A study of verb aspect errors in Aviation English technical descriptions

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Abstract
The paper presents an error analysis study of a translation exercise performed by Croatian L1 university students during their Aviation English course session. The participants of the study were 55 undergraduate and graduate university programme students from The Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences, Division of Aeronautics. The study consisted of an elicitation task involving Croatian to English translation of a number of decontextualized sentences, which dealt with various Aviation English technical descriptions and definitions. The goal of the study was to investigate the observed excessive use of the progressive verb aspect in Aviation English definitions and descriptions. The results of the elicitation task confirm a significant overuse of the progressive verb form in contexts requiring simple verb aspect. The paper relates these findings to several studies on L2 acquisition of verb tense and aspect and offers suggestions for teaching verb aspect.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, tense/aspect acquisition, Aviation English*

Introduction

The paper presents a study of verb aspect errors made by Croatian L1 university students during a translation exercise involving Croatian to English translation of a technical text. The study involved 50 undergraduate and 5 graduate programme students from The Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences, Division of Aeronautics. It was noticed during oral exams in the undergraduate study programme of aeronautics that during questions that involve descriptions of aircraft engines and systems students tend to use the progressive verb aspect in situations where simple aspect is needed. Descriptions that involve permanent, unchanging situations, general realities or plain facts such as abound in technical descriptions were often expressed using a progressive verb aspect. A translation exercise was designed consisting of twelve decontextulized sentences in Croatian, which the students were instructed to translate into English. The sentences all involved aeronautical topics, from technical descriptions of aircraft systems and engines to aviation history and general facts.

The students who took part in the study were first, second, and third year undergraduate students and first year graduate students enrolled in the civil/military pilot and air traffic control modules. During the first and second year of undergraduate study programme both the civil/military pilot and air traffic control modules are taught Aviation English 1-4 comprising 120 hours of lectures and exercises. At the third year only the air traffic control module students take Aviation English 5 course, which comprises 45 hours of lectures and exercises. Students who enrol in the graduate study programme take Aviation English 6 and 7 courses during the first year of study, comprising 90 hours of lectures and exercises. Students attending pilot modules consequently take only 4 semesters of Aviation English during the first two years of the study. Regarding the organization of the language instruction, in the first semester students take Aviation English 1 course and revise the verb system, while the topic of verb tense/aspect used in technical descriptions is introduced in the third semester in the Aviation English 3 course in a lesson that explicitly states that "simple present is the essential time in technical descriptions" (Kukovec, 2001: 38).

Regarding the first year students' English proficiency levels, the situation is not quite clear. In Croatia, secondary school students in their final year take the *matura* exam, a standardized exam on the national level assessing knowledge and skills in various subjects, English included. The exam is taken for the purpose of admission to higher education institutions in Croatia. Secondary school students choose whether they want to take the basic level English matura exam or advanced level English matura exam, depending on the enrolment requirements of their desired university study programme. Enrolment requirement for the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences is the completed basic level English matura exam. According to the National Center for External Evaluation of Education, the institution which administers the matura exams, completed basic level English matura exam corresponds to the A2+ proficiency level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (NCVVO, 2021:6). Consequently, matura exam does not provide us with a precise assessment of the students' language proficiency, we only know they are at least A2+ level. Regarding the English language instruction background of the first year students, it is also very difficult to generalize. Students enrolling in the aeronautics university study programme can have between 7 and 12 years of English language instruction, depending on their choice of primary and secondary schools.

Definitions

Two basic terms that we need to define for the purposes of this paper are verb aspect and technical text. Regarding both the terms aspect and tense, our understanding of them is closest to the definition provided by Bernard Comrie in *Aspect – an introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems* (Comrie, 1976). Comrie's classic and often quoted definition of aspect is "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie 1976: 3). Another useful definition defines aspect as "a way of conceiving the passage of action" (Holt 1943, cited in Binnick 1991: 208). Regarding tense, "it relates the time of the situation to some other time, usually to the moment of speaking" (Comrie 1976: 2). In that sense, and following the usual practice of teaching verb tense/aspect in English as a foreign language, we take the categories of aspect to be simple, continuous and perfect, and categories of tense past, present and future. As for the term technical text or technical writing, we mean language used in technical or occupational fields such as aeronautics, engineering, chemistry, medicine, etc. We consider Aviation English (AE) to be a domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and to contain elements of technical language, especially when relating to aeronautical technology, aircraft maintenance, training, aircraft documentation etc., rather than just radiotelephony communication in standard phraseology between flight crews and air traffic control units. Technical (English) language is in that sense a part of AE but not confined to it. Furthermore, we take technical texts to be organized around specific rhetorical patterns and to employ certain categories of grammar more frequently than others. For example, since definitions normally express permanent or habitual states and processes, simple present tense is prevalent in these kind of texts.

