Effects of Lexical Aspect on the Interlanguage of Ibibio ESL Learners: Later than Sooner

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❖ ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to test the major prediction of the Aspect Hypothesis on interlanguage narratives collected from 171 Ibibio ESL learners in a classroom setting using sets of picture stories. Aspect Hypothesis predicts that lexical aspectual classes of verbs would determine the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology at the very early stages of L2 acquisition of tense-aspect verbal morphology. That is, telic verbs would be marked with the past tense-aspect verbal morphology before atelic verbs in the interlanguage of ESL learners irrespective of their L1 background. The results of our data analyses show a significant effect from the lexical aspect on the acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology with chi-square statistics of (x^2=196.92,*df* = 6, n = 1664, p = <.0001). However, the effect of the lexical aspect is shown to be more prominent among Ibibio ESL learners at higher levels of proficiency. This is contrary to the prediction regarding Aspect Hypothesis. The paper concludes that the influence of the lexical aspect on the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology may be universal but the actual point along the developmental pathway when such influence is obtainable is yet to be determined. This calls for more research into the pattern of the L2 acquisition of tense-aspect verbal morphology.

Key Words

Lexical Aspect, Tense-aspect Morphology, Interlanguage, Aspect Hypothesis, ESL Learners, L2 Acquisition, Ibibio ESL Learners, Telic Verbs, Chi-square Statistics

1. Introduction

Language is a complex system of symbols used to non-instinctively communicate ideas, emotions and other forms of human behavioral concerns, and this enables interaction in a speech community. But the question is: how do humans learn to use this extremely complex system of symbols in such an effective manner that it can be used to express meanings and ideas that are displaced from the moment of speech in time and in space. Researchers in second language acquisition have been brain-storming on the question of how these symbols co-correlate with meaning. This is in cognizance of the fact that combinations of symbols result in the formation of formal structures like morphemes, words, phrases and sentences. This is because the task of discovering the link or relationship between these formal structures (forms) and their referents (function) has posed a serious challenge to language learners at all levels. This challenge seems to be general to all learners though specific manifestations of the problem may differ according to the specific learning conditions of the learners, age of the learners, L1-L2 combination of the learners, level of proficiency, the amount of instruction and the contents of the instructional material to which the learners are exposed among other factors.

The Ibibio learners of English as a second language (ESL) in classroom situation also face this challenge but in unique ways based on the peculiarities of their learning condition, L1-L2 combination and other factors mentioned above. Ibibio is a name of a people and their language. The Ibibio language is spoken in Akwa Ibom State located in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The people have been disputed to constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after the three major ones namely Hausa,

Yoruba and Igbo (Essien 1990, Eyoh 2008, 2013). However, the population of Ibibio speakers is estimated at about 4,000,000 according to the 2006 Nigerian national population census. Genetically, the Ibibio language is classified as a member of the Central Lower Cross of the Lower Cross subgroup of languages which means that it belongs to Delta Cross group of languages; a branch of the New Benue Congo family of languages. The New Benue Congo constitutes a family of languages spoken mainly in Nigeria as the main concerns of this paper are explored in subsequent sections (Connell 1994, Urua 1996, Willie 2011).

One of the concerns of this paper is to discover, describe and explain how Ibibio learners of ESL go about the process of uncovering the link between morphological forms and the functional concept of temporality. In other words, this paper explores how the lexical aspectual or lexical semantics of the verbal predicates (the independent variable) exerts influence on the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology of verbal predicates (the dependent variable) in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners. This task will be attempted with the following research questions in mind: what is the pattern of acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect verbal morphology among Ibibio ESL learners? To what extent is the prediction of aspect hypothesis confirmed or refuted by the empirical data elicited from the Ibibio ESL learners? Does the level of proficiency of the learners determine or contribute to the question of whether the prediction of aspect hypothesis is confirmed or refuted? That is, does the high proficiency learner (HPL) follow the predicted pattern while the low proficiency learner does not or vice versa? The concept of tense-aspect is explored in the following subsection.

2. Tense and Aspect in Natural Language

The concept of temporality is expressed with the category that "relates the time of the situation referred to with some other time, usually the moment of speaking" (Ayoun & Salaberry 2008: 557, Comrie 1976: 1-2).

If the situation is simultaneous with the moment of speech, (i.e. the deictic center), we talk of the present tense. If the moment of speech is subsequent to the situation referred to or discussed, we talk about the past tense, and if the moment of speech is before the situation, we talk about the future tense. Aspect, on its part, is the speaker's view-point about the internal temporal mark-up of the situation. According to Comrie (1976:3, cited in Ayoun & Salaberry 2008:557), aspect denotes the "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation". In fact, aspect has been compared to the camera lens focused on a situation. The lens focused on a situation determines the presentation of a situation just like grammatical aspect does in language (Smith 1983, 1991, Bardovi-Harlig 2000). For example, in describing an event such as washing of dishes, a speaker may say either (1a) or (1b) depending on whether s/he focuses the lens of the view-point aspect on the terminal phase of the situation (1a) or the continuative phase of the situation (1b).

