



# The acquisition of the third person singular allomorphs of the simple present tense in English by Panamanian senior-level learners of English



## La adquisición de los alomorfos de la tercera persona del singular del presente simple en inglés por estudiantes panameños del cuarto año de la carrera de inglés

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this quantitative study with an exploratory and descriptive scope was to apply the concepts of the *Markedness Differential Hypothesis* (Eckman, 1977) and *Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis* (Major & Kim, 1996) in the production of the allomorphs of the third person singular of the English simple present tense by Panamanian Spanish senior-level learners of English. The researchers used a custom-designed book containing images as a research instrument, administering it twice to the sample group. The data collected through this method was subsequently subjected to analysis employing concepts from auditory and acoustic phonetics. The simple descriptive statistics showed that the sample had mastered 64% of the allomorphs of the third-person singular of the English simple present tense. These results could be the base for further research with correlational and explanatory scopes with many participants to confirm or disregard the patterns found in this study.

**Keywords:** allomorphs, marked sounds, unmarked sounds.

**Resumen:** El propósito de este estudio cuantitativo con un alcance exploratorio y descriptivo fue aplicar los conceptos de *Markedness Differential Hypothesis* (Eckman, 1977) y *Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis* (Major & Kim, 1996) en la producción de los alomorfos de la tercera persona singular del tiempo presente simple en inglés por estudiantes panameños de habla hispana del cuarto año de la carrera de inglés. Los investigadores usaron un libro diseñado a la medida de este estudio que contenía imágenes como instrumento de investigación, administrándolo dos veces al grupo de muestra. Los datos recopilados a través de este método fueron posteriormente sometidos a análisis empleando conceptos de fonética auditiva y acústica. La estadística descriptiva simple mostró que la muestra dominaba el 64% de los sonidos del estudio. Estos resultados podrían ser la base para futuras investigaciones con alcances correlacionales y explicativos con muchos participantes para confirmar o descartar los patrones encontrados en este estudio.

**Palabras clave:** alomorfos, sonidos marcados, sonidos no marcados.

## INTRODUCTION

It sounds hopeless when it comes to learning a second language, but it is vital to evaluate many factors before making judgments on a second language learner, especially their pronunciation. External and internal factors always influence the acquisition of a new language. The age differences between adults and children, where grammar and the phonological system are acquired with no effort for children but with great discipline for adults, could be some of the internal factors in learning a second language. Some other external factors that affect the language are the students' environment and the language input, which refers to learning the second language in a non-native-speaking country with not too much L2 input that ends up with a foreign accent. As a result, this study will combine one internal and external factor by focusing on adult second-language learners studying English in Panama, a non-English-speaking country. Regarding pronunciation, there are numerous aspects to study. At the segmental level, studies can be based on consonants and vowels, and at the suprasegmental level, studies can be carried out with intonation, stress, phonotactics, junctures, rhythm, and syllable structures (Nathan, 2008; Rogers, 2000).

However, for this study, the emphasis will be on the pronunciation of the English simple present third person, which requires the addition of the suffixes 's' or 'es' to the verb, resulting in the three allophorms /s/, /z/, and /#z/. Allophorms are variant forms of a morpheme, and their environments are phonologically predictable (Hualde *et al.*, 2001; O'Grady *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, this study is not interested in theories about age and experience effects but in markedness and similarity or dissimilarity of segments, allophonic variations, and the learnability of contrastive features that will be compiled into two theories: The Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) and Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis (SDRH). Eckman in 1977 incorporated the concept of marked and unmarked sounds to predict the acquisition or learnability of L2 linguistic features. According to him, sounds that are more frequent in all languages in the world are called "unmarked sounds," while the opposite is called "marked sounds." In other words, if an L2 sound is more marked than an L1 sound, it will cause difficulty, while those L2 sounds that are less marked than L1 sounds will be easy to learn and acquire. However, later on, Major and Kim (1996) partially agreed with Eckman by stating that markedness is a mediating factor, but the rate of acquisition is faster or slower depending on the similarity between L1 and L2 sounds. That is, if one L2 sound is similar to one L1 sound, the rate of acquisition is slower, while for dissimilar sounds, it is faster. Taking that into account, now those concepts can be applied to the linguistic features of the study.