L2 acquisition of tense and aspect

Since our study deals with verb aspect error analysis in L2 English learners, it is necessary to give some theoretical background to L2 verb aspect acquisition and outline the basic developments of the research in the field. Research into aspect acquisition mostly takes form of studies into the acquisition of verb morphology (Andersen and Shirai 1996). Andersen and Shirai's paper "Primacy of Aspect in Language Acquisition" (Andersen and Shirai 1996) is one of the first reviews of studies into L2 aspect acquisition. The paper gives an overview of L2 aspect acquisition studies conducted mainly in the 1980s, involving learners of different first languages. The majority of studies reviewed involved just one learner, and only four of the reviewed studies involved more than ten learners. The learners were of different ages, with most of them being 18 years old or younger, and of different linguacultural identities. The

idea of primacy of aspect in L2 acquisition is central to all of the studies reviewed by Andersen and Shirai and is defined as a "phenomenon of limiting a tense-aspect marker to a restricted class of verbs, according to the inherent aspect of the verb" (Andersen and Shirai 1996: 529). In other words, the occurrence of verb aspect morphology is influenced by the inherent (lexical) aspect of the verb. Since the connection between verbal morphology and lexical aspect is significant in the linguistic systems of adult native speakers (Bardovi-Harlig 2012), it is, therefore, reasonable to expect that there would be a similar interaction of verbal morphology and lexical aspect in the process of second language acquisition. This means that when learning a second language, a person's understanding of how the different aspects of a verb are expressed through its morphology is likely to be influenced by their knowledge of their native language's verbal morphology and lexical aspect. This hypothesis has also been known as the aspect hypothesis, the defective tense hypothesis, and the relative defective tense hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig 1998). The concept of the inherent (lexical) aspect of the verb is fundamental to all of the variants of this hypothesis and is articulated by Andersen and Shirai in the following way:

"Inherent lexical aspect, also referred to as situation aspect (Smith 1983) or Aktionsart, refers to the characteristics of what is inherent in the lexical items that describe the situation. For example, *know* is inherently stative, whereas *jump* is inherently punctual (i.e., momentary and having no duration)"(Andersen and Shirai 1996: 530).

The categorization of inherent temporal properties of verbs into four groups is the work of Zeno Vendler, who proposed four categories of inherent meanings of verbs (Bardovi-Harlig 1998) – achievement, accomplishment, activity, and state. This classification dates back to Aristotle and has been recently further developed by Dowty and Mourelatos (Andersen and Shirai 1996). Depending on the semantics of a verb – whether its inherent meaning is one of an event taking place instantaneously, having some duration, end point, or having no dynamics and just continuing – verb aspect morphology is acquired. The aspect hypothesis has been tested on different samples of data collected from different groups of learners and its central proposition seems to be valid – "even with the increase in learner background variables and task variation, recent studies support the claim that a learner's use of tense-aspect morphology is influenced by lexical aspectual class" (Bardovi-Harlig 1998: 474).

An alternative hypothesis of L2 tense/aspect acquisition is the discourse hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that the narrative structure influences the distribution of tense/aspect morphology. The hypothesis is based on the distinction between narrative foreground and background and posits that "learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives" (Bardovi-Harlig 1995, cited in Bardovi-Harlig 1998: 476). According to Bardovi-Harlig, "previous work in second language acquisition that links tense/aspect to narrative structure suggests that a relationship exists between the use of verbal morphology and the foreground (the actual story line) and the background (the supportive material) of the narrative (1995: 264). In a detailed comparative study of the two hypotheses Bardovi-Harlig finds them to be complementary and concludes that "a point of departure for future research is the understanding that interlanguage temporal systems are shaped by both the semantics of lexical aspect and the pragmatics of discourse" (1998: 501).

