Insight into the Acquisition of Verbal Morphology: A Longitudinal Study of Croatian EFL Learners' Interlanguage Development

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Abstract: This paper examines the acquisition of verbal morphology in the developing interlanguage systems of Croatian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The longitudinal study inquired into the acquisition of four verb tenses (the *Simple Present Tense*, the *Present Continuous Tense*, the *Simple Past Tense* and the *Present Perfect Tense*) among the same group of 20 elementary school learners over a three-year period of learning (Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8). The acquisition of verb tenses was studied with special empahasis on the second principle of tense-aspect acquisition, i.e. overgeneralization (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). The use of each verb tense was thus investigated exploring the distribution of its overgeneralized use in the environments of other tenses under study. The research was conducted on a corpus of 36 transcribed audiotape recordings of parts of classroom dialogue. The average length of each recording was 15 minutes. Data were collected through different task-based activities (Harmer 2007, Thornbury 2005, Ur 2012) which were designed to elicit learners' speech production. The obtained results have shown that the *Simple Present* was the most frequently overgeneralized tense. The research findings have also revealed that Grade 7 learners overgeneralize verb tenses the most.

Key words: verbal morphology, interlanguage, verb tenses, overgeneralization, task-based activities

1 Introduction

SLA efforts to investigate learner language have been most fruitful in the area of morphology. Early studies of verbal morphology, "commonly referred to as the *morpheme studies"* (Ellis 82), only incidentally included tense-aspect morphology since their primary scope was to examine the occurrence of grammatical morphemes in interlanguage. More recent SLA research has given a great deal of attention to the expression of temporality, particularly the tense-aspect morphology related to the expression of the past. Although many studies inquire into the interplay of several means of temporal expression, including not only the use of morphological means but also

the use of both pragmatic and lexical means, the present study, however, purely investigates the acquisition of verbal morphology. Insight into the acquisition of verbal morphology should reveal the ways in which the concept of temporality is conveyed and how it is reorganized over time as new tense-aspect forms enter the developing interlanguage systems. This insight has been achieved through the research of overgeneralization in the use of verb tenses in the speech production of Croatian EFL learners. A theoretical overview of the study is presented in the first part of the paper with the results obtained in the domain of overuse in the second part.

2 Literature review

Within SLA research, two main traditions of inquiry may be identified: the meaning-oriented and the form-oriented approaches to the acquisition of temporal expression. Meaning-oriented studies, as claimed by Bardovi-Harlig, "investigate a particular concept and ask how it is expressed" (1999, 346). In order to investigate, for example, the concept of the past or the future, such studies inquire into a full range of temporal expression, including pragmatic devices, lexical means and verbal morphology. Form-oriented studies which "follow a particular form and ask how and where it is used by learners" (Bardovi-Harlig 1999, 345) focus only on verbal morphology. Both approaches together, as noted by Bardovi-Harlig, "afford a better opportunity for understanding the acquisition of tense-aspect than either approach alone" (2000, 93).

In the acquisition of L2 English verbal morphology within the form-oriented approach, four general principles have been recognized (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, 111-112). First, acquisition is slow and gradual. Second, form often precedes function; that is, when verbal morphology first appears it is overgeneralized. Overgeneralization or overuse is the application of a tense-aspect form not only in a context where it applies, but also in a context where it does not apply. The third principle is that irregular morphology precedes regular morphology and finally, in the acquisition of compound verb tenses, a verb with a verbal suffix is acquired prior to an auxiliary verb.

Overgeneralization has been well-documented within a growing amount of mostly longitudinal research on the acquisition of temporal morphology by learners of various language backgrounds, whether in naturalistic or classroom settings. Examining the acquisition of English tense-aspect morphology produced by a L1 Japanese learner named Wes, Schmidt (147) reported cases of overuse as in the

following example: *"so yesterday I didn't painting."* According to Pica (148), L1 Spanish learners of English have been seen to overgeneralize as illustrated in *"(Every day) in the afternoon, I'm returning to my house and I have something to eat,"* whereas Klein (45) also found evidence supporting the overapplication of tense-aspect forms in the interlanguage production of a L1 Italian girl named Lavinia, such as *"Did you buy furniture here? I have bought here."* Bardovi-Harlig (1997, 242), examining the acquisition of past tense verbal morphology among 16 learners representing four different language backgrounds (Arabic, Japanese, Korean and Spanish), reported on the problems learners encounter when acquiring the *Present Perfect* and the *Simple Past*, as shown in *"I played base ball, our bat was broken, our ball was cut, I have finished my homework, and I came back"*.

