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## ***DON'T OMIT –S!*: A COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERROR OF CHINESE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH**

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The paper presents an analysis of the common grammatical error of Taiwanese students in oral English, namely the omission of the final suffix *-s* in its three grammatical functions, especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. The major causes of this error are studied in this paper and further divided into two main categories, the grammatical and phonetic one. The omission of *-s* is primarily considered as interference error or “negative transfer” caused by non-inflectional nature of the Chinese language. In the article, the author emphasizes a role of the teacher in the selection of a suitable teaching method for this grammatical rule considering the phonological features of the final bound, inflectional morpheme *-s* in English, and linguistic features of the native language.

**Key words:** error analysis; inflectional morphological error interference; interlingual and intralingual L2 learning problem; missing surface inflection hypothesis.

### **Background**

It is inevitable to produce errors when acquiring a foreign language, especially in the beginning. And «learning a foreign language is essentially learning to overcome these difficulties»; and the difficulty of learning a foreign language «is indicated by a greater frequency of error in performance» [Wilkins 1972: 198f.]. A lot of literature sources on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Second Language Learning (SLL) have evaluated the origin of the incorrectness in the second language and suggested various correction methods for the errors in the foreign language learning process. It is often assumed that the greater the differences between languages, the greater the linguistic difficulties. For the native speakers of Chinese, which is an isolating language, it might be more challenging to acquire a completely different language system like English, as an inflectional language, thereby unavoidably producing a lot of interferences and having to frequently correct those errors. However, this can be misleading, as the study aims to prove that the errors can also be caused by the inconsistency of the rules of the target language (e.g. the adding of the ending *-s* to the verb form in the third person singular in English).

Errors can derive from different causes. They can be caused by the interference of the native language, by lack of knowledge or practice. Furthermore, they can be phonetic, lexical, morphological, grammatical, and syntactical. In general, many errors violat-

ing the rules of foreign language «can be traced back to the mother tongue» [Wilkins 1972: 190]. That implies that those errors bear the linguistic character affected by the native language.

On the assumption of that point of view, this researcher, as linguist and foreign language teacher, did error analysis of one of the common grammatical errors produced by Chinese/Taiwanese students when acquiring English as foreign/second language, namely the omission of the suffix *-s* in its final position. The morphological *omission errors* are more common in SLL and SLA than the *commission errors* (i.e. adding of some morphemes). The difficulty of the former error is often indicated by its frequency in speaking English by Chinese/Taiwanese students. For example, the acquisition of *-s* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular often takes several years for Mandarin speaking children and adolescents who have immigrated to the U.S. [ref. Wilkins 1972: 199; Jia & Fuse: 2007]. The problem discussed in this research is also mentioned in the textbook «*English Conversation in Taiwan*» with purpose to make students aware of this grammatical difficulty [Yeldham 2001: 14]. M. Yeldham, the author of this English textbook commonly used in Taiwan, wrote that the adding of the suffix *-s* to the verb in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular is often difficult for Chinese speakers to use fluently. «This is because it's so different from Chinese, and also because it's difficult for any English learner, after saying *he, she* or *it*, to remember to add *-s*» to

the verb as exception in the verb's conjugation. Such a phenomenon is also called *missing surface inflection hypothesis* in the error analysis proposed by Ionin and Wexler [2001]. Concerning the regular form of adding *-s* to a verb, the study also considered the morphological error when the regular form of "have" is not changed into "has" in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular.

### Purpose and Methodology

In this article, the researcher scrutinized the above mentioned problem of omitting *-s* in its three functions, primarily in the verb in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular but also in the noun's plural form and in the possessive form in order to discern the exact reasons of this grammatical difficulty for Chinese and/or Taiwanese speakers of English. Consequently, those revelations would help to find a suitable remedy to correct the problem.