More recently, analyses of corpora of spoken English and focus on principles of category learning (Wulff et al. 2009) developed the debate of tense and aspect acquisition towards the complex interaction of input elements and their impact on morphology. Features such as prototypicality of lexical aspect, frequency distributions and form, as well as the interactions between these features, were investigated to determine their influence on the order of acquisition of particular verbs. Underlying this approach is a constructionist perspective on language acquisition, which focuses on input of concrete examples or prototypes and relates them to learner cognition. Wulff et al. find that "it is the conspiracy of these several different factors working together that drives acquisition of linguistic constructions." (Wulff et al. 2009: 67). Some studies, such as Dominguez et al. (2013), supplied inconclusive data

regarding the aspect hypothesis in that they do not identify a clear pattern of acquisition of verb aspect that would be supportive of the hypothesis. Using two sets of data collected from several groups of participants of varying proficiency levels, they find that "in the light of all these results, we have enough evidence to argue that a pattern of emergence and development of past-tense forms across different lexical classes consistent with the lexical aspect hypothesis is not supported by our corpus of dana" (Dominguez et al. 2013: 12). Similarly, a 2018 study by Gonzales and Quintana found additional reasons for revision of the lexical aspect hypothesis. In a study of the acquisition of L2 Spanish by native English and Dutch learners, Gonzales and Quintana suggest that the aforementioned Vendlerian classification consisting of four categories of verb meanings, central to a large volume of work on verb aspect acquisition, is not adequate for explaining their data. They state that "there is no influence of the Vendler classification in the L2 production of our students" (Gonzales and Quintana, 2018: 622). A 2015 study of the development of progressive morphology in L2 Japanese (Ryu et al. 2015) also stresses the interplay of factors such as input, learner characteristics, instruction and L1 characteristics in the development of verb acquisition patterns. Their conclusion is, however, less dismissive of the general validity of the aspect hypothesis: "the real issue is perhaps not whether the Aspect hypothesis holds in all situations, but under what conditions… Considering this, it would be wise to treat the descriptive generalization of the Aspect Hypothesis as a universal tendency, not as an absolute universal" (Ryu et al., 2015: 816). Relating to different conditions in which the hypothesis may hold or not, a 2020 state of the scholarship review by Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé provides the following synthesis of the research on aspect hypothesis: "Research in the last 20 years can be characterized as having tested the universal against the particular. The universal is represented by the aspect hypothesis, and the particular by proficiency, first language, input, and task. The overarching question has been whether the aspect hypothesis holds, or whether the acquisitional sequences it predicts can be disrupted by individual variables." (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé 2020: 1138).

Concerning the principle observation of this study, the overuse of progressive verb aspect in contexts requiring simple verb aspect, several studies dealing with the aspect hypothesis note the appearance of the progressive marker in various unexpected positions. Housen (2002) in his work on the development of English verb morphology in Dutch and French-speaking learners of English states that there is a "more general tendency for untutored L2 learners of English to overuse the progressive marker -ing (due to its frequency, phonotactic saliency and morphophonemic stability in the input)"(Housen 2002: 173). Although the participants of our study were not untutored learners, we cite Housen's observation here because it suggests a possible explanation for the same kind of occurrence as the one encountered during the translation exercise. Andersen and Shirai (1996) in their aforementioned review of the studies on primacy of aspect in L2 acquisition offer another interesting perspective on the overuse of the -ing progressive verb marker: "the results regarding the use of -ing are important because they are different from what is found in L1 acquisition in that progressive markers are sometimes overextended to stative verbs in some of the L2 studies" (Andersen and Shirai 1996: 544). Commenting on the linguistic background of the participants of the reviewed studies Andersen and Shirai make a point that is worth quoting in full:

"Many of the L1s of the subjects in the above studies have imperfective aspect, which is strongly associated with durativity (Comrie 1976, Weist et al. 1984). It is plausible that these learners associate the *-ing* marker with imperfective aspect in their L1, as progressive is part of imperfectivity (Comrie 1976).

Therefore, along with a more general tendency to overuse the progressive aspect due to its morphological prominence or stability, imperfective aspect of some L1 languages is also seen as a factor influencing the overextension of -ing forms. There is, of course, no reason that several different factors, from L1 syntax, phonology or semantics could not work together to produce this acquisitional pattern.

Andersen and Shirai, for example, suggest that "universal factors (i.e. markedness, prototype) and the learner's L1 interact and subtly influence L2 development" (1996: 545). Given that this extremely complex problematic is outside of the scope of our study, we limit ourselves to stating that the suggestion concerning the L1 interference seems particularly plausible given the background of the study participants (Croatian L1 speakers) and the high incidence of imperfective verb aspect in the translation task.

