

## Original Paper

# Exploring Style Shifting and Planning Variability in Past-Tense Use: A Case Study of an Intermediate L2 Learner

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Received: March 3, 2025

Accepted: March 12, 2025

Online Published: March 21, 2025

doi:10.22158/sll.v9n2p24

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v9n2p24>

### Abstract

*This study investigates style shifting in second language (L2) acquisition by focusing on the impact of planning time on the accuracy of the past-tense morphology in narrative discourse. Grounded in theories of cognitive processing and variability in L2 performance, this study examines the acquisition experience of an intermediate L2 English learner to explore variability in the use of three past-tense morphemes: regular past tense (e.g., walked), irregular past tense (e.g., went), and past copula (e.g., was). Data were collected using three tasks: a written narrative and two oral narratives designed to elicit varying degrees of planning time. The results revealed significant style shifting, with regular past-tense forms showing the greatest variability and declining accuracy within the reduced planning time. The irregular past-tense forms remained relatively stable, whereas copular past-tense accuracy exhibited moderate variability. Statistical analyses confirmed a significant effect of task type on regular past tense accuracy ( $F(2, 36) = 8.76, p < 0.01$ ), with post-hoc tests indicating higher accuracy in the planned tasks. These findings highlight the cognitive demands of rule-based morphology for spontaneous speech. This study offers practical implications for L2 instruction, emphasizing the importance of pre-task planning, targeted feedback, and metacognitive strategies in enhancing learners' grammatical accuracy. As this study focuses on a single learner, it provides detailed insights into individual variability, although further research with a larger sample could provide more generalizable findings.*

### Keywords

*style shifting, grammatical accuracy, past tense morphology, regular and irregular verbs, copular verbs, narrative discourse, planning time, morphological variability, pre-task planning*

## 1. Introduction

Variability in interlanguage systems is one of the most salient phenomena in second-language acquisition (SLA), reflecting systematic fluctuations in learners' linguistic performance across different elicitation tasks. This variability affects multiple linguistic domains, including phonology, syntax, and morphology, and is influenced by various linguistic, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic factors (Labov 1970). Understanding these fluctuations provides insight into cognitive and contextual influences on L2 development. Psycholinguistic processing models, such as the Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) and Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007), attempt to explain these variations by examining the cognitive constraints that shape learners' ability to access and apply L2 knowledge under different conditions. Empirical research reveals that planned versus unplanned language production significantly impacts linguistic accuracy, emphasizing the crucial roles that task structure and cognitive load play in interlanguage development (Ellis, 1987; Mehnert, 1998; Yuan & Ellis 2003; Ahmadian & Tavakoli 2011; Khatib & Farahanynia 2020; Johnson & Abdi, 2022).

This study investigates the phenomenon of style shifting—systematic adjustments in linguistic output influenced by contextual factors—by examining the planning-related variability in past tense morphology within narrative discourse. Past-tense morphology is particularly relevant because it involves both rule-based (regular past tense) and memory-based (irregular past tense) processes, making it a useful indicator of cognitive processing demands in L2 production. Specifically, the study explores how variations in planning time affect the accuracy of three past-tense morphemes: regular past tense (e.g., walked), irregular past tense (e.g., went), and past copula (e.g., was). Using a case study of an intermediate L2 English learner, this study aimed to determine the extent to which planning time is necessary to facilitate morphological accuracy in both spontaneous and premeditated discourse production.

To achieve these objectives, this study began with a concise review of the literature on interlanguage variability, with particular attention paid to style shifting and the role of planning in L2 morphological accuracy. It then presents a detailed case study, analyzing participants' use of past tense morphemes under different planning conditions (e.g., no planning, limited planning, and extended planning). The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how cognitive and contextual factors interact in L2 acquisition, offering implications for both SLA theory and pedagogical practice in language instruction. By focusing on the interplay between planning time and morphological accuracy, this study advances the current knowledge of the cognitive processes underlying L2 development and offers practical insights to enhance the design of effective language-learning tasks.

