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**From “*falled*” to “*fell*”: the production
of the past tense by L1 English
children.**

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"If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future" Winston Churchill,
Prime Minister of the UK.

ABSTRACT

This final dissertation describes the L1 acquisition of the past tense in English focusing on the biological sex and the age. The aim of the study is to see how children acquire the regular and irregular forms and how many ungrammatical structures called overregularization errors they make. This study investigates the production of the regular and irregular forms and overregularization errors throughout the several stages of L1 acquisition. This research employs data from 24 participants involving spontaneous speech and interactions with adults during their daily activities. Through analysis of this data, the frequency and the context of the several forms will be counted and analysed. The findings suggest that the two-year-old children make almost no overregularization errors, then the three-year-old and four-year-old children make these errors and finally the five-year-old children no longer make them. The study sheds a light on the trajectory of L1 acquisition of the past tense being a natural process that influence in the way children acquire a language.

Key words: past tense, regular forms, irregular forms, overregularization, u-shaped curve.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado describe la adquisición del tiempo pasado en lengua primera centrándose en el sexo biológico y la edad. El objetivo del estudio es ver cómo los niños adquieren las formas regulares e irregulares y cuántas estructuras agramaticales llamadas errores de sobrerregularización cometen. Este estudio investiga la producción de las formas regulares e irregulares y los errores de sobrerregularización a lo largo de las distintas etapas de adquisición de la lengua primera. Esta investigación emplea datos de 24 participantes que contiene discurso espontáneo e interacciones con adultos durante sus actividades cotidianas. A través del análisis de estos datos, se contabilizará y analizará la frecuencia y el contexto de las diversas formas. Los resultados sugieren que los niños de dos años casi no cometen errores de sobrerregularización, luego los niños de tres y cuatro años cometen estos errores y finalmente los niños de cinco años ya no los cometen. El estudio arroja luz sobre la trayectoria de la adquisición de la lengua primera del tiempo pasado siendo un proceso natural que influye en la forma en que los niños adquieren una lengua primera.

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Palabras clave: tiempo pasado, formas regulares, formas irregulares, sobreregularización, curva en forma de u.

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1.Introduction

This study of L1 acquisition of the past tense in children between the age of two and five aims to explore how children use the past tense forms in their language production. Doing the research about this topic is essential because it provides insight into the process of acquiring the past tense forms during the stages of L1 acquisition. This research has shown that children use the regular and irregular forms exhibiting overregularization errors in some cases before mastering the past tense rules. Comparing with the four age groups and the biological sex, this study tends to shed a light on how children understand the past tense using models of L1 acquisition. This study will advance new knowledge by providing a comparative analysis between the four age groups and biological sex on how children understand and produce past tense forms by examining overregularization errors and patterns in regular and irregular forms. This study aims to contribute the existing knowledge about L1 acquisition of the past tense obtaining a richer understanding on this element of L1 acquisition and production.

This dissertation is structured into some sections. First, the theoretical background is established. Next, the research questions and the expectation about the research is outlined. Following this, the methodology for analysing past tense forms is explained. Then, the results are presented. Next the regular and irregular forms and overregularization errors are discussed. Finally, the research questions are addressed and answered.

2.Theoretical Background

This section explains the theoretical concepts of L1 acquisition of the past tense. First, a description of the past tense and a definition of the process of L1 acquisition and second, the overregularization errors, the u-shaped curve and the single model and dual model are illustrated.

2.1. Context about L1 acquisition of the past tense.

In this section, a description of the past tense and an explanation of the process of L1 acquisition are clarified.

2.1.1 A description of the past tense.

Tense is defined as “the universal phenomenon, recognisable by all cultures and divisible into three phases known as present, past and future” (Adejare 2022: 45). In other words, tense has three main periods with the creation of a straight line: the past (A), the present (0), and the future (B) to establish the different actions in time of the verbs (see figure 1). In English, the past describes the previous time to the present moment or “before-now”, the present refers to a zero point or “now” and future means a time afterwards the present period or “after-now (Adejare 2022: 45).

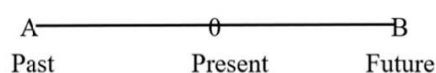


Figure 1. Representation of tense (Adejare 2022: 45)

The past tense is one of the basic tenses and is defined as the action that is taking place at a past moment in time. The meaning of the past tense is that event that informs us about the situation that is completely finished, and it happens in the past as example 1, but it has other applications as well. For instance, it is used to make a polite request as example 2 or to describe a hypothetical situation as example 3 (Paine 2012: 280-282). Children rarely used the past tense on verbs describing ongoing activities. This implies that children are aware of whether a verb represented an action with a clear ending point. They appeared to focus on understanding the meaning of the verb stem matched by the *-ed* inflection (Clark 2009: 190-191).

- 1) I finished my work.
- 2) Please, I wanted to ask you a question.
- 3) The world would be a very different place if humans never discovered electricity.