1a. John washed the dishes
b. John was washing the dishes

The purpose of tense is to order events along a time line; that is, to situate events in reference to other events in terms of temporality whereas aspect reflects the speaker's internal perspective on a given situation (Ayoun and Salaberry 2008). Tense and aspect is very difficult to disentangle from one another in most languages of the world. In the example in (1a), the same morphological form is used to mark the past tense and the perfective aspect. What this means is that to form the past tense form of the verb "wash" in English, the "–ed" suffix is attached to the verb and it is the same "-ed" suffix that signals to the reader or the listener the perfective aspect which shows that the activity of washing of dishes was completed.

3. Lexical Aspect and Aspect Hypothesis

In aspect hypothesis, aspect is discussed under two broad areas: grammatical aspect is what we have discussed so far and aspectual distinction

is made broadly between perfective aspect and imperfective aspect. The differences between perfective and imperfective aspect are explained in terms of the speaker's perspective on the event described. Perfective aspect focuses on the beginning and the end of a situation whereas imperfective aspect focuses on the situation from within, without definite temporal boundaries (Smith 1991, 1997, Ayoun & Salaberry 2008).

Lexical aspect, also known as inherent aspect, refers to the inherent semantic property of the verb phrase or predicate used to express a situation or an event. Vendler[1] (1967 cited in Bardovi-Harlig 2000) proposed a four-way division that distinguishes the lexical aspectual categories of 'states', 'activities', 'accomplishments', and 'achievements'. States persist over time without change. They are not interruptible and if a state ceases to obtain, then a new state begins. For example, 'seem', 'know', 'need', 'want', also 'be' as in 'be tall', 'be big', 'be green' etc. "Activities have inherent duration in that they involve a span of time. They have no specific end points" (Bardovi-Harlig 2000:215). Examples of activities include 'rain', 'play', 'walk' and 'talk'.

Achievements, as a part of lexical aspectual categorization, capture the beginning or the end of an action as in 'the race began or the game ended'. Examples of achievement include 'arrive', 'leave', 'recognize' and 'fall asleep' (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Mourelatos 1981, Andersen 1991). "Accomplishments have both inherent duration (like activities) and inherent end-point (like achievements)" (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 215). Examples of accomplishments include 'build a house, paint a painting" etc. The classes of achievement and accomplishment are grouped together as telic predicates and the classes of statives and activities are also grouped together as atelic predicates. Aspectual distinctions or categories apply to the verb and its argument(s); not just the verb (Dowty 1986). Other distinctions may be

1) Willie (2012, 2014) has observed that the lexical aspectual distinction of verbal predicates into states, activities, accomplishments and achievements may not be universal as empirical data from Ibibio language has shown that the distinction between accomplishment and achievement is blurred in the Ibibio language. Similar observation has been made in Upor (2009) concerning some African languages in Tanzania.

possible in the aspectual system; like the distinction between punctual and non-punctual, dynamic and non-dynamic; but we are concerned mainly with the distinctions discussed above. Overall table of aspectual distinction in language is presented as in table (1).

Table 1. Semantic Features of Aspectual Categories

	States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
Punctual	-	-	-	+
Telic	-	-	+	+
Dynamic	-	+	+	+

(Table 1 adapted from Ayoun & Salaberry 2008: 559 and Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 216). On this table, a "-" sign means the absence of the corresponding feature on the corresponding category of verbs while a "+" sign means the presence of the corresponding feature on the corresponding category of verbs).

Aspect Hypothesis (AH), as propounded by Andersen (1986, 1991, 1994) is a theory of second language acquisition of tense and aspect which predicts that events that have inherent end point (e.g., to crash, to break, to reach the top, to notice something, to recognize somebody) will be the first type of verbs marked with past tense-aspect verbal morphology (i.e., telic predicates are marked with past tense morphology first) at the early stages of acquisition of such tense-aspect morphology. This would be followed by atelic events (i.e. activities; processes that have no inherent end point). Examples of these include; to walk, to beg, to look, to watch, to do, and to listen. And the last class of verbs to be marked with the past tense morphology is the statives (a type of atelic); for example, verbs like; to be, to remain, to know, to have, to want etc. What this means is that the appearance of temporal verbal morphological markings on the verbal predicates would depend on the lexical semantic classes of the predicates. That is, L2 learners first use tense markings to signal or in relation to the lexical semantic classes of the verbs.

