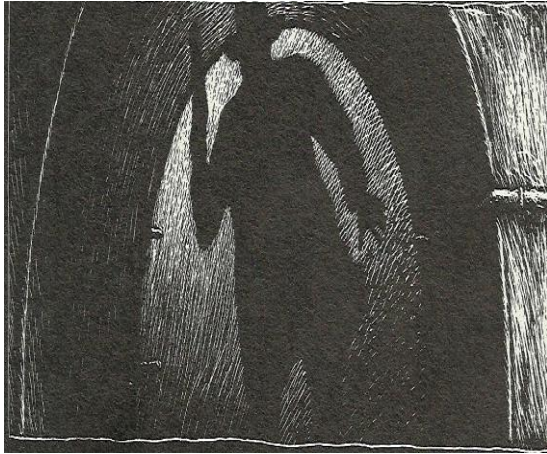




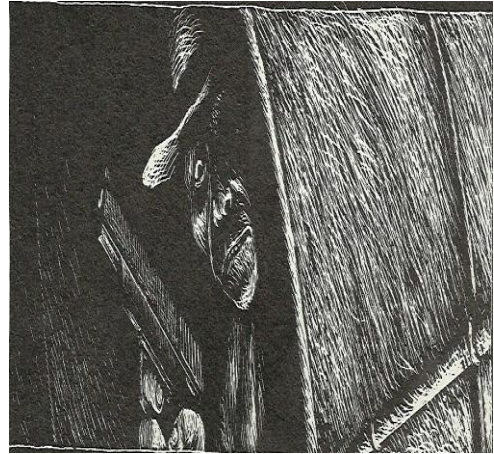




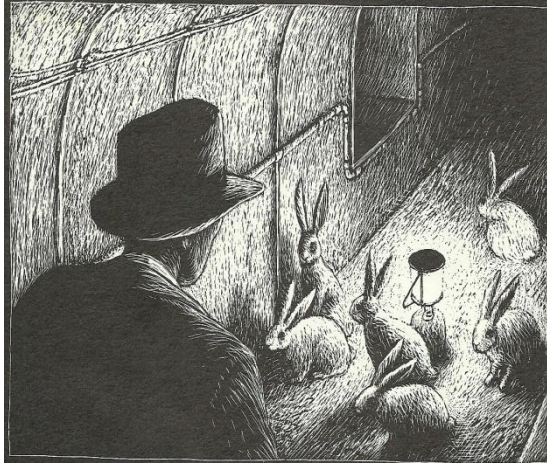




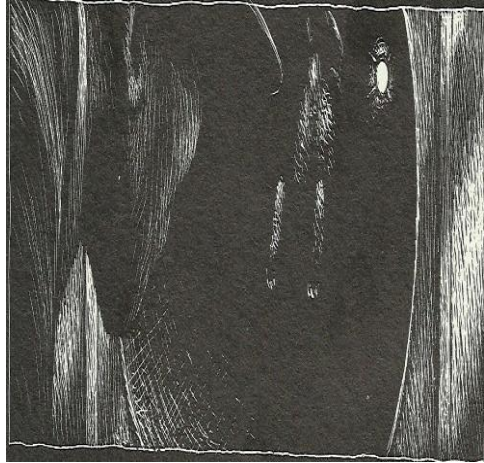
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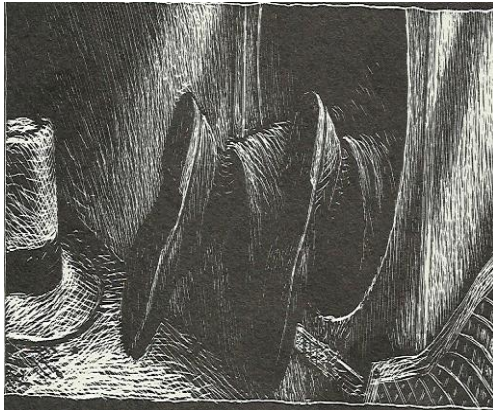
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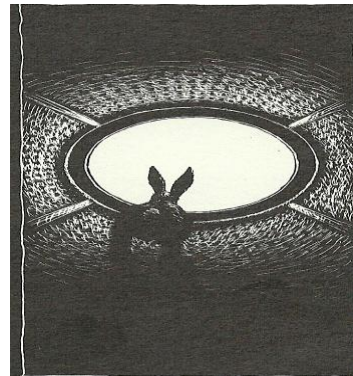
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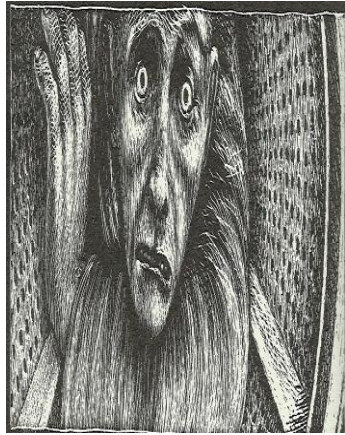