The past tense has two ways to be formed: the regular and irregular forms. On the one hand, regular forms are built by adding the inflection *-ed* to the base form of the verb. Taatgen and Anderson (2002: 10) argue that applying the regular rule offers an advantage from the perspective of L1 acquisition, requiring to know only one principle for building the regular forms. Regular verbs follow a pattern in which it adds a specific inflection to the stem to form the past such as *decide-decided*. On the other hand, irregular forms are

built without adding the *-ed* inflection to stem of the verb, each verb has a specific form to express past situations. Irregular verbs more frequently form the past tense by modifying a vowel or a consonant inside the verb stem, as “*ran*” for “*run*” or “*bought*” for “*buy*” (Smith-Lock 2014: 3). English has around 200 irregular verbs forms, but many of them are rarely used remaining as an essential component in language morphology. Indeed, many of them are the most frequent verbs in speeches (Shipley et al. 1991: 1).

2.1.2 First language acquisition.

First, L1 acquisition is defined as “a process while a child obtains their first language or mother tongue naturally” (Izar et al. 2020: 63). In other words, L1 acquisition is a natural process that starts from birth and follows as children grow up in which they develop the ability to understand, learn and use the rules of their native language to communicate successfully. This process is influenced by daily life factors like social interactions in the school or with the family.

In general, L1 acquisition has four stages between two-year-old and five-year-old children. In the first stage between two and three years old, children begin to build combinations of longer sentences repeatedly excluding simple grammatical features. It has more elaborate sentences with lack of functional words such prepositions and articles. Vocabulary fast improves throughout this stage. They start using the past tense in some verbs. In the second stage between three and four years old, children start building simple sentences with appropriate grammar elements. They begin making use of plurals, possessives and simple past tense. Questions and negations start to be built in a correct way. Children’s sentences become bigger and more sophisticated involving adjectives and adverbs. In the third stage between four and five years old, children are able to build further elaborated sentences with conjunctions and subordination. They also start to comprehend and utilize clearer grammar elements and irregular past tense forms. Their speech come to be more understandable and precise. And, in a fourth stage from five years old, children begin grasping more developed structures with conjunctions, prepositions and proper and correct past tense forms. Their understanding of the grammar rules turns out to be further advanced (Laguerre 2020: 1).

Moreover, in order for the children to comprehend the temporal aspect of the past tense that highlights a specific past event, the period must be identifiable to them, or at the very least, they must be aware that such time exists. A speaker that employs the past tense has a particular past action in mind. The minimum condition for a temporal comprehension of a sentence in the past tense is that children must be concerned about the presence of a specific past when the scenario occurred. For a complete temporal interpretation, it is sometimes required that that exact time ought to be definite (identified) for children (Declerck et al. 2006: 202-205).

Finally, the L1 acquisition of the past tense morphology has been significantly explored in L1 acquisition investigation. According to several academics such as Brown (1973), Marchman & Bates (1994) and Marcus et al (1992), English children around two years old start using the past inflection. English children talk about previous events without using past tense-inflected verbs. After that, when English children begin using the inflections of the past tense, they make some overregularization errors. Following this, children make these errors in evolving past tense morphology, at least at some point of their acquisition process (Nicoladis et al. 2007: 237).

2.2 Models to understand the L1 acquisition of the past tense.

This section shows the different models on L1 acquisition of the past tense. First, overregularization errors, next the U-Shaped curve and the relation with the past tense and lastly the single and dual models to understand the L1 acquisition of the past tense.

2.2.1 The overregularization errors.

First of all, overregularization errors are typical when children overapply the regular rule to verbs that have a unique form. These mistakes must be seen as a natural process of L1 acquisition. Interestingly, these errors demonstrate that children are actively using the past inflection to mark past tense. They apply this rule consistently, even to irregular verbs. This emphasize that children are dynamically trying to understand how the past tense is built (Oliva et al. 2017: 239).

After that, overregularization errors depend on the way the tense is expressed. According to Almor (2002), the past tense in English is most overregulated from three

years old. At this age, children who may have correctly utilized irregular forms begin wrongly regularizing numerous irregular forms. This overregularization continues at five years of age, when children develop irregular past form correctly, they may overregularize around 50% of the produced verbs (Almor 2002: 5).

Besides, some academics, such as Marchman et al. (1999), argue that children are more likely to make overregularization errors for irregular verbs that sound similar to regular verbs (*blow* and *show*) compared to verbs that sound different (*wash* and *see*). They create a set of verbs following the regular and irregular “family-enemy” pattern. This pattern illustrates how some verbs sound similar but have different past tense forms. For example, “*sing/sang*” and “*ring/rang*” are “friends” because they form the past tense similarly and sound the same. In contrast, “*sing/sang*” and “*bring/brought*” are considered “enemies” because they sound similar but form the past differently (Ambridge 2010: 3).