Although cases of overuse clearly point to acquisitional problems, it has been claimed (Bardovi-Harlig 1997, 2000, Ellis 2008, Ortega 2009) that overgeneralization does not need to be interpreted negatively. When a new morphological feature enters the interlanguage system it automatically affects the existing tense-aspect forms, thus making the coexistence of the correct and overgeneralized forms only temporary, due to the learners' attempts to modify and adjust their grammatical knowledge into a rule-governed system. The process of reorganization of grammar knowledge representations, i.e. restructuring (McLaughlin and Heredia 217), has been typically captured as a U-shaped pattern of deveploment and has been defined as "the appearance of correct, or nativelike, forms at an early stage of development which then undergo a process of attrition, only to be reestablished at a later stage" (Sharwood Smith and Kellerman 220). In other words, a U-shaped learning behaviour "involves learning, unlearning and relearning" (Jain and Stephan 3). Cases of U-shaped learning behaviour have been found in both L1 (Cazden 1968, Brown 1973) and L2 acquisition research (Shirai 1990, Ibáñez 2013), especially with regard to the acquisition of past tense verbal morphology (past regular vs. past irregular).

The learners' restructuring of knowledge triggered by overuse of the emergent tense-aspect morphology may be intriguing to examine since it, hopefully, contributes to a better general understanding of how form-meaning associations become established in learner language. Therefore, the present study attempts to delineate the acquisition of morphosyntactic tense-aspect markings through the lens of overgeneralization in the interlanguage production of Croatian L2 learners of English.

3 Aims of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate the acquisition of verb tenses in terms of their overgeneralized use in the speech production of Croatian EFL learners over a three-year period of learning. The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What types of overgeneralization occur in the speech production of Croatian elementary school learners across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8?
2. What is the distribution of types of overgeneralization regarding the tense environment in which they occur in the speech production of Croatian elementary school learners across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8?

4 Method
4.1 Participants

This longitudinal study was conducted among 20 Croatian elementary school learners of English as a foreign language. The same group of learners voluntarily participated in the study during the three-year period of data collection, i.e in Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8. Since the research started with Grade 6 learners who were aged 11-12, parental consent which was required according to the *Ethical Code for Research with Children* (Ajduković and Kolesarić 2003) was easily obtained due to the fact that the author was the learners' former English language teacher who was thus familiar not only with the learners but also with their parents. Moreover, along with the learners and their parents, the school headmaster was also informed about the aims of this research.

The starting age of EFL learning was the same for all the participants, that is, the learners had started learning English in Grade 1 since it is a compulsory school subject in Croatia[1].According to the Croatian National Educational Standard – CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006), Grade 8 learners are expected to reach the A2 level[2] and possibly the lower band of the B1 level[3]based on the

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[1] For more information about the education system of Croatia, visit the website of the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, htttps://mzo.hr.

[2] A2 level global descriptor: "Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and

Common European Framework of Reference – CEFR (Council of Europe 2001).

4.2 Data collection

The data collection yielded 36 audiotape recordings (15 in Grade 6, 15 in Grade 7 and 6 in Grade 8) of parts of EFL classroom dialogue which were collected by the author. The total length of the recordings is 508 minutes. The average length of a recording is 15 minutes (minimal length is 13 minutes, maximal length is 24 minutes). Language data was elicited by means of different task-based activities which foster oral production, since "there is more talk, more balanced participation, more motivation and enjoyment" (Ur 2012, 121) in such production. These communicative activities were mostly designed following suggestions from the reasearch literature (Harmer 2007, Klippel 1984, Thornbury 2005, Ur 1992, 2012), whereas a smaller portion of them was tailored by the author. The task-based activities included activities such as *guess the lie* (Appendix 1), *questions and answers, discussions*(Appendix 2) *chain stories* (Appendix 3), *role-plays*, *questionnaires* (Appendix 4). All the activities were made in accordance with the CEFR level the learners were expected to have achieved. Furthermore, the duration of these activities was not interrupted until reaching a communicative goal which caused differences in the length of recordings.

4.3 Data analysis

The second step of analysis was to identify the use of four verb tenses (the *Simple Present*, the *Present Continuous*, the *Simple Past* and the *Present Perfect*) in the transcribed recordings. The selection of these verb tenses instead of some other tenses (e.g. the *Past Continuous*) can be accounted by the fact that they had been previously included in a broader piece of research (see Semren 2017) which investigated not only the order of acquisition of these four

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routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need." (Council of Europe 24).