AH makes other predictions which we do not hope to be concerned with in this study. These include the prediction that "in languages that encode the perfective/imperfective aspectual distinction, imperfective past appears later than perfective past and imperfect past marking begins with

statives; extending next to activities, then to accomplishments, and finally to achievements" (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 227). Another prediction of AH include the fact that "in languages that have progressive aspect, progressive marking begins with activities, then extends to accomplishments and achievement", (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 227). And the last prediction of AH is that "progressive markings are not incorrectly overextended to states" (Bardovi- Harlig 2000:227, Salaberry 2000:137). The summary of the overall predictions of AH is presented on table (2) below. However, in this study we will be concerned with testing the major prediction of the AH (which is that telic predicates are marked with past tense-aspect morphology first before atelic predicates) in the data elicited from L2 learners of English with respect to the development of the past temporal verbal morphology.

Table 2: Summary of the Predictions of Aspect Hypothesis

Aspect	Statives	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
Perfective Past	4 ◄	3 ◄	2 ◄	1
Imperfective	1 ►	2 ►	3 ►	4
Progressive		- 1 ►	2 ►	3
Present/3ps	1 ►	2 ►	3 ►	4

The different directions of the arrows on the table signify the different developmental pathways of tense-aspect verbal morphology attributable to different lexical aspectual classes of verbs in language generally.

4. Previous Work on Aspect Hypothesis

Since the proposition of aspect hypothesis in Andersen (1991, 1992) several studies have been conducted some of which have provided direct support to the major predictions. One of such studies includes Lee (2001). In Lee's (2001) study, a longitudinal study of two adolescents with Korean L1 learning ESL was conducted. Oral data were elicited with story narration

and translation, picture description and spontaneous conversation. The result of the data analysis showed that one participant rarely used past morphology, whereas the other started to use past tense morphology toward the end of the study. Instead, both participants used adverbials and discourse-pragmatic devices. The lexical aspectual analysis revealed that telic predicates were marked with past tense more often than states and activities whereas progressive appeared first with activities supporting most of AH predictions.

Also, Collins (2002) conducted two studies with French speakers enrolled in English intensive course in Canada to test the predictions made by AH and to establish the degree of L1 influence that would come from the inappropriate use of the present perfect in English which has similar uses to the passé composé in French. The analysis of the data obtained from a 32-passage cloze test looked at the use of the simple past and its alternative forms for four aspectual classes of predicates. The results from the first study revealed a significant difference in past tense use across lexical aspectual classes but no interaction with proficiency level. Also the L1 effect in present perfect use seemed to be limited to higher proficiency learners. Over all, learners had the most difficulty with activity verbs.

The result of the 25-passage cloze task administered in the second study showed a significant difference in past tense use across lexical aspectual classes but no interaction between group and lexical aspect. And Ayoun & Salaberry (2008: 565) observe that "it appears that even advanced learners' use of past tense morphology was influenced by lexical aspect". Significant differences were also found between achievements and states, between achievements and activities, as well as between accomplishments and states. Past progressive was the second common form used mostly with activities followed by the present with states. The present perfect was the alternative form used and most often used with telics, especially with increasing levels of proficiency, but it remained relatively low in production rate.

However, not all studies that have been conducted to test AH have

provided support for the predictions of this hypothesis. An example of such studies includes Housen (2002) whose longitudinal study of a 9-year old Dutch child shows that whereas the development of progressive marking supported the prediction of the AH, the development of past tense did not. First, states were marked for past tense beginning in the early stages of development much more than expected, though they were mostly irregular verbs. Second, type analysis, as opposed to token analysis did not support the proposed early association of past tense marking with achievements because the repeated use of a few achievement verbs (i.e. 'said' and 'got') inflated their token count. Housen (2002) therefore speculates that AH prediction for past tense might be valid for regular past only, whereas a different processing mechanism might be involved for irregular past which is assumed to be more prone to rote learning than regular past (Ayoun & Salaberry 2008).

Another study that tends to be problematic for AH is Rohde (2002) cited in Ayoun & Salaberry (2008:566). Rohde's (2002) study focused on child L2 acquisition of English. It studied verbal morphology in the interlanguage of four German children acquiring English in a naturalistic setting. After discussing various possible factors such as L1 transfer and input, the author argued that 'aspectual effect', which can vary in strength, should be invoked rather than an aspect hypothesis that must be either supported or rejected. The major finding that was problematic for AH was that stative verbs had very high past marking rate (80- 100%) in obligatory past contexts. So, according to Ayoun & Salaberry (2008: 566) "although state verbs in Rohde's (2002) data included 'be' copula/auxiliary, the same tendency was observed by Housen's (2002) study that arrived at a similar finding although he had excluded 'be'. Rohde and Housen therefore both provided important counter examples to the AH".