In addition, a bigger analysis of English children acquisition data, involving ages from two to five, conducted by Marcus et al. (1992), show an unexpectedly low percentages of overregularization errors. As children are growing up, they are producing many more accurate irregular forms, resulting in a continuous decline in the frequency of overregularization. Marcus et al. (1992) argue that the existence of irregular forms like *fell* or *went* prevent the necessity of adding the *-ed* inflection to the verb stem of irregular verbs portraying formations like *falled* or *goed* needless. It is important that children must be aware that the relationship between *went* and *called* is the same, these two forms express past. When children use the regular rule for irregular verbs like *falled* or *goed*, they must be conscious that adults will use the correct one for these verbs such as *fell* or *went*. Since there are not different meanings between *fell* and *falled* or *went* and *goed*, children have to choose between one of these forms. They will take the one adult use that is the correct one (*fell, went*) (Clark 2009: 197-198).

In summary, the removal of the regularized form of an irregular verb is caused by the withdrawal of contrast between the regularized form (*falled, goed*) and non-regularized form (*fell, went*), while the ultimate choice of the correct form is caused by acquiring the form used by the people in their environment. Determining the meaning of

each irregular past tense form is crucial for children to decide which form is the correct to use (Clark 2009: 198).

2.2.2 The U-Shaped curve and the past tense.

Firstly, the U-Shaped curve consists to “a three-step process: good performance followed by bad performance followed by good performance” (Carlucci & Case 2013: 56). In other words, this describes an acquisition pattern in which children initially apply the rule correctly, then they make errors by overregularizing the rule and finally return to use the rule correctly again. The existence of the U-Shaped curve disagrees with the continuity model which argues that performance increases with age and the process of acquiring the past tense forms is repetitive and monotonous. As a result, the regressions examined by the U-shaped curve have turned into a challenge for children in L1 acquisition. It has been noticed that in the case of the past tense of English verbs, children learn how verbs in past are formed, then they add the past inflection in some irregular verbs they produce and finally they perform the irregular forms together with the regular way to make verbs in past tense (Carlucci & Case 2013: 56-57).

More concisely, the U-shaped curve has three periods. Between two and three years old, this period is called early production in which children begin using the past tense forms unevenly, occasionally making some overregularization errors. Between three and five years old, this period is called overregularization period in which children apply the regular rule to verbal forms even if it is an irregular verb, highlighting their understanding of the past tense. And a final period that is called performing in which children over five years old make the distinction between verbs that use the general rule with others that form their past irregularly (Nordquist 2019: 1).

As well as the study developed by Marcus et al. (1992), exploring the past tense, found that irregular forms are acquired using the previously described U-shaped curve. This study explores the overregularization errors in L1 acquisition of the past tense. The participants are 43 between two and five years old selected from CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) database (McWhinney 2000). It used longitudinal data to analyse spontaneous speech to see the rate of overregularization errors over time. The findings of this study suggest that children initially use proper irregular forms, next they overregularize the irregular forms providing an average between 4 to 10 per cent of these

errors with a peak of overregularization at the age of three and four; and finally, they come back to use irregular forms correctly from age of five. However, global statistics indicate a system that tries to prevent overregularization errors which is inevitable in the L1 acquisition of the past tense (Oliva et al. 2017: 239).

2.2.3 The single and dual models.

Two main models explain how children acquire the past tense: the single model and the dual model.

The single model is explained using an only one route on storing irregular and regular forms on the lexicon. Some academics such as Bybee and Moder (1983) argue that under the single model all non-produced forms, whether regular or irregular, are generated by equivalence through a way of connecting ideas in the mind. For instance, if a child fails to produce *throw-threw* the model will generate it by equivalence to *blow-blew* following the “family” pattern explained above. Two factors interfere with this argument. One factor is principally determined by the number of verbs exemplifying the *blew* and *threw* patterns stored in memory while the other factor is determined by the token frequency of individual verbs that undergo this pattern. The model proposes that novel verbs are judged based on their "familiarity" with existing verbs. Irregular forms that sound more similar to existing regular forms are considered more familiar and therefore more acceptable to produce (Ambridge 2010: 2).

Whereas the dual model is explained as the way regular and irregular forms are produced by different routes. Irregular forms are recovered from memory or formed through analogy with words that do not follow the usual rule for forming their past tense while regular forms are formed by applying a rule. For example, *walked* might be built using the default rule on the stem *walk*. When a past tense is needed, the system checks if the irregular form of the verb is stored. If it finds the proper past tense form as *blew*, it uses that one. But if not, it tries to predict how to build past tense based on similar verbs such as *threw*. When the system comes up with the correct past form based on similar verbs, it uses the proper form as *blew*. When the system finds the correct past form, it is not necessary to use the regular rule, but when this is not possible the system will generate the form with the regular rule as *blowed*. For irregular verbs this process is called

overregularization, but for regular verbs the general rule will be generated as *wash/washed* (Ambridge 2010: 3).

3. Research questions.

As it is explained in the theoretical background, this research deals with the L1 acquisition of the past tense in English children between two and five years old. The main purpose of the analysis is to see how children acquire the regular and irregular forms and how they use this tense through the different stages of L1 acquisition. Children might use the past tense less frequently at an earlier age, while children are growing up, they will be more comfortable in using the past making less overregularization errors.