[3] B1 level global descriptor: "Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reason and explanations for opinions and plans." (Council of Europe 24).

tenses but also the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes across the same group of learners, i.e. Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8 learners. Moreover, in the previous research (see Semren 2017), the acquisition of the grammatical morphemes was also examined by means of task-based activities which were designed to elicit the use of the nine[4] morphemes among which are found the grammatical morphemes constituting the *Present Perfect*. For this reason, some of the communicative activites provided a wider range of morphemes, i.e. verb tenses to be used in, for instance, discussions, whereas the questionnaire primarily focused on the use of the *Present Perfect* which, in turn, was closely releated to the use of the *Simple Past*.

In the third step of analysis, the use of the selected tenses was examined regarding their overuse, thus distinguishing four types of overgeneralization. The identified types of overgeneralization were classified according to the tense environment in which they occurred. For instance, Grade 7 learners overgeneralized the *Simple Past* in the sentence *I often lost mobile phone* although the adverb of frequency *often* clearly indicated that the use of the *Simple Present* is required since it denotes habitual and regular action. Therefore, this example was classifed as *Simple Past* overgeneralization, that is of the *Simple Past – Simple Present* subtype. The tense environment was recognized following the rules of grammar adopted from Filipović (1969), Leech (2004) and Swan (2009).

Also, it should be pointed out that ambiguous examples such as *he is put bodies on the floor* (is putting/put), *the criminal is came in front of the office* (is/came), *were you last summer went to sea?* (Did you go to the sea last summer?/Were you at the sea last summer?), *Do you training football?* (Do you train/Are you training), *the boy is run er coming* (runs/is running/is coming), *NE ZNAJU GA. ZATO JER because he...he is always forgets it* (he always forgets/he is always forgetting[5]), *What did you doing?* (are you doing/did you do) and similar were not included in the data analysis. Also, repetitions such as *No, I think that I was watch watched one film movie*, *He acts he is acting with other*

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[4] The grammatical morphemes within the previous study (Semren 2017) included: third person singular *(-s)*, auxiliary verb *be*, progressive *(-ing)*, past regular *(-ed)*, past irregular, auxiliary verb *have*, past participle *(-en)*, present tense copula *be* and the past tense copula *be*.

[5] The *Simple Present* of the verb *forget* refers to a mental state. However, in idiomatic colloquial speech the *Present Continuous* form is often preffered to the regular *Simple Present* form since it is regarded as a more polite method of expressing a mental attitude (Leech 2004). Since these rather detailed differences in the use of the two verb tenses exceed the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006) framework, examples such as this one along with similar ones were excluded from the analysis.

famous... actors or *I was er... I was get up and I couldn't stay in bed* were not seen to fall within the parameters of the analysis.

Furthermore, a smaller amount of the oral production data across Grade 7 and Grade 8 referred to conditional clauses which the learners were not expected to have learned yet, according to the CNES[6] (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006). For this reason, language samples such as *If I could change one thing that happened to me today I will replace replace second class, If I could I will er change him and instead of test I will put a normal class* were excluded from the data analysis as well.

However, the only exception to what the learners were not expected to have acquired according to the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006) pertained to the sequence of tenses, i.e. indirect speech[7] as in *He said he give me, She asked who...did that and I said that I don't know, I thought they are knocking, I told them that it was some kind of mistake that the teacher mistaked that I actually got an...er er A.* Since these interlanguage samples kept frequently reappearing across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8, thus enlarging the sample size, they were included in the analysis.

In the final step, the distribution of overgeneralization types was quantitatively analysed across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8. The classification of four types of overgeneralizationin different tense contexts illustrate the following examples from the corpus:

TYPE 1: *Simple Present* overgeneralizations
a) *Simple Present – Simple Past*
Example 1 (Grade 8)
L4[8]: That is what I learned but there *are* too much irregular verbs that we had to knew.

b) *Simple Present – Present Continuous*
Example 2 (Grade 7)
L9: I usually spend money on clothes but now I *save* because we will go to Poreč.