Aim and methodology of the study

The aim of the study was to determine the incidence of verb aspect errors in technical descriptions and definitions amongst the students of the Aeronautics study programme at the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences. Given that distinguishing between present tense habitual and progressive meanings is a marker of an earlier stage of language acquisition, the aim was to ascertain how frequent this error is in roughly upper-intermediate English learners and to try to account for it.

The incidence of verb aspect errors was measured through the means of a translation task consisting of twelve sentences in Croatian. Out of the twelve sentences, eight were designed to target the simple-continuous aspect problematic while four sentences served as distractors. All twelve sentences dealt with aviation topics, but were contextually unrelated. Out of the total of 11 verbs tested in the translation exercise, 9 were of imperfective aspect, 1 of perfective aspect and one was an auxiliary verb. The task description provided no context for the sentences. The students had all been taught the specific-purpose vocabulary employed in the sentences earlier in their university programme. They did not volunteer to participate in the study nor were they told that the exercise they were doing was a part of a study. They were given the translation exercise as a part of their regular classes. The instruction for the exercise stated only "Translate into English". No further context to the exercise was given in order to make the answers as natural as possible and to avoid giving away what the feature tested for was. Cloze type exercises employed in similar verb aspect acquisition studies (Bardovi-Harlig 1999) were also avoided for the same reason. One of the concerns in designing the elicitation task was that any kind of further instruction beyond the simplest one risks compromising the spontaneity of responses, especially with second year of undergraduate study students who had been taught the verb tense/aspect system during their Aviation English 3 course. Another concern was the duration of the exercise, which we felt, should not be so long as to cause fatigue or discourage students from doing it altogether. We decided that the task should not exceed 15 minutes.

Here we provide several example sentences in Croatian with English translation in parentheses:

U prvom taktu povećava se volumen cilindra i usisava se svježi zrak. (In the first stroke the volume of the cylinder increases and the air is sucked in).

Zrakoplovi koji uzlijeću sa zračnih luka RH mogu biti podvrgnuti pregledima na stajanci. (Aircraft taking off from the airports in the Republic of Croatia may be subjected to inspections on the apron).

Concorde je prolazio kroz dva ciklusa zagrijavanja i hlađenja tijekom leta. (Concorde went through two cooling and heating cycles during flight).

Horizontalnim okretanjem rotora razvija se vertikalna uzgonska sila. (Horizontal turning of the rotor creates a vertical lift force).

Primjena mlaznih motora dovela je do revolucije u putničkom transportu. (The use of jet engines led to a revolution in passenger transport).

Results of the translation exercise

The results show that out of 55 students, 18 translated all the sentences using the verb tense/aspect correctly. Out of 37 students who made errors, 6 of them made three or more errors, and 31 students made 1 or 2 errors. Adding to this number the number of sentences in which the translations were not

provided, we come to a considerable number. The number of sentences in which no translation was provided is presented in Figure 2. Sentences that were left untranslated were not included in the category of error and are not presented in Figures 1 and 3. We present here first the table illustrating the distribution of errors.

Figure 1. Distribution of errors
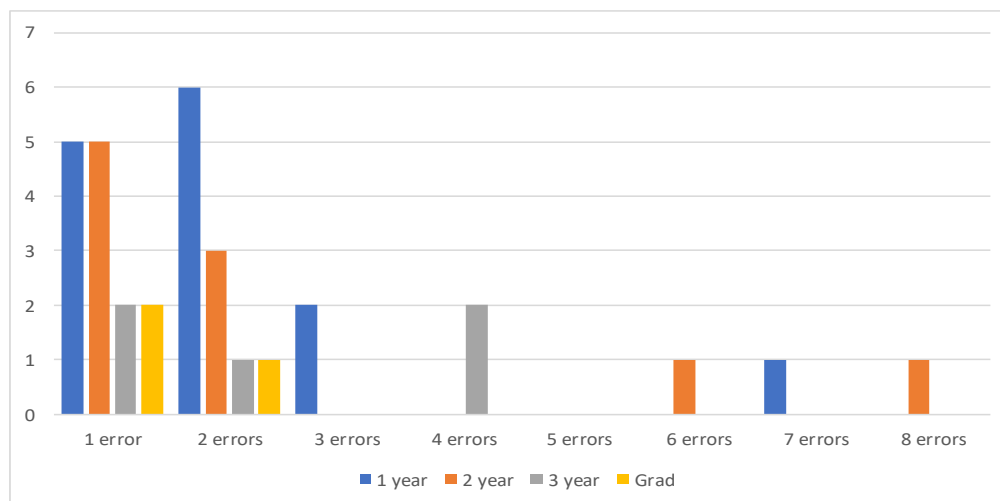
Results shown in Figure 2, which exhibit an increasing number of sentences with no translation provided as the exercise progressed, can be understood in terms of the decreasing motivation and/or fatigue of the participants. We would also suggest that the relatively higher number of errors in the first four verbs can be explained by the process of accommodation to the type of task involved. The participants probably needed a bit of time to get accustomed to the type of exercise involved.

