

Language Learning Background and Attitudes in ESL Contexts: The Case of Verb Acquisition

Terri Schroth¹, Bryant Smith², & Erin Kyles³

Abstract

The educational background and personal preferences of learners of a second language (L2) and their influence on students' L2 acquisition has been an interest in research in previous decades, but discrepancies may exist between this previous research and actual classroom practice and results. In order to determine how learner background and attitudes affect English as a Second Language (ESL) students' verb production, eleven ESL learners participated in both oral and written tasks. They were given written surveys to determine if speaking or writing was emphasized more in learning English in their home countries. Another survey was administered to determine which of these activities they preferred. Next, the participants watched a movie clip and completed writing and speaking activities. The total amount of written and spoken verbs and the total amount of verbs used correctly were compared and analyzed to determine if there was a relationship among participants' learning background knowledge, correct verb usage, and activity preference. In the end, a variety of demographic differences played the largest role in verb production. Meanwhile, a slight but noticeable relationship between a preference for speaking and the number of correct verbs produced was noted.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), second language acquisition (SLA), verb acquisition, language learning background knowledge, learner attitudes

© Association of Gazi Foreign Language Teaching. All rights reserved

1. Introduction

The educational background and personal preferences of learners of a second language (L2) and their influence on students' L2 acquisition were a topic of great interest in previous decades, as seen in pivotal scholarly works, including Holley and King (1974), Hendrickson (1976), Cohen and Robbins (1976), Dvorak (1977), and Schumann (1978). As the field of research in SLA has grown, Block (2000) found a major discrepancy between previous scholarly research and what was found applicable to language teachers in the classroom. The present study seeks to examine issues relevant to both ESL educators and scholars by conducting the study with ESL educators and students in an actual classroom setting. Too often, teachers feel that the studies performed by researchers have no bearing on a real-life classroom (i.e., learner's preference for speaking or writing; learner's attitude effect on performance).

¹ Aurora University, Aurora, IL, USA. Email: terri.schroth@hotmail.com

² Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, LA, USA. Email: james.smith@nicholls.edu

³ Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA USA. Email: emkyles@gmail.com

This study was designed by researchers and educators, and it will help bridge the gap between these respective two groups and thus help in updating the research.

Previous research (i.e., Samimy, 1994) has examined mainly learners' apprehension or anxiety toward language learning. In addition, a study on students' (positive) preferences of type of activity (grammar, speaking, writing, or reading) that emphasized the students' strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses (Lee, 2005), may be more beneficial. In the present study, we investigate learners' preferences toward different areas of language (grammar, reading, writing, and speaking) and previous language background, and how these preferences and backgrounds shaped the acquisition process. We hypothesize that a more positive attitude (preference) toward certain types of activities will lead to better performance and language (verb) acquisition. Furthermore, we believe that (positive) experiences from past learning will (positively) influence language (verb acquisition). By understanding what types of activities students prefer, ESL educators can emphasize these to facilitate successful language acquisition as this study did find a positive connection between the two variables. Several of these pertinent issues in the ESL classroom are examined in this present pilot study. We hope to answer the following research questions:

1. Is a learner's language production (focus: past tense verb forms in English) influenced by the types of activities that were emphasized in his/her previous language learning experience (i.e., if a student's previous instruction focused more on the written language vs. the spoken, or vice versa, did the student develop a preference for either type of activity)?
2. Does a preference for a particular type of activity (i.e., grammar, reading, writing, or speaking) and his/her attitude have an effect on the student's production of past-tense verbs in English?

2. Literature Review

In order to inform our research for this study and gain insight into what scholars in the field have concluded, previous literature was consulted. One category of previous research involved studying the connection between ESL students' oral production and language acquisition. To narrow down the large number of studies, we have focused here on various studies on error correction and verb acquisition.