TABLE 1  
*Third person singular of the simple present tense in English and Spanish*

L2, Target language: English	L1, Source language: Spanish
<u>Cynthia drinks</u> water. /s/	<u>Cynthia toma</u> agua. /a/
Ara <u>loves</u> her kids. /z/	Ara <u>ama</u> a <u>sus hijos</u> . /a/
It <u>flies</u> high. /z/	<u>Vuela</u> alto. /a/
William <u>kisses</u> his girlfriend. /ɪz/	William <u>besa</u> a <u>su novia</u> . /a/

*Note.* Table elaborated by the authors.

Hill *et al.* (2014) state that Spanish is highly inflectional and has a flexible word order. A very good example of this is that a single verb has 118 conjugated forms, which also indicate person, number, tense, aspect, and mood. In comparison to Spanish, English verb morphology sounds simpler since it has a rigid word order and is less inflected because it has limited verb forms and depends a lot on auxiliary verbs.

However, when it comes to the simple present tense in the third person, English seems to be more inflectional than Spanish because it suffers some morpho-phonemic transformations. Table 1 shows the morphological changes the English verb undergoes by adding the suffix 's' 'es' or, in some cases, 'ies' to the verb root. By doing this, there are also some phonological changes since the pronunciation of the allomorph depends on the last sound of the verb root. If the verb root ends in a voiceless sound, it should be pronounced with /s/; if it ends in a voiced sound or vowel, it should be pronounced with /z/; and if the verb root ends in a sibilant sound such as /ʃ, θ, ð, ʒ, s, z/, it should be pronounced with /ʒz/ in an extra syllable. However, in the case of Spanish, it is more predictable since the inflection for the third person singular occurs in the vowel ending, in this case, an /a/, as shown in Table 1. Based on the description above and the two theories explained above as well, it is inferred that the acquisition of the English simple present tense in the third person singular by Panamanian Spanish learners of English will be faster since it is a dissimilar feature because the Spanish verb morphology is different from English. However, this has to be analyzed even further within the field of phonetics and phonology alone. Within these two disciplines, English and Spanish share the phoneme /s/, although they have different syllable structures. Since the sounds in this study are restricted to final sounds, we will refer to the syllable structure, particularly to the coda. In comparison to English, Spanish syllable structure is simpler since the only coda that is allowed at the end of words is the /s/, while English allows for three segments at the end of words. Yip in 1991 (as cited in González Johnson, 2012) said that Spanish codas may lack features of place, which explains the common phonological processes they suffer, such as deletion, spreading, delinking, and assimilation. Taking only the suffix "s" in both languages to denote plurality, there may be some differences in pronunciation that may be critical for Spanish speakers learning English, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
*The voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ for plurality in English and Spanish*

Suffix	English		Spanish	
	Phoneme	Allophones	Phoneme	Allophones
's'	/s/	[s], [z], [ɪz]	/s/	[s], [h], Ø

*Note.* Table elaborated by the authors.

Alvarado de Ricord in 1971 said that in Panama the /s/ is aspirated most of the time by Panamanian speakers, and this was confirmed by González Vega *et al.* in 2022 in their study about discourse analysis in a Panamanian radio station. Most of the speakers aspirated the final /s/ and few kept the correct realization of /s/ but it is unpredictable to specify when. Based on that, there are chances that Panamanian speakers learning English as a second language may aspirate final /s/ at the end of words in English. Now the description of the sound is set on the theories in the study.