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[6] According to the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006), upon finishing Grade 8, learners are expected only to recognize the use of both the first and the second type of conditional clauses.
[7] According to the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006), upon finishing Grade 8, learners are expected to be able to report something said earlier when the verb in the main clause is the present tense.
[8] In the transcripts, numbers were used instead of the learners' names so as to protect their anonymity.

c) *Simple Present – Present Perfect*
Example 3 (Grade 7)
L8: Er… me… in my opinion… the… change in fashion er does make people buy clothes they don't really need but I don't buy… clothes… or I don't need. I always buy… what… is er… what I think er it is necessary for me and I know some people… they have er… bunch of clothes they never *wear*[9] or er –
T: Aha.
L8: or they wore it once… or twice.

TYPE 2: *Present Continuous* overgeneralizations
a) *Present Continuous – Simple Present*
Example 1 (Grade 7)
L3: Poor… poor people and I think that is sad and we need to tell the world that they need help because they *are living*[10]on the beach and every day they need to I don't know mmm walk around the Hawaii to find some food and other things.

b) *Present Continuous–Simple Past*
Example 2 (Grade 8)
T: Because there was just one kindergarten, hm? You all went to the same kindergarten?
L6: Ten of us *is going*… to this errr… same er kindergarten

c) *Present Continuou s– Past Continuous*
Example 3 (Grade 6)
L8: Which weather was /yesterday/?

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[9] According to the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006), at the end of Grade 7, learners are supposed to have acquired the *Present Perfect* denoting an action (affirmative, interrogative and negative form). Since the *Present Perfect* is normally used with the time expressions meaning at some/any time up to now (for instance *ever, never, already, yet*) (Filipović 1969, Leech 2004, Swan 2009), the learner's intened message was to convey that there are some people who have bunch of clothes they have never worn. In other words, the learner's speech production indicates a result of some indefinite action in the past which is reinforced adverbially. However, *have* never *worn* can co-occur with *wear*.
[10] Regardless of the fact that Grade 7 learners were presumed to be familiar with the differences in use between the *Simple Present* and the *Present Continuous* as indicated by the CNES (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports 2006), there were other examples in the corpus such as *After that he has lunch...and er after lunch he is going at work, He er...in eight p.m. he is watching TV and after that he is going to bed, I don't think er think they are checking that clothes that is all...clear or not clear* which demonstrate the opposite. The indefinite form of the *Simple Present* should have been used since it denotes an established habit (Filipović 1969, Leech 2004).

L1: *It's raining* like today.

TYPE 3: *Simple Past* overgeneralizations
a) *Simple Past – Simple Present*
Example 1 (Grade 6)
L6: A boy meets a girl in the book shop.
T: OK. In the book shop. Er (naming the learner)… would you stop?
L6: And er first look he*wa s*in love with her. The girl thinks the boy is ugly and boring.

b) *Simple Past – Present Continuous* (expressing the future (F) action)
Example 2 (Grade 7)
T: So what are you doing this weekend?
L: I –
T: This weekend?
L: I… er *did* er when I… in er woods with er my dog and er er –
T: You too? Good old friends.

c) *Simple Past – Present Continuous* (expressing the present (P) action)
Example 3 (Grade 7)
L2: I see errr very very messup messed up er… er woman because er the dog *pulled* her.

d) *Simple Past – Present Perfect*
Example 4 (Grade 7)
T: What do you think about that… about second hand shops?… Do you like that idea of buying things in second hand shops? Yes, (naming the learner)?
L1: I don't think that's lame or that's for somebody for er who does… doesn't have money. It's cool and I never *saw*[11] that shop in er Split and er I think that's er for the normal kids who buys err errr clothes but if your err parents don't have a lot of money you can… buy those clothes in that errshop.
T: Aha… OK.

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[11]Even though the use of *saw* seems to be interchangeable with *have* never *seen*, this particular learner wanted to state that such a type of clothing shop had not been previously noticed in her/his hometown. Therefore, due to "past with present relevance" (Leech 30) acompanied by the time expression indicating the present moment, i.e. *never*, the author identified the *Present Perfect* as the targeted tense.

e) *Simple Past – Past Perfect*
Example 5 (Grade 7)
L3: When I was a child er I had milk teeth and after when they *fell* out I put them un under the pillow and I wait –
T: Aha.
L3: for my tooth fairy.
T: Aha. OK.

f) *Simple Past (past regular) – Simple Past (past irregular)*
Example 6 (Grade 6)
L2: He errr criminal opened the window and *runned* away.