## 2. A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Second-Language Variability and Style Shifting in SLA

Variability in second language (L2) acquisition has emerged as a central focus in second language acquisition (SLA) research, reflecting the dynamic and nonlinear nature of interlanguage development. Empirical investigations have consistently demonstrated that L2 learners exhibit systematic variability in their linguistic performance, often manifesting as style shifts across different communicative contexts. This variability is influenced by a constellation of factors, including the learner's developmental stage, target language features, and sociolinguistic context, underscoring the non-arbitrary nature of L2 variation (Kim, 2020; Gablasova, 2020; Wang et al., 2024; Verspoor et al., 2021).

While a substantial body of research has explored phonological variation in L2 performance, morphological and syntactic variability remains comparatively underexamined. To address this gap, Godfrey (1980) conducted a seminal study on the use of tense markers among Spanish and Japanese learners of English during a narrative task. His findings revealed that learners' tense marker usage varied systematically according to factors such as their first language (L1) background, linguistic context, verb-token frequency, discourse demands, and proficiency level. However, Godfrey's study was limited by its focus on a single task type, leaving the critical question of how task variation influences linguistic variability unresolved. Subsequent research has sought to address this limitation by examining how social and contextual factors shape learners' grammatical accuracy in diverse communicative settings (Geeslin & Long, 2014).

Building on this foundation, Tarone (1985) investigated style shifting in L2 learners' use of three grammatical morphemes: the third-person singular present tense -s, article, and noun plural -s, as well as direct object pronouns. Unlike Godfrey, who examined variability within a single task, Tarone analyzed learners' performance across multiple tasks, revealing that variability was not confined to a single stylistic shift but was evident across a range of discourse styles. This finding suggests that L2 learners systematically modulate their grammatical accuracy in response to contextual demands, reinforcing the view that variability is not random but shaped by the discursive and interactional conditions of language use. Recent studies, such as that by Wang et al. (2024), have extended this line of inquiry by demonstrating that task-modulated variability encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also social and interactional factors, such as interlocutor familiarity and communicative intent.

Tarone's research, along with other studies on style shifting, is deeply rooted in Labov's (1970) sociolinguistic framework, which posits that linguistic variability is systematic and reflective of underlying linguistic competence, rather than mere performance. Drawing on this perspective, Tarone (1983) conceptualized L2 learners' stylistic variation as a continuum ranging from careful to vernacular speech, arguing that these shifts reflect an organized linguistic system, rather than haphazard

performance errors. Similarly, Ochs (1979) emphasized the structured nature of linguistic variability, although her framework diverged from Tarone's in its focus on discourse planning. Ochs distinguished between planned and unplanned discourse, with the former characterized by greater forethought and structural organization and the latter relying on emergent morphosyntactic constructions. Recent research has expanded this framework by demonstrating that task complexity influences learners' reliance on planned versus unplanned structures (Gilabert & Muñoz, 2010; Suzuki & DeKeyser, 2017). For instance, Gilabert and Muñoz (2010) found that cognitively demanding tasks elicit higher levels of grammatical accuracy, highlighting the role of discourse planning in shaping linguistic variability.

Although both Tarone's and Ochs's frameworks acknowledge variability as an inherent feature of L2 acquisition, they differ in their primary focus. Tarone's model emphasizes stylistic shifts across different communicative tasks, whereas Ochs examined the impact of planning on grammatical and discourse structures within a single discourse type. This distinction has significant methodological implications for SLA research, suggesting that both stylistic variation and discourse planning effects must be considered when analyzing learner performance. Recent studies have further nuanced this debate by integrating insights from cognitive SLA research, which explores how individual differences, such as those in working memory capacity and attentional resources, influence learners' ability to maintain grammatical accuracy across tasks (Suzuki & DeKeyser, 2017).