So, gathering data and examples from the CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) database (MacWhinney 2000), children will show a progress in the ability of producing the regular and irregular past tense forms. It is plausible that there will be differences between the four age groups and biological sex to accurately correctly the forms of the past tense. This database will reveal patterns to research how children face the process of acquiring the regular and irregular forms of the past tense using models that explain the procedure carefully.

It will be easy for children to acquire the regular forms than the irregular forms which suggests that they apply the general rule to form the past, leading to errors of overregularization before producing irregular verb forms properly that require to know the specific form. Once this is explained, two research questions are established:

- i. At what age do L1 English children use the past tense forms correctly?
- ii. What is the most common error made by children when acquiring the regular and irregular forms of the past tense?

These questions will be answered with the data of the results and the information of the discussion in the section 6.

4. Methodology.

This section of the dissertation consists on the description of the participants, and the process of compiling the data with the aim of offering a detailed understanding of the analysis of child past tense usage.

4.1 Participants.

The participants for this study are selected from the CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) database (MacWhinney 2000). The selection process is made according to two criteria: biological sex and age. The biological sex is boys and girls while the ages are two, three, four and five years old. The participants are native English children. They are 12 boys and 12 girls. These four tables summarize all the participants.

Participant	Sex	Age	Corpus
Victor	Boy	2;03	Gleason
William	Boy	2;03	Gleason
Simon	Boy	2;06	Wells
Nanette	Girl	2;03	Gleason
Patricia	Girl	2;05	Gleason
Penny	Girl	2;06	Wells

Table 1: Summary of the two-year-old children.

Participant	Sex	Age	Corpus
Charlie	Boy	3;01	Gleason
FC	Boy	3;02	Tommerdahl
Daniel	Boy	3;03	Fletcher
Jennifer	Girl	3;03	Fletcher
OMS	Girl	3;03	Tommerdahl
Kirstie	Girl	3;03	Fletcher

Table 2: Summary of the three-year-old children.

Participant	Sex	Age	Corpus
Gavin	Boy	4;09	Wells
David	Boy	4;02	Gleason
Edward	Boy	4;05	Gleason
Xavia	Girl	4;04	Gleason
Abigail	Girl	4;08	Wells
Helen	Girl	4;05	Gleason

Table 3: Summary of the four-year-old children.

Participant	Sex	Age	Corpus
Gerard	Boy	5;02	Fletcher
Michael	Boy	5;02	Wells
Martin	Boy	5,02	Fletcher
Victoria	Girl	5;03	Fletcher
Rachel	Girl	5;02	Fletcher
Julie	Girl	5;02	Fletcher

Table 4: Summary of the five-year-old children.

As it is shown in the tables 1 to 4, the corpus of the study is “Gleason”, “Wells”, “Fletcher” and “Tommerdahl” chosen from the CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) database (MacWhinney 2000), this database is English monolingual that show a conversation between the participants and adults. To choose these corpora, two criteria have been used; the first criterion is the study of the verbal forms and the second is size. The first criterion has the purpose to search for the verbal forms necessary to analyse and identify the patterns of use by the participants in each corpus. This criterion has been met in all the corpora and in the 24 participants selected. Size is the other important criterion. The corpora have an appropriate size around an average of 2000 lines per file, which is useful to obtain enough information to be able to explore it without being too short to establish the necessary patterns of use by the children.

The data that these corpora contain is naturalistic. The participants were recorded during their daily activities such as playing with toys, talking in the living room with the grandparents or having a conversation in the dinner time with the family. Naturalistic data

was chosen, because the focus of the study is in understanding the L1 acquisition of the past tense exploring the influence of exposure to show a specific natural development in the usage of the past tense by children. The use of this type of data can show the emergence and the acquisition of the past tense.

4.2 Data collection and classification.

To carry on this analysis, CLAN (Computerize Language Analysis) is used to analyse the past tense in child English. This study explores how children use the past tense in their dialogues, including regular and irregular forms and their attempt to apply the regular rule to irregular verbs called overregularization.

For this research, it is used two CLAN commands to analyse the past use in children between the age of two and five. *FREQ* determines the total amount of verbs that children produce, the total number of past tense forms, as well as regular and irregular forms and ungrammatical structures like overregularization errors. At the same time, *KWAL* look into how participants make use of the past tense forms and the possible influence of their environment on this usage.

The *FREQ* command is a helpful tool to research on how children use the past tense forms. It is useful to numerate and study the regular and irregular forms produced by children. The purpose is to distinguish patterns on how children of the four age groups and the biological sex utilise the past tense forms, revealing knowledge inside L1 acquisition stages. The information taken from this command serves to understand and clarify how participants use the different past tense forms. This is mostly helpful to study why children make overregularization errors and how their past tense usage changes over time. It is effective to determine the percentage for each biological sex within each age group which is applied to see the proportion of the several past tense forms and overregularization errors in their total and it is figured by dividing the number of each form by the total number and multiplying it by 100.