Schumann's (1978) small sample study (and later case study) investigated unaided verbal acquisition. A sample of ESL speakers whose first language was Spanish was chosen in order to determine how second language acquisition (SLA) developed independently from teaching methods. Schumann's design was similar to that of many first language acquisition studies as he took a small sample over a certain length of time and observed the subjects' speech. The data collection involved spontaneous speech, elicitations (both of conversation and experimental types), and pre-planned sociolinguistic interactions (taking the subjects to restaurants, museums, and parties). Schumann found that a lack of explicit instruction did not aid in the acquisition process.

Other research included Holley and King's study (1974) of German learners' error correction, which did find some evidence of error correction being helpful to SLA (as long as it was not overused). Holley and King (1974) approached their study from the standpoint of grammatical accuracy in teaching. At the time of his study, practicing and memorizing dialogs was standard practice in language teaching and teachers highly emphasized the correction of errors in these memorized dialogs. This method put pressure on students to focus more on grammatical correctness than learning how to use the language. Holley and King approached this issue, as did Schumann, from the perspective of first-language acquisition. Therefore, they concluded that error correction does help in speaking, but the kind of error correction must be closely monitored. Overzealous overcorrection by teachers may actually do more harm than good for their students.

Nassaji and Tian's (2010) study examined how teaching activities and classroom environment affected learners' verbal output and production. The study focused on the effect of collaborative learning (vs. individual) on learning English phrasal verbs. No significant difference was shown between the individual tasks and the collaborative ones in terms of learning the phrasal verbs. This

study did not take into account learner preferences, attitudes or previous language-learner background, however.

Next, we consulted studies that researched aspects of errors in writing acquisition. Cohen and Robbins (1976) studied the effects of error correction in writing to determine if this helps produce fewer errors. Corrections of students were made consistently over the ten-week term of the advanced ESL class, and the students did not improve. They found that error correction in writing had no effect on developing proper writing skills; however, this could have been due to a number of factors involving inconsistent grading styles and insufficient explanations of errors.

Zhou, Busch and Cumming (2014) sought to determine a possible correspondence between the goals of ESL learners and their teachers for improving grammar in writing. In regard to verbs, results indicated that the learners showed a strong preference for improving their verb tenses and other forms of grammar. Meanwhile, the teachers stated that despite prioritizing other areas, students seemed more motivated to acquire verb tenses.

For the present study, it was essential to review previous research on learners' preferences for speaking, reading, writing, and listening activities. Most studies focused on negative student reactions to various types of activities (Mak & White, 1996; Lee, 2005; Samimy, 1994). Lee's study provided the best insight for the current study as it took into account the students' enjoyment of reading as a factor in learning correct English writing skills. The earliest studies that focused on language learners' background emphasized the effects on writing or speaking in the target language.

Next, several researchers (Daly & Miller, 1975; Lee, 2005; Lee & Krashen, 2003) discussed learner attitudes. For example, Lee (2005) focused mostly on the negative factors such as writer's block and writer's apprehension; however, neither factor affected the subjects' writing performance. In consistency with other studies, Lee found that enjoying reading and/or reading a great deal helped improve writing and decrease writer's block and apprehension. Other studies focused specifically on learners' apprehensions (Mak & White, 1996; Samimy, 1994), and while such studies are useful, they do not help address whether personal preference aids in students' success in SLA.

Ansarimoghaddam and Tan's (2014) recent study examined ESL language learners' attitude toward writing in L1 vs. L2. This research was of interest to the present study particularly since the authors acknowledged a need to be aware of the learners' attitudes and previous experiences (with writing) in their first language as well as in English. They concluded that there was no significant difference between the learners' writing attitudes in their first language and English, but a slight preference was given to using English in writing activities.

Finally, several recent studies have focused on the effect of ESL students' cultural interests and their effect on learning, noting that "the findings revealed that the respondents were in favor of learning mostly about their own culture, followed by target and international target culture" (Liu & Laohawiriyanon, 2013, p. 38). Shabani (2012) studied the learning styles of Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students and concluded "that they are more interested in what their five senses show them rather than what their imagination tells them. It also implies that they are less interested in what exists at present rather than what can exist in the future" (p. 132).