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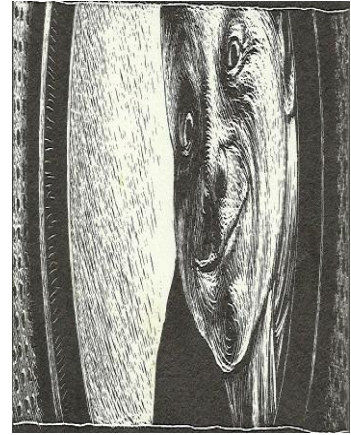




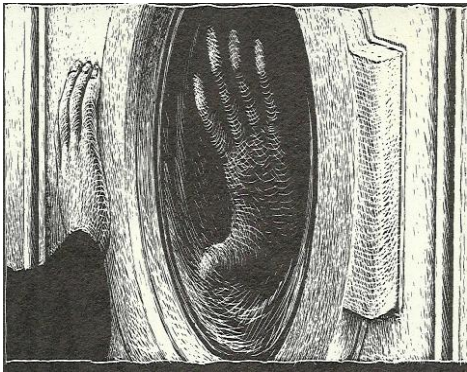
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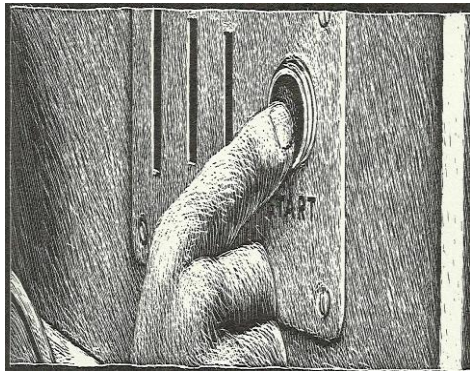
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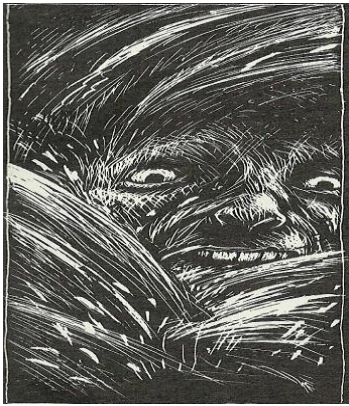
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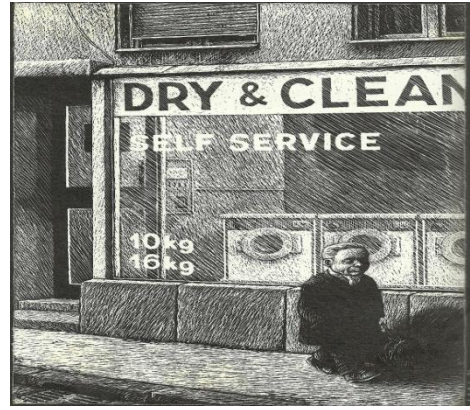
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## Appendix 2.

1. Data collected from the six subjects that took part in the study.

### Aleix (12)

#### Written:

One day a little man **went** to a washing center and he **says** he **was** a wizard, the receptionist **says** he **give** a lot of money if he **says** from where **were** the rabbits. They “accord” he **meet** at the beirment at 7’00 o clock and they **speak** one behind the wall and the other in front of the window. Next day, they **meet** at the washing center, Queen **wash** clothes and later he **pay**. When he **finish** he **says** to the receptionist to **follow** him, he **enter** to a “garage” and he **see** a pipe. The little man **says** to go down and when they **were** under the pipe, the receptionist **take** out a gun and “segrest “rabbits and he **says** to Queen that he **goes** out, then he **go** back but when he **see** the exit of the washing machine, Queen **press** the bottom to start the washing machine and the receptionist **fall** down and then he **went** to his house.

Correct verbs: went, was,were (PAST) , says, goes  
-s morpheme= 2 says, goes.