KWAL is another helpful CLAN command for studying carefully how children make use of the past tense in common situations. This command allows to obtain some specific samples to carry on this research. This permits to identify patterns in L1 acquisition of the past tense, such as how usage varies and changes between biological

sexes in familiar conversation contexts. The data of this command is practical to assess the participant's behaviour. The main purpose of the data taken by this tool is to draw out samples of past use due to the interactions of the 24 participants, facilitating the study of the production of the past forms in English children. All of this will apply broadly in the next sections which the results will be explained. In addition, a large majority of utterances is got to see L1 acquisition patterns and interactions from 24 participants.

5. Results.

L1 acquisition of the past tense forms differs due to the biological sex and the age in this study. In this section, the results of the analysis of the past tense forms is commented. The process of acquiring the past forms by the different children is done in a progressive and gradual way while they are growing up.

Quantitative data regarding the use of the past tense forms in boys and girls between two and five years old ordered by type of past tense forms is present in tables 5, 6,7 and 8. The percentage of these tables represent the total proportion of several past tense forms, and it is used to compare by biological sex and age. These percentages must be interpreted in this way: the distribution of all past tense forms over all verbal structures and the distribution of the regular and irregular forms and overregularization errors over all past tense forms.

Two-year-old children

This belongs to the first stage (see section 2.1.2) which children try to use correctly the regular and irregular forms with a lower rate of overregularization errors. Children are exposed to past tense forms in their environment and try to reproduce these forms in their own speech.

Participants		Verbal forms	Past tense forms	Regular forms	Irregular forms	Ungrammatical forms (overregularization)
Boys	Victor	289	5	0	5	1
	William	186	8	1	7	0
	Simon	34	5	4	1	0
Total		509	18	5	13	1
Percentage			3.53%	27.77%	77.77%	5.55%
Girls	Nanette	71	7	0	7	1
	Patricia	74	15	4	11	0
	Penny	123	5	0	5	0
Total		268	27	4	23	1
Percentage			10.04%	14.81%	85.18%	3.71%

Table 5. Verbal structures of the two-year-old children.

These data show several observations in the two-year-old children. The overall usage makes that girls used past tense verbs more frequently with 10.04 per cent than boys with 3.53 per cent. When using the regular forms, boys tend to use regular forms more often with 27.77 per cent than girls with 14.81 per cent. Girls use more the irregular past tense forms with 85.18 per cent than boys with 77.77 per cent. In terms of overregularization, boys with 5.55 per cent and 1 case show a higher rate than girls with 3.71 per cent and 1 case because boys have fewer past tense forms with 18 than girls with 27 as it is shown in table 5.

In short, two-year-old children indicate differences between boys and girls in the production of the past tense forms and the overregularization errors. Girls tend to use past tense forms further and employ more the irregular forms while boys tend to rely more on regular forms. Overregularization errors are still no present because these children

make a correct use of both regular and irregular forms having a lower rate, because they try to repeat the forms that their environment produce.

Three-year-old children

This belongs to the second stage (see section 2.1.2) in which children start using more frequently the past tense forms, but they start making overregularization errors with the irregular verbs such as “*falled*” instead of “*fell*”.

Participants		Verbal forms	Past tense forms	Regular forms	Irregular forms	Ungrammatical forms (overregularization)
Boys	Charlie	171	36	21	15	1
	Fc	226	19	3	16	1
	Daniel	284	17	1	16	1
Total		681	72	25	47	3
Percentage			10.57%	34.72%	65.27%	4.16%
Girls	Jennifer	224	16	2	14	1
	Oms	216	26	3	23	1
	Kirstie	345	15	0	15	1
Total		785	57	5	52	3
Percentage			7.26%	8.77%	91.22%	5.26%

Table 6. Verbal structures of the three-year-old children.

This table shows some observations in the three-year-old children. Boys with 10.57 used the past tense forms more frequently than girls with 7.26 per cent. When using the past, boys relied more on regular forms with 34.72 per cent while girls used far less with 8.77 per cent. Girls tend to use more irregular past tense forms with 91.22 per cent than boys with 65.27 per cent. In terms of overregularization, boys and girls are almost similar with 4.16 per cent and 3 cases in boys and 5.26 per cent and other 3 cases in girls. At this age, overregularization start to appear in both boys and girls as it can be seen in table 6.

The three-year-old children know the concept of the past and they apply the general rule to regular verbs This stage follows the same pattern of the previous one, but with an important consideration. Girls tend to use past tense forms more and rely on irregular forms while boys tend to have confidence in regular forms. Overregularization

errors display children understanding of how the past is generally built in English, even if they have not yet known the specific forms of the irregular forms.

Four-year-old children

This belongs to the third stage (see section 2.1.2) in which children try to become more accurate in using the regular past tense inflection with regular verbs, but they are still making overregularization errors with the irregular verbs, which require to know the specific past tense form.