Similarly, Noor (2011), in his study on the reading habits of EFL graduate students, found that "EFL post graduate learners read different types of reading materials, have different reasons for reading as well as demonstrated language preference in reading [and] students' primary preference for reading online materials" (p. 7). Understanding the preferences of adult ESL learners is particularly important since, as Noor (2011) mentioned, "language learning is primarily a learner's oriented activity" (p. 1).

Upon review of previous literature, it is clear that an update in research is necessary. Studies about learner attitudes have not examined specifically the types of activities that learners found enjoyable or preferable. While the students commonly excelled in their grammar tasks, they were frequently unable to use this knowledge in their speaking and writing tasks. Perhaps students' personal or learning background, attitudes, and level of interest in a particular activity were causes of this discrepancy. In the present study, we seek specifically to investigate how learner background and activity preferences affect SLA. In addition, since there is a lack of studies that deal specifically with

what students enjoy, this study will approach that issue. Also, if there is a relationship between enjoyment of the class (or areas in which students are weak) and their performance in that area (i.e., grammar, reading, etc.), then the ESL teachers may be able to provide different activities or teaching styles for those classes. Since an ability to speak fluently in the L2 is commonly stated as a main goal of learning a second language, research based on oral production is particularly relevant to researchers and ESL instructors. Finally, research such as the present that emphasizes specifically verb acquisition is needed since past studies have used various methods to judge accuracy in the target language.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The present study's research was collected during five months at an English Language Orientation Program (ELOP) at a large public university in the American Southeast. The participants for this study were students in this ESL program. This program was open to any student regardless of age from anywhere in the world who would like to participate in an intensive English program. The classes in the program included mandatory grammar, composition/writing, spoken English, and reading classes. These classes met for one hour each day, five days a week, for eight weeks. For an extra fee, students could choose to take the optional classes for Conversation and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation. Conversation and TOEFL preparation started after the term began. The mandatory classes were taught by two full-time ESL professionals as well as three linguistics graduate students at the university. Conversation was taught by undergraduate student volunteers, usually English majors; and TOEFL prep was taught by one of the full-time ELOP faculty.

When the students arrived at the university, they took the Michigan State Proficiency Test and were placed in ELOP classes accordingly. The term during which this study occurred yielded three levels: Level 3, beginning; Level 5, intermediate; and Level 6, advanced. Although Level 6 students were all relatively fluent in English, Level 3 students were struggling to become fluent. Level 3 students should have possessed a basic grasp of grammar (including past, present, and future tenses), and a reasonably sized vocabulary in order to carry on every-day conversations. Eleven students participated in this study and their demographics are featured below in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participants' Background

Participant	Nationality	Native Language	Years Studied English	Level in ELOP
1	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	8	3
2	Taiwanese	Taiwanese	15	6
3	Taiwanese	Taiwanese	9	6
4	Korean	Korean	10	6
5	Korean	Korean	6	5
6	Korean	Korean	8	5
7	Korean	Korean	10	5
8	Argentine	Spanish	6	3
9	Syrian	Arabic	6	5
10	Argentine	Spanish	2	5
11	Chilean	Spanish	0.42	3

3.2. Procedures and Instruments

In collecting data, the first goal was to learn from the students what they were taught when they first began learning English in their home countries. Also, what did they enjoy about English: speaking, writing, grammar, or reading? In order to determine what was taught, what the participants enjoyed, and their abilities, the experiment was multi-layered. First, each participant's name was put on a list beside a number. The numbered list was used to keep each participant's information separate without using individual names.

Next, the participants filled out three surveys. The first survey, adapted from a similar survey used by Ramirez (1995), included statements that could be used to gauge what the students enjoyed most. The students were asked to circle their agreement with each statement. The following choices were available: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Example statements included: "I tremble when I know I'm going to be called on in my English classes;" "I enjoy my writing assignments in my English classes;" and "I would rather volunteer to speak during my English classes than to do writing assignments." The second survey was given to determine what they were taught in their home country. This was a straightforward survey consisting of only four statements. The participants needed to rank the emphasis of what they were taught, with 1 representing the least emphasis and 4 the most emphasis. The four possible areas were grammar, speaking, writing, and reading. The final survey was used only to verify level in ELOP and to determine years spent learning English, as well as nationality and native language.