5. The Current Study

Based on the review of previous work on aspect hypothesis presented in the above section, this paper needs to establish a correlation between the independent variable (lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates) and the dependent variable (the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology). This will be achieved through the formulation of research hypotheses that will guide the data presentation, data analysis, presentation of the results and the discussion in this study. Canonically, the null hypothesis (H^o) denies any relationship between the independent and the dependent variables while the research hypothesis predicts a correlation between the two research variables as formulated below.

H^o: There will be no correlation between the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates and the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners.

Research Hypothesis: There will be a correlation between the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates and the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners.

5.1 Research Objectives and Research Questions

One of the major predictions of aspect hypothesis is that lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates determine the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect verbal morphology at the very early stages of both L1 and L2 acquisition of such verbal morphology. The main concern of this paper is to test this prediction in the light of empirical data collected from 171 Ibibio ESL learners in a classroom situation. The paper will also test the research hypotheses as formulated above. As stated earlier in the introductory section, this study attempts to describe and explain the pattern of acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect verbal morphology among Ibibio ESL learners. The extent to which the prediction of aspect hypothesis is confirmed or refuted by the empirical data elicited from the Ibibio ESL learners will also be investigated. The question of

whether the level of proficiency of the learners determine or contribute to the question of whether the prediction of aspect hypothesis is confirmed or refuted will also be addressed. That is, does the high proficiency learner (HPL) follow the predicted pattern while the low proficiency learner does not or vice versa? This study will move a step closer to providing answers to these questions as we discuss how, where and when this research was conducted.

5.2 Research Methodology

This research was conducted inside the classroom of educational institutions in Akwa Ibom state of Nigeria. The research area has a population of about five million people empowered with about 1,146 primary schools, 228 secondary schools and 4 tertiary institutions as at the time of this research. As stated earlier, a total of 171 participants were randomly selected from primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education and they were organized into six (6) groups with the following distribution.

- Group 1 4^{th} grade (primary 4) 30 17.6%
- Group 2 6^{th} grade (primary 6) 30 17.6%
- Group 3 8^{th} grade (JSS 2)[2] 29 16.9%
- Group 4 11^{th} grade (SSS 2) 27 15.8%
- Group 5 University Yr 1 29 16.9%
- Group 6 University Yr 3 26 15.2%

All participants spoke Ibibio as their first language and were all in educational institutions in the research area during the time of this study.

Three sets of picture stories were used to elicit personal narratives from the research participants. The picture stories were excerpts from the book *Picture Stories* written by Radlov (1960 cited in Upor 2009). Three different excerpts from the book were selected for the three levels of education to be sampled. These included “Two Foolish Goats” selected for the participants in primary schools which constitute groups 1 and 2, “Toy Rat” selected for the participants in secondary schools which

2) JSS = junior secondary school, SSS = senior secondary school

constitute groups 3 and 4, and “Bad Luck” selected for the participants in universities which constitute groups 5 and 6 in this study. These set of picture stories have already been used in the African context in Upor (2009) and it recorded a tremendous degree of success. The book contains child friendly picture stories full of fun and mischief and surprises. The stories are pictorial (contains only a series of pictures) and allows the participants to make up their stories but on the same topic and contents. The sameness of the topic and contents is intended to guarantee ease of analyses and comparability of the narratives elicited from the research participants (Willie 2011, 2012). The major research task that concerned this study was the writing of the personal narratives. The participants were given about 45 minutes to complete the research task and were instructed to begin the narrative with the phrase “once upon a time…” This instruction was to ensure that participants render their narratives in the past.

Next, the data collected from the participants were organized and coded for verbal morphology and lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates. For verbal morphology, the verbal predicates found in the participants’ narratives were coded into the simple past, the past progressive, the past perfect (pluperfect), the present, the present progressive and the present perfect. The simple past was identified by the base form of the verb plus the past tense suffix “-ed” or the irregular past form of the verb (Verb + -ed/Irregular form). The past progressive was identified by the use of the past form of the copula “was” plus the base form of the verbs followed by the progressive suffix “-ing” (was + verb + ing). The past perfect was identified by the past form of the verb “to have” followed by the base form of the verb plus the past suffix or the participle marker (had + verb + -ed/-en). The present form of the verbs was identified by the base form of the verb or the base form followed by the third person singular marker (verb/verb + s). The present perfect form of the verbs was identified by the present form of the verb “to have” followed by the base form of the verb followed by the past or the participle marker (have + verb + -ed/en). The present progressive form of the verbs was

identified by the present form of the copula followed by the verb followed by the progressive suffix (is + verb + ing).