TYPE 4: *Present Perfect* overgeneralizations
a) *Present Perfect – Simple Past*
Example 1 (Grade 7)
L1: Yes my all English teachers... *have been*[12] good because... er they knew... how... explain... the... tasks or words or something like that and er... they never asked too much.

5 Results and discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis. The results addressing the first research question of this study are presented in Table 1.

Simple Present overgeneralizations	122 (42%)
Present Continuous overgeneralizations	60 (20%)
Simple Past overgeneralizations	110 (37%)
Present Perfect overgeneralizations	2(1%)
TOTAL	294 (100%)

Table 1. Types of overgeneralization in the speech production of Croatian EFL learners – general data

As can be seen in Table 1, there were 4 identified types of overgeneralization in the learners' speech production during the observation period (Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8) which accounted for 294 cases of overuse. Most of the overgeneralizations were

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[12]Since Grade 7 learners were engaged in the discussion about their former English language teachers which is supported by the speech sample of another learner, i.e. *I had er three English teachers and they were all...er good. They were all good to me. Errr they were...they mmm...mmmm...they pushed me...err in front and they helped me...in in the school way*, it might be stated that the *Simple Past*, "in that it deals with past events, is the natural form of verb to employ in narrative" (Leech 10).

overuses of the *Simple Present* (42% or 122 of 294 overgeneralizations) while a slightly lower percentage of overuse occured for the *Simple Past* (37% or 110 of 294 overgeneralizations). Cases of *Present Continuous* overuse accounted for 20% of the overgeneralizations, whereas only 2 cases (1%) of *Present Perfect* overuse occured in the overall corpus.

To answer the second research question, each type of overgeneralization has been examined according to the tense environment in which it occured. The results summarizing the distribution of different types of ovegeneralization are shown in separate tables (Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5).

Grade	Simple Present						TOTAL	
	Simple Past		Present Continuous		Present Perfect			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6	31	27%	2	29%	0	0%	33	27%
7	62	55%	4	57%	2	100%	68	56%
8	20	18%	1	14%	0	0%	21	17%
TOTAL	113	100%	7	100%	2	100%	122	100%

Table 2. Distribution of *Simple Present* overgeneralizations across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8

As can be observed from Table 2, a total of 122 overgeneralizations of the *Simple Present* were produced over a three-year period of learning. The *Simple Present* overgeneralizations were most frequent in Grade 7 (56% or 68 of 122 overgeneralizations). Overuse of the same tense was almost twice less frequent in Grade 6 (27% or 33 of 122 overgeneralizations) when compared to Grade 7. The least frequent overuse of this tense appeared in Grade 8 (17% or 21 of 122 overgeneralizations).

The results also indicate that most of the overgeneralizations of the *Simple Present* occurred in the environment of the *Simple Past* (92% or 113/122). The *Present Continuous* environment was the second most common environment (6% or 7/122) for the same type of overgenaralization. Overuse of the *Simple Present* in the *Present Perfect* environment occurred only in Grade 7 (2% or 2/122). Moreover, it was the least common overuse of this type.

| Grade | Present Continuous | | | | | | TOTAL | |
| | Simple Present | | Simple Past | | Past Continuous | | | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6	11	24%	2	33%	2	25%	15	25%
7	25	54%	1	17%	4	50%	30	50%
8	10	22%	3	50%	2	25%	15	25%
TOTAL	46	100%	6	100%	8	100%	60	100%

Table 3. Distribution of *Present Continuous* overgeneralizations across
Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8

The findings in Table 3 show a total of 60 overgeneralizations of the *Present Continuous* out of which 30 (50%) were produced in Grade 7. The results also reveal equally distributed overuse of the same tense in Grade 6 and Grade 8 (25% or 15 of 60 overgeneralizations).

Furthermore, it can be also observed that the most frequent overuse of the *Present Continuous* was identified in the *Simple Present* environment (77% or 46/60). The second most frequent overuse of the same tense occurred in the environment of the *Past Continuous* (13% or 8/60) while the third identified overuse appeared in the *Simple Past* environment (10% or 6/60).

| Grade | Simple Past | | | | | | | | | | | | TOTAL | |
| | Simple Present | | Pres. Cont. (F) | | Pres. Cont. (P) | | Pres. Perfect | | Past Perfect | | Simple Past (irreg.) | | | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6	24	41	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	5	71	31	28
7	33	57	1	100	1	100	9	100	29	88	2	29	76	69
8	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	0	0	3	3
TOTAL	59	100	1	100	1	100	9	100	33	100	7	100	110	100

Table 4. Distribution of *Simple Past* overgeneralizations across
Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8

As for *Simple Past* overgeneralizations, Table 4 illustrates a total of 110 overgeneralizations out of which a great proportion of overuse occurred in Grade 7 (69% or 76 of 110 overgeneralizations). Grade 6 learners provided 28% (31 of 110 overgeneralizations) whereas Grade 8 learners only 3% (3 of 110) of *Simple Past* overuse.