Participants		Verbal forms	Past tense forms	Regular forms	Irregular forms	Ungrammatical forms (overregularization)
Boys	Gavin	207	17	4	13	0
	David	331	16	3	13	3
	Edward	205	28	0	28	1
Total		743	61	7	54	4
Percentage			8.20%	11.47%	88.52%	6.55%
Girls	Xavia	386	47	9	38	4
	Abigail	215	24	4	20	0
	Helen	379	20	0	20	5
Total		980	91	13	78	9
Percentage			9.28%	14.28%	85.71%	9.89%

Table 7. Verbal structures of the four-year-old children.

These results in the four-year-old children show several observations. Boys with 8.20 per cent use the past tense less commonly than girls with 9.28 per cent. Girls with 14.28 per cent used more the regular forms than boys with 11.47 per cent. However, girls with 85.71 per cent make less use of the irregular forms than boys with 88.52 per cent. This is because, as it is shown in table 7, boys produce fewer past tense forms, both regular and irregular, compared to girls. In terms of overregularization errors, girls soar to 9.89 per cent and 9 cases while boys soar to 6.55 per cent and 4 cases

In summary, the data suggests a different pattern of the previous stage, but with a significant issue. Girls tend to use past tense forms more and rely on regular forms while boys tend to use irregular forms. The significant issue is the overregularization errors. In this case, girls have the tendency of making more errors than in the previous stage with 3

more cases, while boys follow the same pattern of the previous stage with 1 more case in this stage. Children still use the regular inflection to verbs that has special forms and require to know the unique form of the irregular verbs.

Five-year-old children

This belongs to the fourth stage (see section 2.1.2) in which children have become skilled at both regular and irregular past tense forms. They use these forms correctly to express past events in their discussions but overregularization errors can occur in a very exceptional and isolated manner.

Participants		Verbal forms	Past tense forms	Regular forms	Irregular forms	Ungrammatical forms (overregularization)
Boys	Gerard	258	35	3	32	0
	Michael	573	77	21	56	0
	Martin	413	31	3	28	1
Total		1244	143	27	116	1
Percentage			11.49%	18.88%	81.11%	0.69%
Girls	Victoria	176	22	3	19	0
	Rachel	513	63	6	57	0
	Julie	621	28	3	25	1
Total		1310	113	12	101	1
Percentage			8.62%	10.61%	89.38%	0.88%

Table 8. Verbal structure of the five-year-old children.

These data show several observations. Boys with 11.49 per cent use past tense verbs more often compared to girls with 8.62 per cent. Boys with 18.88 per cent use regular past tense forms at a higher rate compared to girls with 10.61 per cent. Nevertheless, irregular past tense forms are dominant for girls with 89.38 compared to boys with 81.11 per cent because boys produce more past forms than girls. And finally, overregularization are very uncommon compared with previous stages with a 0.69 per cent and an example for boys and a 0.88 per cent and another example for girls.

This suggest that both boys and girls are making a correct use of the regular and irregular forms, but boys are more advanced than girls in terms of using the general rule.

While irregular forms are the most used category for both. This implies a good understanding of the past tense, demonstrating that the number of overregularization is decreasing making it irrelevant as they have more knowledge about how to use the different past tense forms as it is shown in the table 8. But with such low percentages it is not possible to consider the 2 cases as overregularization errors.

6. Discussion

This section discusses different aspects about the past tense such as regular and irregular forms and overregularization errors in the L1 acquisition of the past tense.

6.1 The regular forms.

The data of the section 5 demonstrate that regular forms have shown a pattern in which 18 of 24 participants of the study gradually improve the correct formation and usage of the regular form of the past, meanwhile the other 6 of 24 participants do not produce regular forms. In terms of the age, the data demonstrates that children are making a proper use of the *-ed* inflection in the four age groups. It means the fact that children are applying the regular rule to express past events. Children identify verbs and are able to build sentences that express past. In terms of sex, the regular forms show a pattern in which the boys use the regular forms more often than girls except from the group of four years old in which girls uses the regular forms more frequent than boys. An exposure to the correct past tense use in conversation, presentation or discussion and everyday interactions let children to comprehend the appropriate usage.

Example 1. Simon age 2 from “Wells” corpus:

*CHI: you finished ?

*MOT: I haven't finished yet .

Example 2. Daniel age 3 from “Fletcher” corpus:

*CHI: and it stopped .

*INV: the windmill stopped ?

Example 3. David age 4 from “Gleason” corpus:

*CHI: what happened ?

*MOT: the little bit that I did fell out .

Example 4. Julie age 5 from “Fletcher” corpus:

*INV: it died .

*CHI: it died and the cat ate it.

The examples 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the usage of the regular rule in the four age groups in the child’s utterance. These utterances highlight the correct usage of the regular rule in four children of the four age groups, using the inflection *-ed* to express past actions in verbs such as “*finished*”, “*stopped*”, “*happened*” or “*died*”. The other utterances reinforce the child's production of the regular form, demonstrating exposure to the language. This interaction helps the child understand and use the correct form of the regular verbs, being conscious of the time of the action. Exposure to the language is crucial for a child's understanding of the regular rule making more precise and correct use of the past tense.