TABLE 3  
*Status of the sounds in the study*

English allomorphs for the third person singular of the simple present tense	Contrastive analysis with Spanish	The <u>Markedness</u> differential hypothesis (MDH)	Similarity differential rate hypothesis (SDRH)
/s/	*/s/. It does not have a counterpart as an allomorph of the third person singular of the simple present tense in Spanish, but it does exist in the conjugation of other pronouns, plurality, and in word-finally.	Unmarked	Similar
/z/	No counterparts	Marked	Dissimilar
<u>/ɪz/</u>	No counterparts	Marked	Dissimilar

*Note.* Table elaborated by the authors.

Based on the above description, this study intends to test The Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) (Eckman, 1977) and The Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis (SDRH) (Major & Kim, 1996) as tools to explain the mastery or lack of mastery of this important phono-morpho-syntactic feature that any second language learner of English struggles with. In other words, this study intends to estimate the frequency of inaccuracies of each allomorph in this study, resulting in an answer to the question: Have senior students mastered the third person singular of the simple present tense? Which allomorphs caused more difficulty? In addition, this study could be used as a theoretical background for further research, as it could be a necessary tool to help students improve their pronunciation and for the professor to have evidence to know where to work when using these verbs conjugated in the third person singular.

## METHODOLOGY

The scope of this study was exploratory and descriptive, and it followed a quantitative design using simple descriptive statistics: percentages. Only one group of participants with one level of proficiency, whose ages ranged from 19 to 54, was selected for this study. They were six senior students who were majoring in the BA program in English at the University of Panama at Soná branch. According to the curricula of this university's linguistics department, these students took phonetics classes as a course in the first and second semesters of the first year of the BA program only. One student had traveled to the United States for only four months, and the other five participants have never been to the U.S. or any other English-speaking country. These participants only use the target language, English, in classes because their environment outside of the classroom is Spanish. They attend class during the evening shift, with seventeen hours of English instruction per week.

Only one instrument was employed, and one of the authors designed it. It was a small book that had different images of one person, one thing, or one animal to denote the subject in the third person and images of actions. The authors just instructed them to create sentences as daily routines or habits. It was open to

creativity. The process was genuine because not even the researchers and the participant could anticipate the production.

The book was given to the participant for a few minutes to give them time to organize their ideas or clarify any doubts about what they had to do. Then, we started with the recording section using a cellphone. Since the sample was very small, this procedure was repeated two different times to increase the data only, not with the purpose of doing inferential statistics. Then the authors analyzed the utterances by using auditory phonetics, where we listened carefully and rated each pronunciation individually. Then, we compared the results and kept the ones we agreed upon, and for those few in disagreement, we used acoustic phonetics to check, under the spectrogram, the voicing feature that is easy to observe. Finally, we tabulated the results in Excel and got the graphs from there.

## RESULTS

Table 4 shows the results for each participant the first and second times. Even though each participant held the same book instrument, the productions were genuine and not uniform, meaning there was no equal number of utterances per speaker or allomorph.

TABLE 4  
*Results of the book instrument*

Subjects	Frequency of pronunciations for the task done the first time					
	<i>/s/</i>		<i>/z/</i>		<i>/ɪz/</i>	
	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
Participant 1	2	6	2	3	0	4
Participant 2	7	3	3	3	2	5
Participant 3	5	4	1	4	0	4
Participant 4	5	5	2	3	3	3
Participant 5	8	0	8	1	6	2
Participant 6	8	3	5	2	6	3
Subjects	Frequency of pronunciations for the task done the second time					
	<i>/s/</i>		<i>/z/</i>		<i>/ɪz/</i>	
	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
Participant 1	5	5	3	4	1	4
Participant 2	7	2	6	2	6	3
Participant 3	6	4	6	3	4	2
Participant 4	8	2	5	4	2	3
Participant 5	10	0	8	0	7	1
Participant 6	9	2	8	0	7	1

*Note.* Table elaborated by the authors.