Examining the distribution of *Simple Past* overgeneralizations it can be noticed that cases of its overuse most commonly appeared in environments associated with the *Simple Present* and the *Past Perfect*. The *Simple Present* environment accounted for 54% (59/110) of overgeneralizations while the *Past Perfect* accounted for 30% (33/110) of overuse.

Surprisingly, only Grade 7 learners used the *Simple Past* in *Present Continuous* and *Present Perfect* contexts. Only one overuse of the *Simple Past* occurred in the environment of the *Present Continuous* in both present and future contexts as opposed to nine cases of *Simple Past* overgeneralizations in the *Present Perfect* environment, accounting for 8% of overuse. Additionally, Grade 7 learners produced a somewhat lower overuse (2% or 2/110) of past regular in the environment of past irregular when compared to Grade 6 learners (5% or 5/110).

Grade	Present Perfect	
	Simple Past	
	N	%
6	1	50%
7	1	50%
8	0	0%
TOTAL	2	100%

Table 5. Distribution of *Present Perfect* overgeneralizations across Grade 6, Grade 7 and Grade 8

The results in Table 5 display a total of only 2 overgeneralizations of the *Present Perfect*. Overuses of this tense appeared in the *Simple Past* environment in both Grade 6 and Grade 7 (1 overgeneralization per grade).

Based on the obtained findings of this study (see Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5), it appears that Grade 7 learners overuse verb tenses the most (60% or 175 of 294 overgeneralizations). Among the four types of overgeneralization, Grade 7 learners most frequently overused the *Simple Past* (43% or 76/175 overgeneralizations) (Table 4). Although overuse of the *Simple Past* in the *Simple Present* context in Grade 7 prevailed over other tense environments, the same type of overuse was approximately twice less common (19% or 33/175) (Table 4) when compared to the overuse of the *Simple Present* in the *Simple Past* context (35% or 62/175) (Table 2).

To sum up, it seems that acquisition of temporal morphology in terms of overuse in different tense contexts can be captured as U-

shaped learning behaviour, though the U-shaped curve is upside down. An inverted U-shaped curve, as indicated by Strauss (1982), appears when the percentage of overuse is plotted instead of the percentage of appropriate useof verb tenses as indicated in Figure 1.
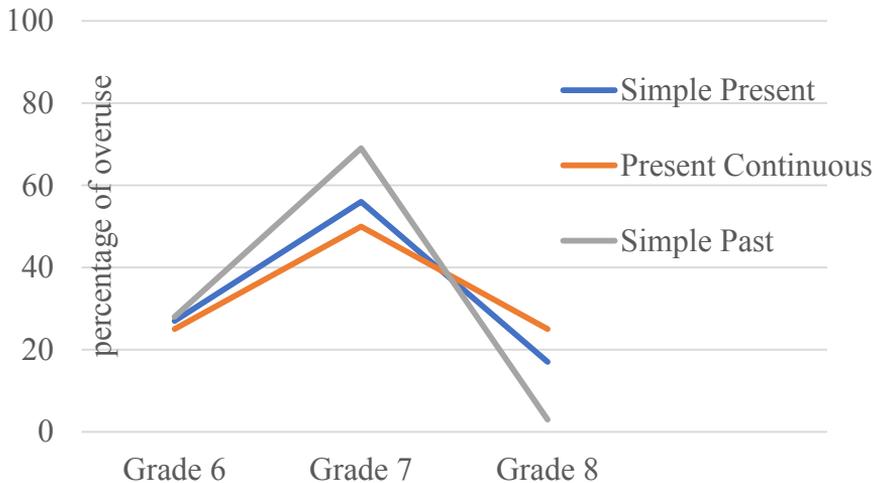

Figure 1. An inverted U-shaped development of Croatian EFL learners acquiring
temporal morphology

From the figure above it can be noticed that the *Present Perfect* is the only tense for which acquisition does not demonstrate U-shaped performance. The absence of a U-shaped curve for this tense will be addressed somewhat later. Regarding all other tenses, it seems that the amount of overuse in Grade 7 in comparison to Grade 6 resulted in an increase which, quite expectedly, decreased in Grade 8. Even though the *Simple Present* and the *Simple Past* exhibited lower overgeneralization scores in Grade 8 as opposed to Grade 6, the *Present Continuous* did not show the same declining pattern of overuse. Nevertheless, it might be claimed that this U-shaped behaviour points to the reorganization of existing linguistic knowledge and advancement towards more target-like use in the developing interlanguage system of Grade 8 learners.