Errors: 12/25

#### Oral:

A man **goes** to a circus to buy a ticket for the circus and the receptionist **say** he **was** a magician. (Repite) He **says** there **is** one circus of magicians. The man **gives** money. And the other man **leaves**. (se lo digo)The other day, when he **goes** to the street, he **looks** the man with the car and he **looks** to the window and he **see** the man and he thinks he is looking for him. Then when he **goes** to the dirty clean and **put** her clothes in the washing up, then he **paid** and he **see** the man. So, he **following** him and he **thinks** he **goes** to the sewer. The he **go** down and he **look** rabbits. He **thinks** that the rabbits **are** used in the circus and he out. Then he **catch** the rabbits and he **goes**. He **seek** the rabbit but when he **goes** out of the washing up he **see** the face of the magician and he **took** the bottom of the washing machine and he **start** to rot?and the magician **goes** out.

Correct verbs: goes, says, is, gives, leaves, looks, thinks (7)  
-s morpheme = 7

Errors: 9/29

### Marta (14):

#### Written:

- One night, one man **visit** the other man
- The mans **talk** in the house and and house’s man **pass** a photo of other man.
- The man **see** the photo.
- The house’s man **pay** the other man.
- The other man **leave** the house and **enter** in your( his) car.

- The car **leave** the house.
- The man **go** to the city and stay in front of a flat.
  
- One man **observe** the car's man about one window.
- The man **stay** the window's man.
- The window's man **go** out.
- The man **talk** behind the window's man.
- The window's man **do** the the wasing.
- The window's man **pay** the washing machine.
- The window's man **leave**.
- He man **talk** behind the window's man.
- The man **is** very surprised.
- He **see** the window's man in the street.
- Te window's man **enter** in the sewer.
- The other man **enter** also.
- He walk and he **search** the window's man.
- He **see** the sewer.
- He **see** the rabbits and one light.
- He **doesn't understand** nothing.
- He **enter** in a whole.
- The rabbit also **enter**.
- The window's man **catch** the rabbit.
- The man **doesn't know** nothing.
- The window's man **smile** his.
- The window's man **close** the mashine door.
- He **push** the bottom of the washine mashine.
- The man **is** in the washine mashine.
- The window's man **leave** and go to street.

Correct verbs: doesn't know, doesn't understand (but it is NEGATIVE), is (TO BE)  
 -s morpheme= 0

Errors: 29/33

### Oral:

There **is** a big house and in the house **are** two mens and one man **catch** a photo to the other men. The other man **see** the photo and the man of the house **give** money to the other man and the other man **leave** to the house and **enter** in the car. In the city, the man of the car **is** in front of the flat and in the flat one man **see** for the window. The man of the window **go** to street and **walk** for the street and **enter** in the washing machine shop and **put** clothes in the washing machine and **turn** on the washing machine. He **leave** the shop. The man of the car **talk** behind the man of the window. The man of the window **turn** right in the other street and the other man **is** surprised.

The man of the window **enter** in the sewer and the car's man is behind the men. He **see** a rabbits and one light and he **follow** a rabbit and the window's men **catch** a rabbit and **close** the washing machine and the man of the car is in the washing machine and he **turn** on the wm and he **leave** the shop.

Correct verbs: is, are (TO BE) -s morpheme=0

Errors: 21/27

**Marc (12):**

**Written:**

- The small men **give** a picture.
- The tall men **watch** the picture.
- The small men **give** 100 bank notes to kill the men of the picture.
- The tall men **go** out the traffic jam.
- The tall men **stay** in a petro station.
- The tall men **sees** the men in the picture.
- The men **see** out the window.
- The men **listen** the other men of the picture.
- The men **go** out the house.
- The tall men **follow** the men. There **is** a washing service.
- The men **put (clothes)** inside the washing machine.
- The men **pay** the washing machine.
- The men **get** back out.
- The tall men **follow** the other men.
- The tall men **have** a surprise.
- The tunel **has open**
- The men **go** inside.
- The men **go** out the gun.
- The men **look** the tunel.
- There are rabbits with a lantern.
- The men **found** the tunel and **go** inside.

Correct verbs : sees, is and are (TO BE), found(PAST)  
-s morpheme= 1 sees

Errors: 18/21

**Oral:**

The men(instead of man) **give** some money to another men for kill a boy , the wizard. The men **go** to the car, **stop** in front of the flat of the wizard and **wait** for the men go out of his flat. And the men **go** to the washing store and **turn** on the washing machine and **go** out. The men **leave** the other men and the men **stay** in a street, **turn** to right. The man is surprised because the other men, **the wizard is disappeared** and he **go** on the sewer and **take** the gun. He **see** a rabbit and he **walk** behind the rabbit.