This study tried to determine the reason(s) for this ungrammatical omission by Chinese speakers of English in their oral (not written) communication. As the study did not focus on the accuracy rate or the frequency rate of the error but more on its nature, the qualitative analysis will be prevalent here instead of the quantitative method. For this purpose, a survey was conducted using 90 Taiwanese university students majoring in English (Sophomore), but only 86 students provided explanations for their errors. Four incomplete surveys could not be considered in the evaluation process. The results of the survey are shown below in form of the table and later analyzed and evaluated in the qualitative empirical analysis that constituted the main approach of this study in combination with the descriptive method.

### Empirical Study

After teaching English to students from different countries, I immediately noticed that the Taiwanese students often do not pronounce the final suffix *-s* in speaking or even do not add *-s* in English writing or reading. This fact has also been mentioned and interpreted by Lin & Chien in the way that «[...] young generations in Taiwan pronounce English via simplified ways of articulating. [...] To orally converse with foreigners in a smoothly effective way, [...] all what they can do is to lessen articulating

accuracies in some difficult phonetics» [Lin & Chien 2011: 71]. This study aimed to examine whether the omission error of final *-s* occurs only due to «a desire to sound fluently» or there is some deeper explanation of the facilitated and consequently wrong articulation. In some cases (as analyzed below), such deletion can be traced back to the mother tongue as the Chinese language has almost no morphemes. And as mentioned above, «the greater the difference between languages, the greater the difficulties will be» (the similarity of languages may also cause errors due to the possible confusion) [Wilkins 1972: 192]. According to Wilkins, such difference also requires different teaching methods depending on the mother tongue of the learners that will be proposed below.

Before the analysis, the author would like to summarize the main functions of the inflectional, bound morpheme *-s*. English has three suffixes *-s* which indicate different functions and should always be pronounced (in comparison with French where it is not pronounced):

1. 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (e.g. *She comes to the school*);
2. Plural (e.g. *I have three apples*);
3. Possession (e.g. *This is Mary's book*).

The final morpheme *-s* represents here the **allomorphy** in English, whereas the allophone *-s* belongs to the same phoneme but has different pronunciations in different positions. Thus, the plural morpheme *-s* can be realized as either [s], [z], or [əz], depending on the form of the root to which it attaches [ref. Language Files 2004: 168]. As we will see later from the surveys, this difference leads often to the deletion of *-s* by students in the plural form.

Surprisingly, only four students answered in the questionnaire that they usually do not make such a morphological error, i.e. they do not delete *-s* as a final morpheme in English. The reasons for omitting *-s* mentioned in the survey by the Taiwanese students are remarkable, especially for the EFL teachers, as some of them are probably not aware of problems mentioned below. All factors of *-s* deletion indicated by the students can be divided into the following six categories:

No.	Cause	% of Students
1	Forget to add <i>-s</i>	50% (43)
2	Not used to add <i>-s</i> as Chinese doesn't have morphemes	20.93% (18)
3	Unsure about the correct pronunciation of <i>-s</i>	11.63% (10)
4	Do not know the grammar rule	6.98% (6)
5	It is not significant to add <i>-s</i>	5.82% (5)
6	Do not pronounce <i>-s</i> clearly as they speak or read fast	4.65% (4)
Total		100% (86Ss)

The linguistic interpretation and evaluation of these data follow.

### Discussion

With regard to the error's nature, the answers shown above can be divided into the following two categories: Reasons 1, 2, 4, and 5 can be classified as grammatical / morphological errors, whereas reasons 3 and 6 are phonetic errors.