After the surveys were completed, the participants watched fifteen minutes of the film "Back to the Future" (1985). These fifteen minutes were near the end of the movie, at the climax of the story. The purpose for using *Back to the Future*, besides its lack of certain school-inappropriate elements (such as excessive violence and blood, sex, and bad language), was twofold. First, there was not a great deal of dialogue, so the participants would not struggle trying to understand everything that the characters had said. Second, the plot enabled participants to concentrate more on the storyline than on correct verb usage. While some of the students had already seen this movie, it had been a long time for all of them, so being thrown into the end of the action was a similar experience to those who had not seen the movie.

After viewing the film clip, the participants were asked to write narratives about the movie. Furthermore, each student was interviewed separately and was asked to describe what happened in the movie. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Following the transcription, the total past tense or possible past tense verbs in each written summary and each oral interview for each participant were counted. Then, the number of correct verbs was counted. Past tense verbs were chosen to measure a student's command of English as they are notoriously difficult for ESL students and successful use of a variety of these verbs is often an indication of successful language acquisition.

After consulting the data, it seemed necessary to also separate irregular verbs from regular verbs, so the irregular verb totals were pulled from the past tense verb totals. Sample verbs included: "wanted," "wrote," "was," "drove," and "believe" (Participant 2). "Wanted" and "believed" were separated into the regular verb category, and "wrote," "was," and "drove" were placed in the irregular verb category. Another count was done removing "to be" from other irregular verbs ("was," in the example of Participant 2). This gave many variables to use in analyzing the data. Furthermore, past progressives were counted as well. However, a phrase such as "was walk" as opposed to the correct "was walking" was counted as incorrect even if the context required the past progressive. After numerical rankings were converted into percentages, correlations were run against each other using SPSS for Windows to determine the effects of what was taught and what was preferred by students.

4. Results

4.1. Language Learning Background

The ways in which the participants' background affected their ability to produce past verb forms are found in the following tables. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate lists of the different types of verb productions for each student as well as the means for each type. The total number of verbs written ranged from 4 to 33, and the total number of verbs spoken ranged from 7 to 47.

Total percentages of correct writing ranged from 11% (Participant 9) to 100% (Participant 8). This was interesting since Participant 9 was in Level 5 but Participant 8 was Level 3. For speaking, percentages ranged from 13% (Participant 1) to 97% (Participant 2). This fit into the more general assumption that the higher the Level, the better the speaker. Subject 1 is in Level 3, and Participant 2 is in Level 6. The regular verb percentages ranged, in the written, from 14% to 100%; and the spoken ranged from 0% to 93%. There was a very clear distinction, per subject, between speaking and writing. The "to be" percentages were not quite as expected as about half the participants, in writing, got all of them wrong or all of them right. In speaking, they got either all of them correct, half of them correct, or none of them correct. This was contrary to the assumption that writing would be easier and produce more positive results. Additionally, it was interesting to note the dichotomy between these two tables in that there did not appear to be any relationship between number/type of verb used and Level in ELOP.

Table 2.
Verb Use in Writing

Verb Category	S₁	S₂	S₃	S₄	S₅	S₆	S₇	S₈	S₉	S₁₀	S₁₁	Mean
Total Verbs	4	23	20	11	12	8	33	18	9	12	23	15.7273
Total Correct	2	20	15	2	9	4	21	18	1	10	4	9.63636
Percentage Correct	0.50	0.87	0.75	0.18	0.75	0.50	0.64	1.00	0.11	0.83	0.17	0.57273
Irregular Total	2	11	11	5	4	3	19	11	2	7	12	7.90909
Irregular Correct	1	11	9	1	4	0	10	11	0	5	0	4.72727
Irregular Percentage Correct	0.50	1.00	0.82	0.20	1.00	0.00	0.53	1.00	0.00	0.71	0.00	0.52364
Regular Total	2	12	9	6	8	5	14	7	7	5	11	7.81818
Regular Correct	1	9	6	1	5	4	11	7	1	5	4	4.90909
Regular Percentage Correct	0.50	0.75	0.67	0.17	0.63	0.80	0.79	1.00	0.14	1.00	0.36	0.61909