Figure 2. Number of errors per verb
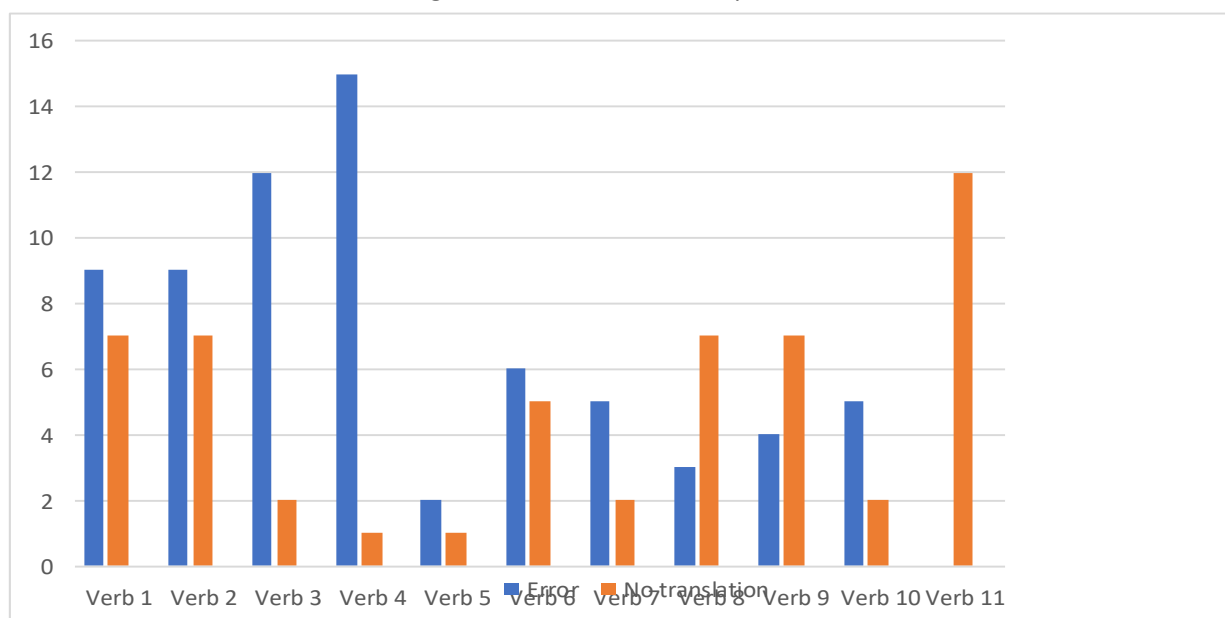
The majority of study participants (39) were first and second year of undergraduate study programme students. Only five students who participated in the study were graduate study programme students. Figure 3 presents the distribution of study participants according to the year of study.

Figure 3. Distribution of participants according to year of study.
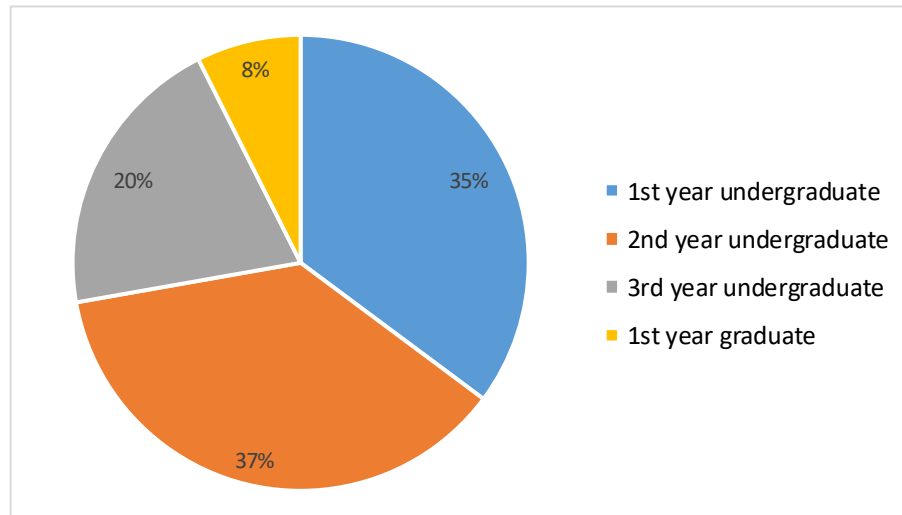
The average value of errors per student decreases with the year of study with the first year undergraduate programme students having the highest average score of errors per student and the graduate programme students having the lowest score of errors per student.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