Through the contrastive analysis of English and Chinese, reason 2 indicates the interference caused by the first analytic language, namely Chinese, whereas no morphemes are added to the word's stem. Therefore, the Taiwanese students forget and are not used to adding *-s*, especially to the verb in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. Besides such *interference error*, also called '*negative transfer*', where no suppletion is required in Chinese, some students also forget to add *-s* because they focus more on other grammatical rules in English and unintentionally fail to bear this morphological grammar rule in mind. D. Wilkins [1972] pointed out that the omission of *-s* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular form of the verb occurs when students overgeneralize the English verb's conjugation, where no *-s* is added to other person forms [cause 1]. So, it can be assumed that the omission of *-s* has two main reasons, namely the interference from Chinese with no inflectional morphology in verb conjugation and noun plural forms as *interlingual L2 learning problem* [cause 2] and/or the overgeneralization as *intralingual L2 learning problem* [cause 1] [ref. McLaughlin 1984: 51]. Cause 1, which often occurred by Chinese speaking ESL students, has been mentioned in the study of different scholars like Dulay and Burt [1973, 1974], Krashen [1987], and Paradis [2005]. Krashen considered it as the «careless error» that could be self corrected by Monitoring if the students had time and focused more on form rather than on meaning because the learners know already the rule [Krashen 1987: 99]. Krashen also added «these are rules that have been learned but have not been acquired [...] and are formally simple rules, involving mostly bound morphology». So, this problem can be improved through intensive and attentive use of English from the student's side and the teacher's teaching method and then adjusted to the features of the mother tongue that will be discussed below.

Cause 4 is evidence of student's lack of knowledge that leads to the *error of competence* that cannot be corrected by the L2 learner in contrast to the *error of performance* that can be recognized and corrected by the L2 learner her-/himself [ref. Corder 1971]. Therefore, the role of the teacher here is to intervene as the teacher will inductively or deduc-

tively explain the grammar rule that the students will be able to apply correctly. In addition, to eliminate reason 5 the teacher needs to explain explicitly the significance of that grammar role which, if neglected, will lead to non-grammatical language use and also to the meaning's inaccuracy in terms of singular and plural. As Wilkins [1972] assumed the omission of *-s* may be caused by the confusion between the plural *-s* of nouns and *-s* of the verb form; however such erroneous correlation was not apparent among Chinese learners of English.

Next, it is highly important to distinguish the omission of final morpheme *-s* as a grammatical (including morphological) error from the deletion of final morpheme *-s* as a phonetic error. The cause of the phonetic error has been revealed through reasons 3 and 6. If the student is not sure whether to pronounce /s/ or /z/ in the final position of *-s*, s/he may pronounce it incorrectly or simply may not pronounce it at all in order to avoid mispronunciation and/or sound fluent, thus resulting in the grammatical error, namely the *inflectional morphological error*. This phenomenon can be considered as "avoidance for fear of interference" that could also be observed by some researchers [Schachter 1974] among Chinese and Japanese learners of English [ref. McLaughlin 1984: 63]. Furthermore, according to Lin & Chien, a trend of pretended smoothness of non-native speakers of English may also lead to «reducing quantity and decreasing accuracies of phonemes» [Lin & Chien 2011: 72]. The final *-s* is pronounced as /s/ following a voiceless sound and as /z/ following a voiced sound. The final *-s/-es* is pronounced as /əz/ following sibilants (s, z, sh, zh, ch, j). So, the explicit explanation of this phonological rule is required from the teacher, as well as regular practice by students for a further correct application of it. Despite the recent increasing tendency of the inductive grammar method, I am personally convinced that the most appropriate approach for explaining this important grammar rule (add *-s* to the noun for the plural form and to the verb for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular form in the present tense) and the phonological rule (pronunciation of the final morpheme *-s*) described above, should be deductive and explicit, whereas the teacher explains it directly and then lets the students practice it. Also some researchers [Hammerly 1975; Hernet 1974; Krashen 1987] determined through their studies that deductive approach is more successful as the retention of rules over time is better. Furthermore, the sharp contrast of English and Chinese grammar will make the difference of *-s* use in English remarkable for the learner, and consequently the corresponding grammar rule will be retained by the learner. With regard to reason 6, some students indicated that they pro-

nounced the final *-s*, but probably it was pronounced "slovenly". Therefore, in speaking and reading, the teacher needs to force the students to pronounce the final morpheme *-s* clearly without muttering it as it is significant for correct English.