Irregular Not "to be" Total	2	9	9	4	1	2	16	9	2	5	11	6.36364
Irregular Not "to be" Correct	2	9	7	1	1	0	9	9	0	3	0	3.72727
Irregular Not "to be" Percentage Correct	1.00	1.00	0.78	0.25	1.00	0.00	0.56	1.00	0.00	0.60	0.00	0.56273
Irregular "to be" Total	0	2	2	1	3	1	3	2	0	2	1	1.54545
Irregular "to be" Correct	0	2	2	0	3	0	1	2	0	2	0	1.09091
Irregular "to be" Percentage Correct	0.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.33	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.48455

Table 3.
Verb Use in Speaking

Verb Category	S₁	S₂	S₃	S₄	S₅	S₆	S₇	S₈	S₉	S₁₀	S₁₁	Mean
Total Verbs	16	31	7	10	12	36	47	25	22	18	22	22.3636
Total Correct	2	30	4	5	4	19	26	19	3	8	7	11.5455
Percentage Correct	0.13	0.97	0.57	0.50	0.33	0.53	0.55	0.76	0.14	0.44	0.32	0.47636
Irregular Total	6	17	7	6	5	13	34	20	10	12	15	13.1818
Irregular Correct	0	17	4	2	2	6	15	16	0	5	4	6.45455
Irregular Percentage Correct	0.00	1.00	0.57	0.33	0.40	0.46	0.44	0.80	0.00	0.42	0.27	0.42636
Regular Total	10	14	0	4	7	23	13	5	12	6	7	9.18182
Regular Correct	2	13	0	3	2	13	11	3	3	3	3	5.09091
Regular Percentage Correct	0.20	0.93	0.00	0.75	0.29	0.57	0.85	0.60	0.25	0.50	0.43	0.48818
Irregular Not "to be" Total	6	11	6	4	3	11	30	18	4	8	12	10.2727
Irregular Not "to be" Correct	0	11	3	2	2	5	15	14	0	3	4	5.36364
Irregular Not "to be" Percentage Correct	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.50	0.67	0.45	0.50	0.78	0.00	0.38	0.33	0.46455

Irregular "to be" Total	0	6	1	2	2	2	4	2	6	4	3	2.90909
Irregular "to be" Correct	0	6	1	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	1.09091
Irregular "to be" Percentage Correct	0.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.50	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.50	0.00	0.36364

Next, it was possible to examine the learning background of the participants with their production of these different verb forms in both speaking and writing. Table 4 shows the percentage of the emphasis placed on writing and speaking in the participants' home countries, as well as the mean percentage for each teaching emphasis.

Table 4.
Learner Background

Emphasis	S ₁	S ₂	S ₃	S ₄	S ₅	S ₆	S ₇	S ₈	S ₉	S ₁₀	S ₁₁	Mean
Writing	0.47	0.73	0.73	0.73	0.60	0.40	0.53	0.80	0.73	0.60	0.67	0.63545
Speaking	0.76	0.76	0.60	0.76	0.64	0.76	0.92	0.72	0.68	0.80	0.92	0.75636

Bivariate correlations were run using these percentages of emphasis on teaching background against the totals and percentages of all the different verb types listed in Tables 3 and 4 in SPSS. A correlation was deemed significant if $p \leq .05$. However, because the sample was so small, if $.05 < p \leq .08$, then the correlation would be considered as approaching significant. On a larger sample study, those correlations would probably be lower and therefore more effective in showing a relationship. From the following relationships, it could be concluded that there was indeed some effect of these teaching emphases on the participants' verb production. There were also some non-relationships that could be explored more in future studies. The total number of spoken regular past tense verbs correlated with being taught writing (Pearson $p = .034$). However, a closer examination indicated that this connection might not be as strong as the numbers suggest. Interestingly, this was the only connection between teaching the written language and any of the various verb forms' totals and percentages. Although, if the numbers were taken at face value, it was logical to conclude that an emphasis on writing could contribute to the total amount of spoken regular past tense verbs used. Superficially, it appeared as if an emphasis on writing did not actually help the students in writing.