The data was also coded for lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates using a version of the diagnostic test first used in Dowty (1979). This diagnostic test had been used in subsequent studies like Bardovi-Harlig (2000), Salaberry (2000), Upor (2009) and it yielded maximum reliability. This test provides a four-way distinction of the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates into stative verbs, activity verbs, accomplishment verbs and achievement verbs. The test has three stages of diagnosis with the first stage designed to distinguish between state and non-state verbs, stage two was designed to distinguish between activity and non-activity verbs while the last stage was designed to distinguish between accomplishment and achievement verbs as presented below:

Step 1: State or non-state

Does it have a habitual interpretation in simple present?

If no → State (e.g., *I love you*)

If yes → Nonstate (e.g., **I eat bread**) → Go to step 2

Step 2: Activity or non-activity

Does 'X is V-ing' entail 'X has V-ed without an iterative/habitual meaning? In other words, if you stop in the middle of 'V-ing, have you done the act of 'V'?

If yes → Activity (e.g., run)

If no → Non-activity (e.g., run a mile, build a house) → Go to step 3

Step 3: Accomplishment or achievement

[If test (a) does not work, apply test (b) and possibly test ©]

(a) If "X V-ed in Y time, e.g., 10 minutes", then 'X was Ving during that time'.

If yes → Accomplishment (e.g., *he painted a picture, He built a house*)

If no → Achievement (e.g., *He noticed a picture, He recognized the king*)

(b) Is there ambiguity with *almost*?

If yes → Accomplishment (e.g., *He almost painted a picture* has two readings: He almost started to paint a picture/He almost finished painting a picture)

If no → Achievement (e.g., *He almost noticed a picture* has only

one reading)

(c) "X will VP in Y time, e.g., 10 minutes" = "X will VP after Y time".
If no → Accomplishment (e.g., *He will paint a picture in an hour* is different from *He will paint a picture after an hour* because the former can mean that he will spend an hour painting a picture, but the latter does not)
If yes → Achievement (e.g., *He will start singing in two minutes* can only have one reading, which is the same as He will start singing after two minutes, with no other reading possible).

It is important to state that in using these diagnostic tests for the classification of verbs the syntactico-semantic contexts where the verbs were used in the participants' narratives were given adequate consideration because they play a pivotal role in determining the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates in the English and other natural languages. What this mean is that in the English language, for example, the verb 'walk' free of context is an activity verb in terms of its lexical aspectual classification. However, the same verb 'walk' in the phrase 'walk to school' is an accomplishment verb because the situation of walking to school is a durative event which terminates when the walker reaches the school. That is, the event has a natural end point.

6. The Results

One of the important research questions that this study attempts to address is; what is the pattern of acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect verbal morphology by Ibibio ESL learners? To provide answer to this and other research questions mentioned previously, we present a within-category analysis[3] of the raw token count together with percentages

3) This approach analyzes the morphological use within each lexical aspectual category so that the percentage of the progressive marked on activity verbs by a group of participants, for instance, would be a ratio of all the verbal morphology marked on activity verbs by the participants in that group. This approach was used in Bardovi-Harlig (2000), Robison (1995) to insulate the results from the adverse effects of the inherent difference in the number of

of the tense-aspect verbal morphology as distributed in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners in table (3) below.

Table 3: Raw Token count with percentages of Morphological Markings within Lexical Aspectual Classes by Group

Group	Form	States		Activities		Accomplishment		Achievement	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Group 1	Past	61	88.4	3	13.0	1	5.0	44	60.3
(Primary 4)	Past Progressive	0	0.0	11	47.8	10	50.0	7	9.6
N=30	Past Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Present	8	11.6	7	30.5	7	35.0	22	30.1
	Present Progressive	0	0.0	2	8.7	2	10.0	0	0.0
	Present Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Total	**69**	**100.0**	**23**	**100.0**	**20**	**100.0**	**73**	**100.0**
Group 2	Past	91	95.7	25	65.7	3	42.8	77	86.6
(Primary 6)	Past Progressive	0	0.0	8	21.1	1	14.3	4	4.5
N=30	Past Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Present	3	3.2	3	7.9	1	14.3	8	8.9
	Present Progressive	1	1.1	2	5.3	1	14.3	0	0.0
	Present Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	14.3	0	0.0
	Total	**95**	**100.0**	**38**	**100.0**	**7**	**100.0**	**89**	**100.0**