There are several limiting factors that need to be addressed before discussing the study's implications for teaching and overall conclusions. The first concerns the sample of the students. Although all of the participants of the study were long time learners of English as L2 and are all enrolled in the same university study programme, it would be rash to assume uniformity in their language proficiency levels. Although the undergraduate study programme is made up of two different modules that take the same Aviation English courses, the students can additionally be divided into three groups – air traffic control students, civil pilot students and military pilot students. Language proficiency levels tend to be the highest in the air traffic control group and lowest in the military pilot group, although as of yet we have not conducted any comprehensive empirical studies to confirm this observation. Military pilot students also more often tend to come from vocational secondary schools with fewer hours of language instruction. Levels of motivation for Aviation English classes also tend to be higher in students who have attended secondary schools of the grammar school type where language instruction is generally more advanced and challenging. Although there is an English language entry exam during the enrollment period, its main purpose is to check for any speech impediments in candidates whose future jobs will involve extensive use of radiotelephony, rather than to give a comprehensive language proficiency result for each candidate. All this points to the fact that proficiency levels can sometimes differ considerably within a seemingly uniform sample of learners.

The second point concerns the nature of the task employed in the study. Most of the L2 tense/aspect acquisition studies reviewed during the writing of this paper (Andersen and Shirai 1996, Bardovi-Harlig 1999, Housen 2002) employed a variety of tasks in elicitation of samples from learners, such as conversational interviews, film retell tasks, cloze passages, short contextualized passages, etc. Although

these studies were much broader in scope and dealt with aspect/tense acquisition rather than verb aspect error analysis, there is, of course, merit to employing each of these elicitation tasks in error analysis-type of study as well. Constraints of time and logistics involved in interviewing roughly 50 possibly unwilling university students made us decide in the end on a translation task, which could be incorporated into a regular teaching session during the semester.

Regarding suggestions for further research, we feel that the elicitation task that we employed in this study could be complemented with a short contextualized passage translation task. In that way we could assess if the contextual meanings and discourse organization affect in any way the correct choice of L2 verb aspect. Seeing that technical texts are more difficult to organize according to the foreground-background lines that shape the discourse hypothesis, it would be interesting to see what kind of results would the application of the said hypothesis provide on a technical kind of a text, given the usual lack of clear narrative lines and prevalence of stative and durative meanings in such textual genres. A comprehensive analysis of the discursive properties of a technical text would be a precondition for such an attempt.

Furthermore, given the centrality of the aspect hypothesis in the current verb aspect acquisition research, it would be useful to design an elicitation task in which all categories of inherent lexical aspect are represented. Verbs employed in our elicitation task featured a predominance of imperfective meanings, as mentioned in the aim and methodology section of the study. The reason for this was that in definitions and descriptions of processes or states verbs with imperfective meanings prevail.

A third suggestion for further research, along with taking into account the wide range of findings relating to aspect and discourses hypotheses, would be to establish a more precise level of language proficiency amongst the participants. We have already mentioned that even though our sample of participants projects a certain uniformity in terms of language proficiency that might not necessarily be the case. In her findings on the role of narrative perspective on the verb tense/aspect acquisition, Bardovi-Harlig states that "level of proficiency clearly emerges as a likely factor in the distribution of tense relative to grounding" (1995: 264). Bearing that in mind, a precise pre-testing language proficiency assessment of the study participants should improve the validity of the results.