Referring to the successive steps proposed by McLaughlin [1984: 47] in the error analysis, the teacher needs to 1. identify error; 2. describe error; 3. explain error; 4. evaluate error; 5. correct (/prevent) error. Therefore, the error analysis should consider the L2 learning process in terms of learner's performance analysis in order to figure out an appropriate teaching approach. According to Krashen and in reference to Hendrickson [1976], the error of *-s* omission should be corrected as the grammar rule is a part of the conscious Monitor; it is learnable. However, the error correction should not interfere with communication, i.e. no error correction in free conversation, but it is allowed on written works and grammar exercises [Krashen 1987: 117ff.]. In addition, I personally believe the error correction is also allowable for oral English performance (in the classroom) but only after a conversation as a remedial step. The teacher needs to follow the grammatical rules, error-free, when teaching, including communication, because the students will acquire the rule indirectly though the correct input of the target language.

After analyzing the errors, it can be concluded that the grammatical error mentioned in reasons 1, 2, and 5 causes concurrently the phonetic error, namely the deletion of the final consonant even if the learner is actually aware of the rule. The only exception is applied to reason 4 where the learner does not know the rule and in fact it leads to a purely grammatical error. Vice versa, the phonetic error mentioned in reasons 3 and 6 causes, simultaneously, the grammatical error whereas the incorrect pronunciation is primarily. Evidence of the correlation between the grammatical and phonetic error like deletion of *-s* in the final position is obvious.

Considering the different background of the Chinese language, the emphasis on the related grammar aspects is required by English teachers of Chinese/Taiwanese students to avoid such systematical morphological and phonetic errors. Furthermore, as an EFL teacher, I firmly believe that a simplified explanation and practice of adding the final morpheme *-s* and its correct pronunciation should be practiced at the preschool age of Chinese learners in common bilingual kindergartens to facilitate their English learning process. Some studies [Dulay & Burt 1973; Hakuta 1978; Gavrusseva & Lardiere 1996; Rice & Wexler 1996; Haznedar 2001; Paradis 2005] also draw attention to this and other errors in grammatical morphology produced by preschoolers

who have been learning ESL. These researchers concluded that ESL children take a long time to be accurate with 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s*. However, the researchers could not reach an agreement on the question whether the structure of L1 greatly influences the SLL or SLA. Dulay and Burt [1973, 1974] found that the acquisition of the morpheme 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s* in the L2 is independent of L1 because it was similar for both native speakers of Spanish and Chinese. However, Hakuta [1978] suggested that the error with 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s* for Japanese learners of English was problematic. Similarly, Paradis [2005] pointed out that the native speakers of languages with non-inflectional morphology like Chinese or Vietnamese may be less attentive to bound morphemes, forgetting to add them, than the learners of inflectionally rich L1 like Spanish or Arabic.

My observational approach applied in different Taiwanese bilingual kindergartens revealed that the final morpheme *-s* as plural or 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular is often omitted by (very) young learners due to the lack of knowledge and unfortunately is often not corrected by their teachers, thus building the wrong foundation of English grammar from the beginning of their SLL process. However, fortunately, many educational materials in Taiwan like textbooks, posters, and flashcards use mostly the plural form, probably, as a part of a pedagogic strategy to introduce the new vocabulary to learners making them familiar with the plural of the noun. Referring again to J. Paradis, it is important to study from the preschool age whether the errors come from the lack of knowledge or practice or from language impairment that should be diagnosed earlier. However, instead of the early diagnosis many L2 educators use «wait and see» approach for a long period of time and accept «the result of his or her not being a native speaker» that may result into an irremediable defect [Paradis 2005: 173]. Consequently, the early error analysis and the early diagnostics of the error nature and its cause with the following error correction or speech defect/impairment should be done by an instructor at the early stages of SLL. Herewith, the factor of learner's individual pace of L2 learning should not be out of the teacher's focus as it is repeatedly emphasized by many researchers mentioned in this paper.