Group	Form	States		Activities		Accomplishment		Achievement	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Group 3	Past	91	79.8	23	37.7	3	33.3	47	66.1
(JSS 2)	Past Progressive	0	0.0	14	22.9	1	11.1	1	1.5
N=27	Past Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Present	22	19.3	18	29.6	4	44.5	21	29.6
	Present Progressive	1	0.9	6	9.8	1	11.1	2	2.8
	Present Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Total	**114**	**100.0**	**61**	**100.0**	**9**	**100.0**	**71**	**100.0**
Group 4	Past	105	73.9	37	36.4	13	44.8	95	66.1
(SSS 2)	Past Progressive	1	0.7	17	16.9	0	0.0	2	1.5
N=27	Past Perfect	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.7
	Present	22	15.6	30	29.8	15	51.7	30	21.9
	Present Progressive	13	9.1	17	16.9	1	3.5	7	5.1

tokens of verbal morphology produced from different lexical aspectual classes of verbs.

	Present Perfect	1	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	1.5
	Total	**142**	**100.0**	**101**	**100.0**	**29**	**100.0**	**137**	**100.0**

Group	**Form**	**States**		**Activities**		**Accomplishment**		**Achievement**	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Group 5	Past	116	94.3	109	56.5	42	64.6	208	75.1
(Year 1)	Past Progressive	0	0.0	9	4.7	1	1.6	1	0.3
N=29	Past Perfect	1	0.9	2	1.0	0	0.0	15	5.4
	Present	4	3.2	32	16.6	10	15.3	16	5.8
	Present Progressive	2	1.6	40	20.7	11	16.9	35	12.7
	Present Perfect	0	0.0	1	0.5	1	1.6	2	0.7
	Total	**123**	**100.0**	**193**	**100.0**	**65**	**100.0**	**277**	**100.0**
Group 6	Past	89	89.0	57	50.9	27	71.1	171	77.3
(Year 3)	Past Progressive	1	1.0	10	8.9	0	0.0	4	1.8
N=26	Past Perfect	0	0.0	1	0.9	0	0.0	3	1.4
	Present	7	7.0	24	21.5	8	21.1	20	9.1
	Present Progressive	3	3.0	19	16.9	3	7.8	20	9.1
	Present Perfect	0	0.0	1	0.9	0	0.0	3	1.4
	Total	**100**	**100.0**	**112**	**100.0**	**38**	**100.0**	**221**	**100.0**

Recall that, as stated earlier in this study, the major prediction of AH is that verbal predicates that have inherent end points (telic events like achievements and accomplishment) would be the first type of predicates marked with the past tense-aspect verbal morphology at the very early stages of acquisition of such verbal morphology. Verbal predicates that do not have inherent end points (atelic verbs like activities and states) would be the last type of predicates to be marked with the past tense-aspect verbal morphology at the early stages of both L1 and L2 acquisition of verbal morphology. At the conceptual level, what this means is that the lexical aspectual classes of the verbal predicates determine the sequence of acquisition and distribution of verbal predicates.

A look at the results on table 3 above portrays a dichotomy of acquisition sequence that emerged. This is because participants in groups 1 to 3 i.e., learners in 4^{th}, 6^{th} and 8^{th} grades, respectively, pattern differently than participants in groups 4 to 6 i.e., learners in 11^{th} grade, first and third year university students respectively. Learners in groups 1 to 3 show the sequence Stative > Achievement > Activity > Accomplishment (i.e.

atelic > telic > atelic > telic verbs) which is not in support of AH whereas learners in groups 4 to 6 follow the sequence Stative > Achievement > Accomplishment > Activity (i.e. atelic > telic > telic > atelic verbs). Here we can claim partial support because acquisition sequence for achievement precedes that for accomplishment (all telics) and the two precede activity as predicted by AH. In addition, if we dropped stative verbs from this analysis, we find a clearer support for AH as the acquisition sequence turns out to be Achievement > Accomplishment > Activity (telic > telic > atelic verbs) as predicted by AH but this is only at higher levels of proficiency. Remember AH predicts that this observed pattern would emerge more at the lower levels of proficiency.

Observe that the dichotomy is created by a steady increase in the tokens of accomplishment verbs produced by learners at higher levels of proficiency. Learners at lower levels of proficiency produced very low number of accomplishment verbs compared to other categories. For example, learners in group 1 produced only 20 tokens of accomplishment verbs of which only 1 is marked with past. Groups 2 and 3 produced 7 and 9 tokens respectively of which 3 tokens each were marked with past. However, this numbers jumped to 29, 65 and 38 tokens of which 13, 42 and 27 are marked with past in groups 4, 5 and 6 respectively though this is also incredibly low compared to other categories. This generally low rate of production of tokens of accomplishment verbs and corresponding low rate of past marking on this category may be attributable to L1 effect especially at lower levels of proficiency.