When the emphasis was on teaching the spoken language, there were more relationships with the various verb forms, which provided the connection between teaching the spoken language and total number of verbs spoken. For this relationship ($p = .046$), it was quite evident that an emphasis on teaching the spoken language fostered a comfort in speaking so that students would speak more in general. There was a link between teaching the spoken language and the spoken irregular verb total. This ($p = .020$) fit in with the generalization that the more emphasis on speaking, the more the subjects spoke overall. There was also a parallel between teaching the spoken language (speaking) and irregular verbs that were not a form of "to be" ($p = .033$). This was important, as it suggested that all irregular verbs, excluding "to be," were influenced by an emphasis on teaching the spoken language. However, there was no correspondence between teaching the spoken language and regular verb totals or percentages.

4.2. Learner Preferences

To answer the second research question (learner preferences/effect on production), we compared the various verb forms in Tables 2 and 3 against the preference percentages seen in Table 5.

Table 5.
Learner Attitudes

Preference	S ₁	S ₂	S ₃	S ₄	S ₅	S ₆	S ₇	S ₈	S ₉	S ₁₀	S ₁₁	Mean
Grammar	1.00	0.25	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.25	0.50	0.81818
Speaking	0.25	0.50	0.50	0.25	0.50	0.25	0.50	1.00	0.25	0.75	0.25	0.45455
Writing	0.50	0.75	0.50	0.25	0.50	0.25	0.75	0.50	0.25	0.50	0.75	0.50000
Reading	0.75	1.00	0.50	1.00	1.00	0.75	0.75	0.50	0.75	1.00	0.25	0.75000

We noted that grammar and reading are the preferred activities of the participants, while speaking and writing are ranked relatively low in comparison. In fact, considering how much more the subjects spoke than they wrote, it was surprising that speaking ranked the lowest of all four preferences. We investigated what relationships (if any) their preferences had with the different types of verbs produced by the subjects. Upon analysis of the data, several connections came to light. First, there was a connection between the total amount of spoken instances of “to be” used correctly and a preference for grammar. This connection was significant ($p=.027$). This could mean that an enjoyment of grammar lead to more correct usage of the most common verb of all. It is possible, however, that since this sample was reduced, and this observation was coincidental.

Even though a preference for speaking ranked lowest out of the four categories, it had the most connections with different verb types. These p values are listed in Table 6. Notice that three of the correlations are $p>.05$, but remember that as long as $p\leq.08$, then this is considered as approaching significant. Notice, also, that the majority of the connections were with written verb categories. This suggests that perhaps there was a comfort level achieved with a preference for speaking that encouraged better performance in writing. It is important, though, that the same spoken categories did not reflect the same connections; although the ones that did were represented in the written categories as well.

Writing was the next attitudinal factor to be examined, and it was also associated with several verb categories. These p values are represented in Table 7. There were six categories that were approaching significance in this case, with four of them being the spoken verb categories represented in this relationship. Also, it should be pointed out that no percentages correlated with a preference for writing. This means that the more the students enjoyed writing, the more verbs they produced in writing (and some speaking) regardless of how well they did. In other words, an enjoyment of writing promoted more usage of the language and therefore a higher comfort level in the language as well. Finally, a preference for reading did not correlate with any other variables.