For the mispronunciation of */s/*, in general, some of the participants omitted it or aspirated it. However, they did pronounce */s/* in words that should be pronounced with */z/*. On the other hand, */#z/* was replaced with */s/* or only pronounced the base form of the verb.

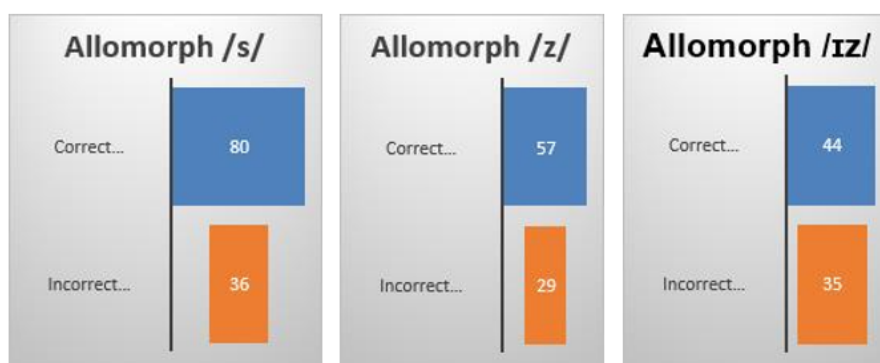


FIGURE 1

*General results per allomorph**Note.* Figures elaborated by the authors.

Figure 1 shows the individual results of each allomorph. Because each participant had a different number of realizations of each allomorph, the total number is unequal. The allomorph /s/ was the most realized and the most well-pronounced. Even though in all of them, the number of correct pronunciations outnumbered the mispronunciations, there was not a great difference for the allomorph /#z/.



FIGURE 2

*General results for the pronunciation of the third person singular of the English simple present tense**Note.* Figure elaborated by the authors.

Figure 2 shows that this sample represents the fourth-level student of the English career who has mastered 64% of the English simple present tense in the third person singular, leaving an error margin of inaccuracies of 36%.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results presented in the previous section, from a narrow perspective, it can be confirmed that the voiceless alveolar fricative sound /s/ is a similar sound between the native and target languages, and its high preference for usage (see Figure 1) can also confirm that it is an unmarked sound, easy to produce by these second language learners. However, when you observe the panoramic picture of the pronunciation of the suffix 's' to denote the simple present tense in the third person singular, it is not that easy to pronounce. These Panamanian learners had to keep in mind rules that they knew in theory and tried to apply but sometimes ended up using their Panamanian Spanish allophonic system because they replaced the sounds with aspirations and omissions or overused the /s/. Therefore, this confirms the phonological processes that mentioned Yip (as cited in González Johnson, 2012) and with the studies of Alvarado de Ricord (1971) and González Vega *et al.* (2022) about that the voiceless alveolar fricative is unpredictably aspirated and omitted sometimes.

According to Eckman's (1971) Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH), the results confirm that the /z/ and /ɪz/ were marked sounds because 34% erred in the pronunciation of /z/ and 44% erred in



the pronunciation of /z/, implying that both sounds take longer to acquire. In the case of the Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis (SDRH) by Major & Kim (1996), /z/ and /#z/ are dissimilar sounds, which means that they should be acquired faster. The results partially agree with this hypothesis because the correct pronunciations outnumbered the mispronunciations, but there is still a significant percentage of realizations that lack mastery of these dissimilar sounds yet.

In general, it can be said that this sample knew the theory and the rules and tried to apply them most of the time, but not 100 percent. That is a good question to reflect on in light of this study: How much of any linguistic feature do senior students in an English career need to master? This sample showed mastery of the rule of the third person singular of the simple present tense at 64%. We wonder now if that percentage is good, bad, or moderate.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study could be the basis for further research with correlational and explanatory scopes, a quantitative design, and a large number of participants to confirm or disregard the patterns found in this study. Notwithstanding, these results provide insights for professors and students about the teaching and learning of this grammatical feature that includes the disciplines of phonetics and phonology, syntax, and morphology.

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