6.2 The irregular forms.

The data of the section 5 show a pattern in which irregular forms are more numerous than regular forms; these forms are produced by the 24 participants of the study. In terms of the age, the irregular forms are produced more than the regular forms, and this is present in all participants and in the four age groups. It is repeatedly used in daily speech and children have a tendency of using it appropriately most of the time. They are constantly exposed to these forms that allows them to become more familiar and easier to remember the particular form of the irregular verbs. In terms of sex, the irregular forms display a pattern in which the girls use the irregular forms more often than boys except from the group of four years old in which the boys use the irregular forms more frequently than girls. Irregular forms are needed to know the exact form, and this makes for children to have troubles to produce and use the correct form.

Example 5. Nanette age 2 from “Gleason” corpus:

*CHI: Tupty went over there .

*FAT: Tupty went over where ?

Example 6. Charlie age 3 from “Gleason” corpus:

*CHI: I [/] I took (.) Sabina in my car .

*FAT: you did ?

Example 7. Abigail age 4 from “Wells” corpus:

*CHI: I got a present for when she leaves .

*MOT: mhm [= yes] .

Example 8. Michael aged 5 from “Wells” corpus:

*CHI: he told me [?] that .

*INV: did he ?

The examples 5, 6, 7 and 8 prove a pattern in which children are knowing the unique forms of the irregular verbs in the child’s utterance. They produce irregular forms recognizing what they hear making these specific forms easier for them to collect understanding as something expressing past. In this study, irregular verbs are not complicated to produce, so children will improve the irregular forms as they grow up, learn and understand the use of the past tense.

The utterances of the examples 5, 6, 7 and 8 show that it demonstrates a clear understanding of the irregular forms of the past. In this case, “*went*” is the past tense of the irregular verb “*go*” from a two-year-old girl, “*took*” for “*take*” from a three-year-old boy, “*got*” for “*get*” from a four-year-old girl or “*told*” for “*tell*” from a five-year-old boy, displaying that these children have got that these verbs have a specific form to construct the past tense, rather than simply adding the past regular rule. In addition, children learn the past tense forms through exposure to forms and then they try to build

sentences from their own expressing past to suggest that children are familiar with irregular forms of the past.

6.3 The overregularization errors.

The overregularization errors (section 2.2.1) are a matter that is important to analyse and comment on. In this study and in terms of age groups, 14 of 26 participants make overregularization errors beginning to appear at the age of three with a differences of 1 per cent between girls and boys and at the age of four with a difference of less than 3 per cent between girls and boys. At the age of five, these errors also occur but with considerably less frequency, which indicates a more appropriate and adequate use of irregular forms. In terms of sex, girls tend to make more overregularization errors than boys being a difference of 1 per cent between boys and girls at the age of three and a difference of less than a 3 per cent between boys and girls at the age of four. For example, the case of "*felled*" has been seen in a five-year-old girl called Julie, which is caused by the correct use of the irregular form by unintentionally applying the regular rule. Later on, this verb is perfectly constructed by the child in other utterances.

Example 9. Victor age 2 from "Gleason" corpus:

CHI: I [/] I dranked [: drank] [] it all up .

*MOT: did you ?

Example 10. Jennifer age 3 from "Fletcher" corpus:

*CHI: that breaked ,, didn't it .

*INV: it did .

Example 11. Helen age 4 in "Gleason" corpus:

CHI: the policeman falled [: fell] [] down .

*MOT: he fell down , huh ?

Example 12. Martin age 5 from "Fletcher" corpus:

*INV: where is it ?

CHI: <it's in> [/] it's in my house <but but but> [/] but they maked [: made] []
it in a far far place .

The examples 9, 10, 11 and 12 are examples of overregularization errors in the child's utterance. The children between three and four years old develop these errors being determinant at the age of four, which is normal in L1 acquisition of the past. The five-year-old children show a better understanding on how regular and irregular forms are constructed. The three-year-old and four-year-old children show the application of the general rule to some verbs that have a specific past tense form such as "*drinked*", "*fallen*", "*made*" or "*broken*", forming ungrammatical structures. These ungrammatical structures show that children know the regular pattern of adding the *-ed* inflection and attempt to make use of it correctly even applying it to some irregular verbs with specific forms as the best strategy, because children are not familiar with the particular form of these verbs. And finally, limited exposure for less common irregular verbs such as those in the examples 9, 10, 11 and 12 makes children to employ the general rule.

7. Answering the research questions.

This section of the dissertation answers the two research questions.

Research question 1. At what age do L1 English children use the past tense forms correctly?

As the study has shown with the four age groups, it is a gradual and continuous process as children are growing up. It takes several years to develop the correct usage of the past tense forms. However, it is important to note that there are variations at the age in which children master the past tense. The data show that there are differences between the four group ages. The three-year-old and four-year-old children are the groups in which the overregularization errors are developed, but this is temporal because the five-year-old children demonstrate a correct use of the irregular and regular forms. This is something very usual in the process of L1 acquisition of the past tense.