Furthermore, it might be also claimed that the U-shaped curve resulted from the interaction between the learner's voluntary participation and the task-based activity. When the learners were not willing to participate in a predetermined communicative activity, they were given the opportunity to select another activity of their choice

since their participation in this study was voluntary. The learners mostly avoided the questionnaire which was designed to elicit the use of the *Present Perfect* which, due to only two cases of its overuse (Table 5), could not be captured as U-shaped behaviour (Figure 1).

Moreover, as previously indicated in section 4.3, the learners's selection of the communicative activity might have enabled more frequent suppliance in the use of particular verb tenses. It is most likely, for instance, that role-plays or chain stories provided more opportunities for a wider range of tenses to be used, thus likely causing a greater amount of overgeneralization in the learners' speech production, unlike questionnaires which, as already stated, were restricted in terms of tense suppliance. In addition, the duration of the activities might as well have had an impact on oral production: uninterrumpted flow of the communicative activity most probably provided more occasions for overuse.

6 Conclusion

This study was conducted with the goal of providing better insight into the acquisition of tense-aspect morphology regarding the overuse of four verb tenses in the speech production of Croatian EFL learners. An attempt to answer two research questions has been made. The first question focused on overgeneralization types, whereas the second question dealt with their distribution across Grade 6, Grade 7, and Grade 8. Based on the findings, several conclusions have been drawn.

Examining the acquisition of verbal morphology, it can be noticed that the two most frequent types of overuse were the overgeneralization of the *Simple Present* and the *Simple Past*. Furthermore, it seems that Croatian learners showed the strongest associations between the *Simple Present* and the *Simple Past*. Namely, these verb tenses were the most commonly used environments in which the four types of overuse occurred with the *Simple Past* context slightly predominating over the *Simple Present*.

In order to fully understand how Croatian EFL learners acquire verbal morphology and thus restructure their grammatical knowledge while approximating toward the target language, the overgeneralized use of verb tenses should be investigated even further. The amount of overuse in relation to different types of task-based acitivities should also be examined. What is more, the expression of morphological features should be examined from the point of a single time reference (the past-present-future time) with special empasis on the acquisition

of those verb tenses which differ between Croatian and English (e.g. the *Simple Present* vs. the *Present Continuous*, the *Simple Past* vs. the *Present Perfect*) regarding the rules of their use. This aspect of temporal acquisition should further be investigated from the angle of the national curriculum and possibly examined as a case-study, thus observing patterns of interlanguage morphosytactic development across different proficiency levels considering the impact of affective factors on FL learning. This should be done to obtain a potentially more detailed account of the expression of temporality.

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UVID U USVAJANJE GLAGOLSKE MORFOLOGIJE: LONGITUDINALNO ISTRAŽIVANJE MEĐUJEZIČNOG RAZVOJA HRVATSKIH UČENIKA ENGLESKOGA KAO STRANOGA JEZIKA

Ovaj rad istražuje usvajanje glagolske morfologije u međujeziku hrvatskih učenika engleskoga kao stranoga jezika. Usvajanje četiriju glagolskih vremena (the *Simple Present Tense*, the *Present Continuous Tense*, the *Simple Past Tense,* the *Present Perfect Tense*) longitudinalno se promatralo kod skupine 20 istih učenika osnovne škole tijekom tri godine učenja (šesti, sedmi i osmi razred). Usvajanje glagolskih vremena proučavalo se s posebnim osvrtom na preuopćavanje (eng. *overgeneralization*) (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). Uporaba pojedinog glagolskog vremena analizirana je s obzirom na distribuciju njegove preupoćene uporabe u okruženju preostalih glagolskih vremena. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku koji se sastoji od prijepisa 36 zvučnih zapisa dijelova razredne interakcije. Prosječna duljina snimke je 15 minuta. Govorna produkcija učenika poticala se različitim komunikacijskim aktivnostima usmjerenim na zadatak (eng. *task-based activities*) (Harmer 2007, Thornbury 2005, Ur 2012). Dobiveni rezultati upućuju da je *Simple Present* najučestalije preuopćavano glagolsko vrijeme*.* Rezultati istraživanja također otkrivaju da učenici sedmog razreda najčešće preuopćavaju glagolska vremena.