According to Willie (2012), telicity assignment on similar class of verbs in the learners' L1 is dubious in the sense that such verbs can be interpreted either as telic or atelic verbs when used in L1 sentences. This, according to the study in Willie (2012), creates a unique learning constraint for this group of ESL learners especially at lower levels of proficiency, and as Ortega (2009) has pointed out, what level of proficiency a particular L1 transfer shows up might depend on the nature of the linguistic structure that the learner is confronted with during the learning process. Thus, Willie (2012) argues that the Ibibio ESL learners at lower levels of

proficiency show a kind of conceptual transfer resulting in the low rate of production of accomplishment verbs because, at these levels, they are still formulating and testing hypotheses about telicity assignment of accomplishment verbs in their target language.

If we harness the means of the past tense-aspect verbal morphology marked within each lexical aspectual class of verbal predicates by groups, we can present a graphic illustration of the acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect morphology by Ibibio ESL learners as in figure (1) below.

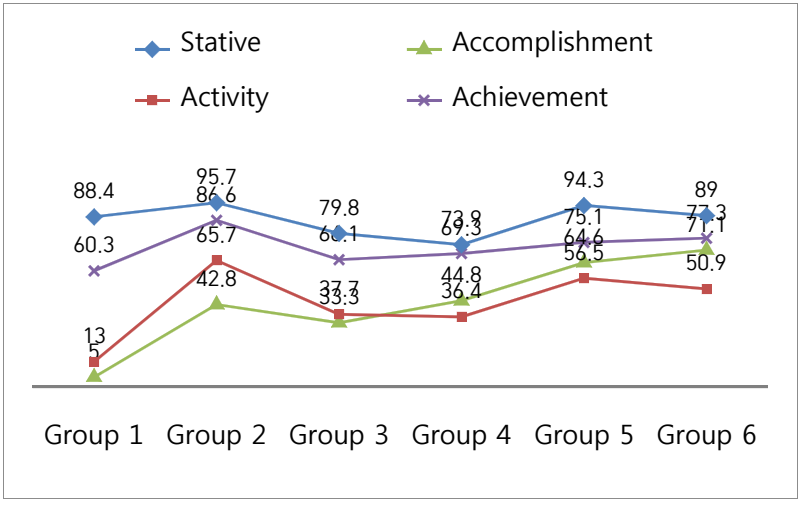

Fig 1: A Within-category Distribution of Past Tense-aspect Morphology by Group

The graphic representation in figure (1) shows that accomplishment verbs present the most learning challenge to learners at lower levels of proficiency whereas stative verbs presents the least learning task to learners at all levels of proficiency. However, activity verbs overtake accomplishment verbs as the most challenging category at higher levels of proficiency namely, from group 4 to group 6. Generally, observe that achievement verbs and stative verbs pattern together by presenting higher percentage rates of acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect

morphology while accomplishment verbs and activity verbs also pattern together by presenting generally lower percentage rates of acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect morphology in all groups of participants.

At this juncture we need to confirm, reframe or refute our research hypothesis in the light of the results presented. Be reminded that our research hypothesis predicted that there will be a correlation between the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates (the independent variable) and the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology (the dependent variable) in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners. To test this hypothesis, a chi-square test was conducted on the data and the result is presented on table (4) below.

Table 4. Correlation between Past Tense-aspect Morphology and Lexical Aspect

Table of Verbal Morphology by Lexical Aspect					
Verbal Morphology	**Lexical Aspect**				
Frequency Col Pct	**ACC**	**ACH**	**ACT**	**ST**	**Total**
PAPERF	0 0.00	19 2.79	3 0.92	1 0.18	23
PAPROG	13 12.75	19 2.79	69 21.17	2 0.36	103
PAST	89 87.25	642 94.41	254 77.91	553 99.46	1538
Total	102	680	326	556	1664

Statistic	**DF**	**Value**	**P-Value**
Chi-Square	6	196.9227	<.0001

The chi-square statistics of (x^2 = 196.92, *df* = 6, n = 1664, p = <.0001) presented on table (4) indicates a probability value (P-Value) of .0001. This shows a significantly strong correlation between the acquisition and distribution of the past tense-aspect verbal morphology and the lexical aspectual classes of the verbal predicates observed in the interlanguage of Ibibio ESL learners. With this in mind, we can conveniently refute the null hypothesis (H^o) which predicted that there will be no such correlation among the two variables in this study.