Table 6.
 p Values for Preference for Speaking

Verb Category	p Value
Written Correct	0.018
Written Percentage Correct	0.001
Written Irregular Correct	0.008
Written Irregular Percentage Correct	0.008
Written Regular Percentage Correct	0.076

Written Irregular Not "to be" Correct	0.005
Written Irregular Not "to be" Percentage Correct	0.027
Written "to be" Total	0.059
Written "to be" Correct	0.010
Written "to be" Percentage Correct	0.003
Spoken Irregular Correct	0.050
Spoken Irregular Percentage Correct	0.042
Spoken Irregular Not "to be" Correct	0.062
Spoken "to be" Percentage Correct	0.044

Table 7.

p Values for Preference for Writing

Verb Category	<i>p</i> Value
Written Total	0.005
Written Correct	0.035
Written Irregular Total	0.005
Written Irregular Correct	0.079
Written Regular Total	0.016
Written Regular Correct	0.014
Written Irregular Not "to be" Total	0.007
Written Irregular Not "to be" Correct	0.074
Spoken Irregular Total	0.071
Spoken Irregular Correct	0.072
Spoken Irregular Not "to be" Total	0.077
Spoken Irregular Not "to be" Total Correct	0.080

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to answer questions about the effect of the learner background and learner preferences on SLA and verb usage. In short, did previous learner experiences (background) and/or their personal preferences affect their acquisition and production of verbs? In order to examine these issues more closely, it was necessary to look at all the factors in relation to each other. The previous section took these variables into account and noted the relevant relationships.

There were few connections between the teaching variables and the different verb categories, consistent with several previous studies (Schumann, 1978; Holley & King, 1974; Cohen & Robbins, 1976). However, the teaching spoken language variable did have more of an influence and affected mostly spoken forms. This means that emphasis on speaking during class could lead students to be more comfortable with speaking. However, they did not necessarily use their knowledge correctly. Teaching the spoken language also affected a small segment in writing, namely the irregular forms that are not "to be." Because this segment was questionable due to its small size, it is fair to say that teaching the spoken language did help in speaking production but not in writing production. Teaching the written language only affected one variable, and that was the spoken regular total, not the writing variable. This was understandable because students seem to have a very difficult time applying everything they have learned into their writing. It made sense that the reverse was also true. Therefore, an emphasis on writing does not carry over into learners' writing or speaking performance.

Next, we will discuss students' personal preferences. We hypothesized that if the students preferred a certain part of the language more, they would do better in that area. If the participants

preferred speaking (6 out of the 11 did), then that should affect their speaking production in a positive way. However, this is not the case. Rather, students' writing is more positively influenced. Oddly enough, a preference for speaking strongly influenced the proper usage of past tense verbs in all forms. It did not, however, strongly affect the production of spoken verbs.

A preference for writing had a different effect on the written and spoken language than a preference for speaking. This preference affected no "percentages correct" but several "totals," mostly in written forms. This means that a preference for writing could help produce more written forms and some spoken forms, but a preference for speaking truly helped writing more. Interestingly, neither preference made the students better speakers, which simply means that they may have been less afraid to make mistakes as they spoke. As for the remaining two preferences, there was a link between a preference for grammar and the total amount correct of spoken forms of the verb "to be"; there was no link between a preference for reading and other variables.

6. Conclusion

Based on these findings, ESL/SLA programs should emphasize speaking in their classes. This is not to say that other areas should drop in their importance, but perhaps in grammar, reading, and writing classes, the students could be encouraged to speak even more. An emphasis on writing however, could still be of help with a few changes. As was seen in Cohen and Roberts (1976), the present study did not take different error correction techniques into consideration. However, even though there was slight relationship between an emphasis on writing and written production, with some changes this could be remedied. A uniform approach to error correction, an immediate explanation of errors (Shabini & Meraji, 2010), and tracking student errors over the term could be helpful.

As for the participants' preferences, the students who enjoyed speaking the most did quite well in writing. The students who enjoyed speaking exuded more confidence that they understood and could also use their knowledge in their writing. In the same manner, students who enjoyed writing also excelled in writing. It was also true that certain aspects of students' speaking improved with a general preference for writing. This suggests an overall comfort level with the language that translated into producing more in the language in general.