The U-Shaped curve (see section 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) is a model that explains the L1 acquisition of the past tense. The two-year-old children make almost no errors in using the past tense because both regular and irregular forms are acquired by the same route by storing them in memory throughout the single model. For example, they associate "*jumped*" as a verb expressing past events as well as verbs such as "*got*".

Later on, the three-year-old children make more errors when using the past tense. This is because they know that there is a rule to mark the past, so they also have two routes; one for the irregular verbs in which they acquire the irregular forms according to the forms they hear and another one for the regular verbs where they use the rule to make regular forms as the dual model says. Since they understand that the regular rule exists, they also use it for irregular verbs starting to make overregularization errors in verbs they do not know the specific form. The four-year-old children follow the same trajectory as the three-year-old children, although they are still making errors, but they distinguish that there is a rule for regular verbs that they have to use to express past correctly while for irregular verbs they have to acquire the only one form for irregular verbs and build perfectly that past as the dual model says too.

Finally, the five-year-old children hardly ever make mistakes when constructing the past. They already understand how the past tense is formed, making these errors very residual and exceptional. They know that regular verbs are formed with a rule while irregular verbs are formed by acquiring their unique form as the dual model says.

To finish answering this question, the U-Shaped curve has demonstrated that the age in which children correctly begin using the past tense forms is five years old. Children of this age are making a correct use of the regular forms applying properly the *-ed* inflection and a correct use of the irregular forms knowing the specific form of the irregular verbs developing a low rate of overregularization errors as the data of the section 5 shows.

Research question 2. What is the most common error made by children when acquiring the regular and irregular forms of the past tense?

In this study, the data has demonstrated that children are exposed to regular and irregular forms which have a high frequency rate in everyday speech giving rise to errors of overregularization. Children try to overapply the regular rule to verbs that forms the past in an irregular manner. The academics suggest that irregular verbs that are similar to regular verbs are more likely to be overregulated from three years old (section 2.2.1).

This study illustrates that children attempt to use a regular past tense forms to verbs that they do not know yet such as “*breaked*”, “*falled*” or “*drinked*”. These overregulated structures are temporal in L1 acquisition of the past tense and are a normal part of this

process. As it is highlighted in the section 5 of this study, overregularization errors are not a concern for children to be correct at the age of five. Increasing exposure to language, these errors normally disappear, even though locally and exceptionally these errors may still occur at this age.

Children of three and four years old overregularize the irregular past tense verbs because they are still understanding how the past tense rules work. Children's tendency to say things like "*fallen*" is an interesting aspect into how they acquire the English verbs. It is not an error for children; it is a sign that they are developing the correct usage of the past. They hear the past tense formed with the *-ed* inflection for regular verbs, so they naturally try to apply this rule showing that they are actively figuring out the system of past tense formation. The participants of this study follow a pattern in which the regular rule for past tense forms is something simple and economical than knowing the irregular forms for them. This is an indicator that shows the progress in acquiring the past tense in which they are trying to clarify the grammatical rules concerning the past tense.

As a conclusion, the most important point is that overregularization errors are a normal part of the L1 acquisition of the past tense attempting to make sense of the grammatical rules for the past tense. These errors decrease at the age of five as children are being exposed to more language and realise the unique form of the irregular verbs. Children gradually develop their understanding and application of past tense forms over time as they are exposed to language and actively retain the past tense rules. As they acquire more irregular forms, they gradually learn the exceptions and refine their past tense usage. This suggests a simultaneous acquisition of both regular and irregular forms with children constantly improving knowledge about past tense becoming their usage more correct over time through a combination of the rule and knowing the irregular forms.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the L1 acquisition of the past tense forms is a process in which the age and the biological sex take part. Children normally exhibit some difficulty in performing the past tense forms on the path to L1 acquisition. The two-year-old children have shown that they are understanding the concept of the past and they produce the regular and irregular forms not making overregularization errors storing them in memory. The three-year-old children have demonstrated that they are in the process of understanding the concept of the past being aware that there is a rule for regular verbs while for irregular verbs they need to know the specific form, this is why overregularization errors start to emerge. The four-year-old children have illustrated that at this stage they already have a clearer concept of the regular rule of the past, but some errors are still occurring. As in the previous stage, they are aware that there is a rule for regular verbs, making more overregularization errors for irregular verbs that they do not know the specific form. The five-year-old children have exemplified that they no longer make overregularization errors when forming the past, and if any do occur, it is very exceptional. They are already conscious that regular verbs are made through a rule and irregular verbs by knowing the unique form and they know how to build sentences that express past correctly making the distinction between regular and irregular forms.

Finally, this study adds to the understanding of past tense providing insights into the process of L1 acquisition of the past tense morphology. Further studies might look into individual differences or the impact of bilingualism unravelling the complexities of L1 past tense acquisition and production giving an understanding in boys and girls of two, three, four and five years old.

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