7. Discussion

According to Willie (2014:55-56) following Bamgbose (2011) and other researchers, the Nigerian national policy on education, which is applicable in this research area, provides that the English language shall be taught as a subject of studies beginning from pre-primary to the junior primary levels of formal education and in all adult and non-formal education. The first clause of the policy states that "Mother-Tongue (MT) and/or the Language of Immediate Community (LMC) will be the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels and in adult and non-formal education" (Willie 2014:55). What this means is that the English language would only be taught as a subject whereas indigenous Nigerian languages would be used as the medium of instruction at these levels of education in this research area. However, the third clause of this policy states that the English language is the medium of instruction beginning from senior primary education (i.e. from primary 4 or 4th grade where we sampled the participants in our group 1) to secondary and higher education in the country.

It is worthy to note that in commencing the sampling of participants for this study from primary 4 we relied on the basic assumption of the Interaction Hypotheses: a language acquisition theory which assumes that language learning especially second language acquisition can only take place when there is "authentic interaction" between the L2 learner/s and a native speaker or another L2 learner of a higher proficiency level. This study assumes that real ESL learning in this research area commences at the beginning of senior primary education when English is used as a medium of instruction because this engenders authentic interaction in the classroom and facilitates learning. If this is right, then Ibibio ESL learners from primary 4 to primary 6 (i.e. groups 1-3 in this study) constitute learners at lower levels of proficiency while learners from groups 4 to group 6 constitute learners at higher levels of proficiency.

Now, how does all this relate to this study? Recall that this study is out to test the major prediction of the AH. The prediction is that the

pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect verbal morphology would be determined by the lexical aspectual classes of the verbal predicates at the early stages of both L1 and L2 acquisition of such verbal morphology. However, the result of this study as presented on table (4) shows that, statistically, there is a significant relationship between these two variables namely the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology and the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates. Most importantly, the results presented on table (3) and the graphic representation on figure 1 show that the relationship between the two research variables is more significant at higher levels of proficiency than at the lower levels.

An important finding in this study that has implication to second language learning in general and the learning of English as a second language by Ibibio ESL learners is the realization that activity verbs present the most challenging learning task to learners at higher levels of proficiency while accomplishment verbs present the most challenging learning tasks to learners at the lower levels of proficiency. Though this study has a limitation in that it does not discussed L1 or cross-linguistic effects, Willie (2012) suggests that this is due to the difference in telicity assignment on these classes of verbal predicates between the learners' L1 and L2. What this means is that the intricacies of telicity assignment on accomplishment verbs and activity verbs in the Ibibio language is different than in the English language. As discussed in Willie (2012) the distinction between activity verbs and accomplishment verbs in the Ibibio language is largely blurred. The implication of this is that classroom teachers of ESL in this research area should be made to be aware of such differences and should therefore be encouraged to bring in more teaching and learning materials on activity verbs and accomplishment verbs during authentic interaction in the classroom.

Furthermore, the results of this study which show that the effect of lexical aspect is more prominent among Ibibio ESL learners at higher level of proficiency has the implication that the results of previous researches which show that the effect of lexical aspect is felt among learners at the lower level of proficiency cross-linguistically need to be re-examined. This

study submits that the point along the developmental pathway where the effect of lexical aspect is more prominent is not yet settled in research on second language acquisition of tense and aspect.

8. Conclusion

This study observes a dichotomous pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology among Ibibio ESL learners. The observed pattern shows the following pattern for learners at lower levels of proficiency: Stative > Achievement > Activity > Accomplishment (i.e. atelic > telic > atelic > telic), whereas learners at higher levels show the following pattern: Stative > Achievement > Accomplishment > Activity (i.e. atelic > telic > telic > atelic). The predicted pattern by proponents of AH (Andersen 1991, Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Ayoun and Salaberry 2008) as noted earlier, is as follows: Achievement > Accomplishment > Activity > Stative (i.e. telic > telic > atelic > atelic) at the lower levels of acquisition. Although the results of this study show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology and the lexical aspectual classes of verbal predicates, the results also show that such a relationship is more prominent among Ibibio ESL learners at higher levels of proficiency. This is contrary to the prediction of AH.

Besides, Upor[4] (2009) conducted a similar study among ESL learners in Tanzania who were sampled from various indigenous African languages spoken in Tanzania and the results of that study also showed that the effect of lexical aspect was more prominent among learners at higher levels of proficiency than among learners at lower levels. Consequently,

4) The only studies (to the best of my knowledge) that have tested the predictions of AH on data collected from speakers of indigenous African languages who are learners of European languages are Upor (2009), Willie (2012) and this study. All three studies arrived at very similar results namely that the effect of lexical aspect is more prominent among learners at higher levels of proficiency.

one might be persuaded to conclude that the effects of lexical aspect on the pattern of acquisition and distribution of tense-aspect morphology may be real and universal but the issue of the point along the acquisition or developmental pathway where such effects are obtainable is yet to be resolved in L2 acquisition of tense-aspect research.

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