Furthermore, this study has its limitations due to small sample size. Since it was a pilot study, it gives a brief insight into what is needed for further research. This study should be performed on a larger group in order to examine the possibility of more significant relationships among variables. Also, if possible, the participants should be asked about their writing background and previous preferred activities. Next, a larger sample would provide the data necessary to truly examine the irregular verb forms broken down into forms of "to be." It would also be helpful, in a larger sample, to examine instances of over-regularization of irregular past tense verbs (i.e., runned for ran). There were not enough of these in this sample to warrant study, but there probably would be in a larger sample. In short, an emphasis on teaching for oral production marginally helped ESL students' acquisition, but an emphasis on writing had a much lesser effect. Learner preferences played a role in how well the students performed, but, to reiterate, a larger sample should be used in future research to further explore the effects of preferences of grammar and reading on production.

References

- Ansarimoghaddam, S., & Tan, B.H. (2014). Undergraduates' experiences and attitudes of writing in L1 and English. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 14(1), 7-28.
- Block, D. (2000). Revisiting the gap between SLA researchers and language teachers. *Links & Letters*, 7, 129-143.
- Cohen, A. D., & Robbins, M. (1976). Toward assessing interlanguage performance: The relationship between selected errors, learners' characteristics, and learners' explanations. *Language Learning*, 26(1), 45-66.
- Daly, J. A., & Miller, M. D. (1975). The empirical development of an instrument of writing apprehension. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9, 242-249.

- Dvorak, T. (1977). Grammatical practice, communicative practice, and the development of linguistic competence. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.
- Hendrickson, J.M. (1976). The effects of error correction treatments upon adequate and accurate communication in the written compositions of adult learners of English as a second language. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.
- Holley, F., & King, J. K. (1974). *Imitation and correction in foreign language learning*. In J. H. Schumann & N. Stenson (Eds.), *New frontiers in second language learning* (pp. 81-89). Rowley: Newbury House.
- Lee, S.Y. (2005). Facilitating and inhibiting factors in English as a foreign language writing performance: A model testing with structural equation modeling. *Language Learning*, 55(2), 335-374.
- Lee, S.Y., & Krashen, S. (2003). Writer's block in a Chinese sample. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 97, 537-542.
- Liu, S., & Laohawiriyanon, C. (2013). Students' attitudes towards cultural learning in the English classroom: A case study of non-English major students in a Chinese university. *International Journal of English Language Education*, 1(3), 28-42. Retrieved from <http://www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/ije/article/view/3508/291717>
- Mak, B., & White, C. (1996). Communication apprehension of Chinese ESL students. *Hong Kong Journal for Applied Linguistics*, 2(1), 81-95.
- Nassaji, H., & Tian, J. (2010). Collaborative and individual output tasks and their effects on learning English phrasal verbs. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(4), 397-419.
- Noor, N. M. (2011). Reading habits and preferences of EFL post graduates: A case study. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-9. Retrieved from <http://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/IJAL/article/download/95/59>
- Ramirez, A. (1995). *Creating contexts for second language acquisition theory: methods*. White Plains: Longman Publishers.
- Samimy, K. (1994). Teaching Japanese: Consideration of learners' affective variables. *Theory into Practice*, 33(1), 29-33.
- Schumann, J. H. (1978). *The Pidginization process: A model for second language acquisition*. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers.
- Shabani, E.A., & Meraji, S.R. (2010). Preference consequentialism: An ethical proposal to resolve the writing error correction debate in EFL classroom. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 4(4), 313-332. Retrieved from <http://www.ijls.net/volumes/volume4issue4/shabani1.pdf>
- Shabani, M. B. (2012). Different learning style preferences of male and female Iranian non-academic EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 127-137. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/19344/12814>
- Zhou, A.A., Busch, M., & Cumming, A. (2014). Do adult ESL learners' and their teachers' goals for improving grammar in writing correspond? *Language Awareness*, 23(3), 234-254.