Some observations on teaching English L2 tense and aspect

Before delivering our conclusions, we would like to make an observation concerning the conceptualization of the tense/aspect in English L2 instruction and suggest how this conceptualization might influence the student proficiency in handling these key verb categories. Since our analysis of verb aspect errors committed by university undergraduate students' points to a significant confusion regarding the nature of the category of verb aspect, we would like to take a brief look at how the English verb system is often approached in secondary education classrooms. It has been our experience teaching undergraduate Aviation English courses that although students generally have a solid grasp of the verb system and are familiar with the verb tenses, they do not really understand the concept of verb aspect. They have learned to think about the temporality of verbs in a sequential way – they first learned present simple, than present continuous, then past simple, then past continuous, then present perfect, then past perfect, with future tenses thrown in somewhere in the middle of this sequence. This is, of course, a logical way of introducing the tenses and probably cannot be significantly improved, but it also creates a certain sense of linearity and isolation of these individual concepts. It very rarely occurs to students that present perfect, past perfect and future perfect might in some strange way be alike. Some of these tenses are contrasted through mixed tenses exercises, but usually in the standard present/past simple and continuous pairing or simple past and present perfect pairing. During the B1 level instruction present perfect simple and continuous are contrasted and during the B2 level future perfect and continuous and the idea of narrative tenses are usually introduced.

The category of aspect rarely gets explicitly covered outside of the individual tense pairings and the idea of the inner temporality of a situation in that way gets somewhat skirted. Exercises that would, for example, focus on the verb aspect through different tenses, thereby drawing attention to the inner temporality of a situation, are extremely rare. A cursory review of the English language textbooks available for secondary school teaching in Croatia for the year 2019/2020 gives an indication that most of the teaching materials available avoid presenting the category of verb aspect outside of the particular tense/aspect pairing. According to the table published on the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education website (MZO, 2019), most popular textbook series for the said school year seems to be Oxford University Press' Headway 5th edition (Soars, L. and Soars, J. 2019), and Profil Klett's Solutions 3rd edition (Falla T. and Davies, P.A. 2019) and Insight (Sayer, M. and Roberts, R. 2019). In none of the three most popular textbooks for secondary school is the verb aspect explicitly dealt with, with the focus instead being on the tense/aspect pairings. Grammar exercises in which, for example, different tense forms are elicited, but within the same category of aspect, seem to be overall very rare in the available teaching materials. We would suggest that in a situation in which the confusion surrounding the concept of aspect extends well into upper intermediate levels of proficiency it might be helpful to design exercises that in some form isolate the category of verb aspect. An example of this kind of exercise would be a cloze type mixed tense exercise in which only, for example, perfect aspect verbs are elicited, in past, present, or future. Working within the same category of aspect will help students focus on the meaning and use of *perfect* aspect by contrasting the past, present and future forms.

The results of our translation exercise show that even learners of high language proficiency levels and with more than twelve years of formalized language instruction commit verb aspect errors with some regularity. Although the above-mentioned remarks on the conceptual confusion surrounding the category of verb aspect are entirely anecdotal and have not been supported by empirical research into how undergraduate students conceptualize the English L2 aspect, we provide them here in order to put the results of our study in the context of the classroom and language instruction methodology.

Conclusions

The study was designed with the premise that the incidence of verb aspect errors is overall high, which was a subjective observation based solely on the experience of undergraduate programme oral exams. Our findings indicate that more than half of the students participating in the exercise made at least one verb aspect error. Considering that most students had been learning English for at least twelve years, this figure appears to be significant. One suggestion that would account for the occurrence of errors is the interference from L1 Croatian that results in imperfective verb aspect in Croatian being translated as the progressive aspect in English. A more detailed study is needed to elaborate on this correlation. The incidence of errors decreases with the number of Aviation English courses taken during the university study programmes. A drop in the number of errors made by the third year students can be explained by the fact that in the second semester the students are explicitly taught the prevalence of simple aspects in technical texts. In terms of suggestions for designing future course materials, we suggest that in teaching verb aspect it could be beneficial to design exercises and tasks in which students practice the usage of various tenses, but within the same category of aspect. Activities that help students contrast the same category of aspect through different temporal circumstances will help them focus on the idea of aspect and its particular meanings. In order to overcome language transfer issues, course materials should be designed to help students understand unique features of technical English, such as grammar structures and conventions for writing technical documents. Additionally, course instructors should be able to identify and address the specific language transfer issues faced by their students. Explicit instruction and exercises tailored to contrast specific verb/aspect pairings are suggested as a way to better prepare students for effective communication in technical contexts.

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