

## **Subject-Verb Agreement in L2 processing: L2 learners are sensitive to subject plurality but no to verb plurality**

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English plural -s and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person-singular -s are one of the last morphemes to be acquired by L2 learners, whose native language has no obligatory plural marker or the similar verb inflection (e.g., Han, 2004; Long, 2003). Studies show gradual development of sensitivities to Subject-Verb-Agreement cues in native child English speakers (Dube et al., 2016; 2019), yet experimental investigations of SVA processing in L2 learners remain extremely sparse.

We tested native speakers of Australian English and Japanese learners of English with the picture-sentence matching task. Participants saw two scenes and heard a sentence where the subject number (singular vs. plural), the verb (grammatical vs. ungrammatical), and the length of relative clause (RC short vs. long) were manipulated. The results showed that both native speakers and L2 learners a strong overall bias to select the plural picture. Native speakers dominantly selected the plural picture when they heard a plural subject regardless of the verb grammaticality and the RC length, while a singular subject elicited much fewer selections of the singular picture and their responses were slower than when they heard a plural subject. This may reflect the restrictive reading of the RC that enabled linking the singular sentence to the plural picture, but with processing cost. The ungrammaticality of the verb generally slowed down the native speakers' responses.

The analysis of L2 learners' data included participants' offline grammar test scores. Like native speakers, they showed a strong preference for the plural picture: even with the singular subject, the plural picture was selected about 70% of the time. Unlike native speakers, the grammaticality of the verb did not affect the response time in the L2 learners. Further analysis showed that L2 learners who scored higher in the SVA questions in the grammar test showed higher sensitivity to subject plurality than the learners who scored lower.

The results suggest that the presence of -s in the subject impacts the SVA processing in L2 learners of English. Since the singular-subject led to about 30% singular picture selections in L2 learners, we reject the possibility that L2 learners are completely insensitive to the presence or absence of word-final -s. The results also suggest that L2 learners who had firmer grammatical knowledge for the SVA rules had higher sensitivity to the subject plurality. However, there was an overall tendency that the verb grammaticality does not seem to affect their picture selection and RT even after short RC. Thus, the fossilization of L2 SVA errors may be attributed to the learners' insensitivity to sentence-medial word-final -s.

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