Ključne riječi: glagolska morfologija, međujezik, glagolska vremena, preuopćavanje, komunikacijske aktivnosti.

APPENDIX 1

Grade 6
TASK: *Guess the lie*
Step 1: Write five sentences about:
- your house
- your family
- your friends
- your school
- something of your own choice

Include two false things.

Step 2: Read to the class your sentences.
Step 3: The rest of the class has to guess the lie.
The class is allowed to ask you some questions after the story.
Answer the questions with YES/NO.
Ask questions and try to guess what has the pupil lied about!

APPENDIX 2
Grade 8
TASK: *Fashion discussion*
Step 1: You are pupil A. Read the questions. Do not show these to pupil B.
Step 2: Ask pupil B some or all of these questions.

1) Do you like fashion?
2) What do you think of the fashion industry?
3) Are you a fashion victim/slave to fashion?
4) How does fashion affect your life?
5) How important is fashion today compared with in the past?
6) What are the bad things about fashion?
7) When was the last time you went shopping? What did you buy?
8) Who are the most fashionable teachers in our school?
9) Can you be a friend to someone who has a terrible sense of fashion?
10) Do you have a favourite fashion designer?
11) What area of fashion interests you most – clothes, hair, shoes, cosmetics, accessories, etc.?
12) Do you have your own fashion or follow the crowds?
13) Have you ever bough something you didn't need?

APPENDIX 3

Grade 7
TASK: *Chain story*
Step 1: The teacher writes one word on the board and calls the first pupil to invent a sentence using the word written on the board.
Step 2: Then, the teacher writes another word and the next pupil invents one other sentence trying to connect it with the previous sentence.Encourage your pupils to be inventive and to make up a funny story!

STORY 1	STORY 2
EARLY	MONDAY
MAN	MORNING
SEE	TEACHER
YESTERDAY	GIRL
WEAR	PARK
TWO	ICE CREAM
QUICKLY	ANGRY
RAIN	TUESDAY
STREET	CINEMA
ANIMAL	BEFORE
CRAZY	BIRTHDAY
BIG	BOYFRIEND
BANANAS	SAD
POLICE CAR	WRITE
FALL	LIKE
LEG	PHONE
HOSPITAL	GO OUT
FLOWERS	HANDS
HAPPY	KISS
AFTER	BEAUTIFUL
HOME	TOGETHER
TIRED	YEARS

APPENDIX 4

Grade 8
TASK: *The money questionnaire*
Step 1: In pairs, ask and answer the following questions.
Provide detailed answers. Use the cues to make questions.
Make questions using the Present Perfect.

e.g. *Tell a lie/to your parents*Have you ever told a lie to your parents?
  (Why did you tell a lie?) I told them a lie because...

A) Have you ever...?
1. *You waste/money on something you have never used*
(What was it?)
2. *Your mother/ever lose/a credit card or a wallet*
(When did she lose it? How much money did she lose? Did she find her creditcard/wallet?)
3. *Your father/win any money (e.g. in a lottery)*
(When did he win money?)
4. *You lend/money to someone who didn't pay you back*
(Who did you lend money to-a friend, a relative...? Did you ask for your money back?)
5. *Your friend /steal something from a supermarket*
(How old was he/she ? Was he/she caught by the shop assistant?)

Step 1: In pairs ask and answer the following questions.
Provide detailed answers. Use the cues to make questions.
Make questions using the Present Perfect.

e.g. *Tell a lie /to your parents*Have you ever told a lie to your parents?
(Why did you tell a lie?) I told them a lie because...

B) Have you ever...?
1. *You be/to a mall or shopping centre*
(Why did you go there? Who did you go with? Did you buy anything?)
2. *Your father/forget to buy you a birthday present*
(Why did he forget to buy you a present? Were you sad?)
3. *You/take money from your parent's wallet*
(What did you need the money for?)
4.*You/find money in the street*
(What did you do with the money?)
5. *Your girl/boyfriend/buy you a nice present*
(What did he/she buy you? Was it expensive?)