The men **take** the rabbit and the men **realise** that he **is** in a washing machine, and the other **smile**. The men **turn** on the washing machine and the other men **go** to his house.

Errors: 19/21

### **Miquel (11):**

#### **Written:**

Franklin , the man of the hat **need** a picture of Mr. Peter, her enemy. A man **give** a picture of mr. Peter to Franklin and Franklin **give** money to the man. Then Franklin **go** by car to the house of mr. Peter. But Franklin **hide** because Mr. Peter **don't see** him. Then Mr. Peter **get** out of the house, and Franklin **follow** him. Mr. peter **go** to washing machine store, but Franklin **stay** out of the store. Then Mr Peter **get** out of the store and Franklin **follow** Mr Peter. Then Franklin **see** the pipe open. Then Franklin **enter** to the pipe.

Correct verbs: 0

Errors: 13/14

#### **Oral:**

The man of the hat **need** a picture of his enemy , the wizard, and the other man **give** the picture and the man of the hat **give** money to him and then he **catch** a car and he **went** to the house of the wizard. Then, the wizard **leave** the house and the man of the house **follow** him and the wizard **enter** to the washing store and the man of the hat **stay** outside. Then, the wizard **leave** the washing store and the man of the hat **follow** the wizard. The man of the hat **saw** the sewer open and he **enter** to the sewer. And the the man of the hat **take** a gun for kill the wizard and he **found** a lot of rabbits. He **saw** a hole and the man of the hat **enter** to the hole and then the man of the hat **saw** the wizard behind the glass and the man of the hat **is** on the washing machine and then the wizard **press** the button and the man of the hat **disappear**, and the wizard **leave** the washing store with the man of the hat in the washing machine.

Correct verbs: is (VERB TO BE) and verbs in pasts like saw, found, went.

Errors: 16/22

### **Julia (14)**

#### **Written:**

- Two people **speak** and a man **show** the picture to the other.
- The man **say** to the other man **to find** the man of the picture.
- He **give** money because **find** the man.
- He **leave** the house, **get** the car and **find** the man.
- The man **arrive** in the place.
- The man **find** the other man.
- He **wait** behind a wall the man **leave** of his house.
- The man **leave** of his house and he **follow** at the place.

- He **arrive** to the shop.
- He **enter** and wash the clothes.
- The man **turn on** the washing mashine.
- 
- He **leave** the shop.
- When the man **leave** the shop, he **start** follow him.

Correct verbs: 0

Errors: 19/21

### Oral:

A man **give** a picture to another man and he **looks** and then he **pay** with money to find the person. Then , **leave** the house and **go** to the car and **find** the person of the picture. Then, he **leave** the house, and **go** to the car and **find** the person of the picture. The man of the hat **follow** the magician and he **enter** into the shop and **start** the washing machine. Later, he **leaves** the shop and the man of the hat **follow** the magician. The magician **disappear** and he **enter** into a sewer and he **see** rabbits and he **follow** a rabbit. The magician **catch** the rabbit and he **close** the washing machine and **turn on** the washing machine and the man **disappear** and the magician **leave** the shop.

Errors: 18/21

### Max (14):

#### Written:

There's a magician in a circus and a man **come** to see he. He **do** a magic trick and the man **pay** to the magician. When the magician **take** the car to go to some place, he **follow** he and the magician **goes** to dry and clean shop. He **put** the clothes and he **get** out of the shop and he **do** a magic trick with the man. He **put** the man in a tunnel with a lot of rabbits, the man **try** to flee of the tunnel but he **is** in a washing machine, then the magic **start** the machine.

Correct verbs: is(TO BE), goes

-s morpheme=1 goes

10/13

### Oral:

There's a circus and in the circus there **are** two people, a magician and a man with a hat. The man **pay** to the magician some money and then the magician **start** to spy the man. The magician **goes** to dry and clean shop and **put** in the washing machine some clothes. And the man **see** him. The magician **do** a magic trick and **put** the man of the hat in a tunnel without any light. The man **is** very scared and she **found** a lot of rabbits in this tunnel. When he **try** to escape, he **see** that he **is** inside the washing machine and she **can't open** the door. And the magician **turn** on the washing machine.

Correct verbs: is, are( TO BE), goes, found(PAST) ,can't open( MODAL VERB)-s morpheme= 1 goes.

Errors: 9/1