#### **Limitation and Conclusion**

The result of this study elicited differing sources of the systematic error in English by many English learners, especially by Taiwanese learners - namely the omission of the final morpheme *-s* in its three functions, especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. The most common reasons can be traced back to the mother tongue Chinese (cause 2) and considered as

the interlingual error, but some common causes derive from the target language English (causes 1 and 3) causing the intralingual error. The most suggestive reason for the omission of the final morpheme –s can be considered as an error of performance that can be corrected by the L2 learner her-/himself. Only in a few cases (causes 4 and 5) this omission causes the error of competence due to the learner's lack of knowledge along with her/his desire to perform a pretended smooth speech in English. This type of error can be corrected only by a teacher. After knowing the reasons for causing these errors, the teacher should find a way to correct them. The most revealing result of the study was the fact that the students did not pronounce –s, even though they knew the rule, but they were not sure about the pronunciation of the final –s that varies with different factors. This cause should be highly considered by the English teacher in the ESL class. To sum up, the indicated morphological (1, 2, 4, 5) and phonological (3 and 6) causes of the –s dropping revealed their interrelation, whereas the former automatically leads to the latter error and vice versa.

As for the study's limitations, some other questions still remain open. In further research, it might be desirable to investigate the frequency of dropping –s in terms of its three different functions, indicated above, which would require extensive quantitative research. Furthermore, it is meaningful to investigate why students add –s more frequently in the plural and possessive form rather than in the verb's conjugation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. Many researchers [Rice & Wexler 1996; Bedore & Leonard 1998; Paradis 2005; Jia & Fuse 2007] also indicated that the addition of homophonous suffixes –s was done by L2 learners of English more frequently with the non-tense-related morphemes in the plural form and possessive –s, than in the tense-related morphemes like 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. According to Jia & Fuse [2007], most L2 learners of English showed over the years the highest level of mastery with the plural form in comparison to the lowest level of performance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. In addition, as some students admitted that they forget to add –s in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, mostly in the speaking rather than in the writing because the latter allows more time for concentration. It could be of research interest to compare the frequency of omitting –s in the speaking and writing process. Which reason is dominant in the omitting –s in the verb's conjugation, namely the interference or overgeneralization, is another unanswered question. Furthermore, it may also be advantageous to study the correlation between the difficulty degree of vocabulary and its accurate production of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular with the morpheme –s, as it was partially undertaken by some linguists

[Abraham 1984; Cook 2000; Dulay and Burt 1974; Ellis 1988; Lightbown 1987; Pica 1984]. Next, comparing my teaching experience in mainland China and in Taiwan, I mentioned that the Chinese students have less trouble with the adding and pronouncing of morpheme –s in English compared with their counterpart in Taiwan, even if both have Chinese as native language. It would be of interest to examine such an assumption and the reasons of such phenomenon in the further contrastive study. And last but not least, further suggestion of suitable teaching approaches and exercises would definitely be appreciated by teachers and learners in order to eradicate these errors.

The most effective recipe for those errors is the well-known proverb «practice makes perfect». In addition, the teacher needs to explain the grammatical rule in the target language and the difference from the mother tongue explicitly. It is desirable that the post-effect of the survey conducted on certain Taiwanese students could be evaluated later through the students' speaking and reading because many of them implied indirectly that this survey made them aware of the importance of adding –s and they promised to be more accurate in terms of its grammar and pronunciation.

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## **НЕ ОПУСКАЙ –S!:** ОСНОВНАЯ ГРАММАТИЧЕСКАЯ ОШИБКА КИТАЙЦЕВ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Представлен анализ распространенной грамматической ошибки тайваньских студентов в устной речи на английском языке, а именно упущение конечного суффикса –s во всех трех его грамматических функциях, в особенности в 3 лице ед. ч. Дается обзор основных причин, приводящих к данной ошибке, которые далее поделены на две категории, грамматическую и фонетическую. Упущение -s является прежде всего ошибкой интерференции или «негативного переноса», обусловленного неинфлексивным характером китайского языка. В статье подчёркивается роль преподавателя в выборе подходящего метода освоения данного грамматического правила с учетом фонологических особенностей конечной связанной инфлексивной морфемы –s в английском языке и языковых особенностей родного языка.

**Ключевые слова:** анализ ошибок; интерференция инфлексивной морфологической ошибки; меж- и внутриязыковая проблема изучения иностранного языка; гипотеза отсутствующей поверхностной флексии.