A further methodological challenge, as Ellis (1987) highlighted, pertains to the design of experiments that investigate style shifts. Studies influenced by the Labov/Tarone framework often employ tasks designed to elicit varying levels of attention to form, such as dialogue, narratives, and grammar tests. However, as Tarone's findings illustrate, this approach raises questions about comparability, as discourse type can influence the linguistic structures that learners prioritize. In contrast, Ochs's framework suggests that a single discourse type can encompass varying degrees of planning, thereby obviating the need for tasks that introduce radically different types of language use. Empirical support for this perspective comes from studies such as that of Suzuki and DeKeyser (2017), who demonstrated that learners with greater working memory capacity exhibit greater grammatical accuracy during cognitively demanding tasks, underscoring the interplay between planning variability and linguistic performance.

To accurately assess L2 learners' variable competence, it is essential to distinguish between variability arising from engagement in various language tasks and variability resulting from fluctuations in attention to linguistic form, the latter of which constitutes planning-related variability (Ortega, 2012). Recent advancements in corpus-based SLA research further suggest that style shifting is not confined to spoken language but extends to digital communication, where learners adapt their grammatical choices based on formality and audiences (Verspoor et al., 2021). This review highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of L2 variability, emphasizing its systematic and nonarbitrary character. Integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives has underscored the importance of considering sociolinguistic,

cognitive, and discourse-based factors in understanding style shifting. Interdisciplinary approaches and innovative methodologies will be essential for advancing our understanding of L2 variability and its implications for language teaching and learning.

### 3. The Study

#### 3.1 Rationale for the Study

Over the course of two months, the researcher conducted structured interactions with the participants, revealing significant variability in the accuracy of past tense morphology usage. Specifically, the participant exhibited pronounced style-shifting in the production of three distinct past tense forms: regular past tense, irregular past tense, and copulas. These patterns of variation were not only noteworthy, but also indicative of underlying cognitive and sociolinguistic processes that warrant further exploration.

The primary objective of this study was to provide a systematic and theoretical analysis of the factors influencing the participant's linguistic behavior. By examining the mechanisms underlying morphological variation and style-shifting, this study sought to enhance our understanding of the interplay between linguistic competence, performance, and contextual influences. Furthermore, its findings contribute to broader discussions in the fields of second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics, offering insights into how speakers navigate variability in language production.

#### 3.2 Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study investigated the relationship between planning time, morphological accuracy, and style-shifting in interlanguage production. To explore these aspects, the following hypotheses were tested and the accompanying research questions were addressed.

- 1) The participant's accuracy in the use of interlanguage morphology during narrative discourse will exhibit systematic variation contingent upon the amount of time allocated for discourse planning.
- 2) The participant will demonstrate higher accuracy in interlanguage morphology in planned narrative discourse than in unplanned narrative discourse.
- 3) The participant will demonstrate higher accuracy in the use of tense markers and articles in planned narrative discourse (with pre-task planning) than in unplanned narrative discourse (without pre-task planning).

These hypotheses are grounded in the theoretical framework of cognitive and sociolinguistic approaches to second language acquisition, which posits that linguistic variability is systematic and influenced by temporal and contextual factors (Tarone, 1983; Ochs, 1979). By testing these hypotheses, this study aimed to provide empirical insights into the mechanisms underlying variability in interlanguage production and contribute to a broader understanding of how planning time affects morphological accuracy and style-shifting.

### 3.3 Research Questions

- 1) How does the amount of planning time influence the participant's accuracy in using interlanguage morphology during narrative discourse?
- 2) Does the participant demonstrate higher accuracy in interlanguage morphology in planned narrative discourse than in unplanned narrative discourse?
- 3) How does the direction of style-shifting correspond to the planning time available?

## 4. Method

### 4.1 The Participant

L.A. is a 21-year-old Angolan female who has been studying English at a university in Western Pennsylvania for the past three months. Her decision to pursue English language studies was influenced by a confluence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. From a young age, L.A. exhibited a profound fascination with cross-cultural communication, driven by an integrative orientation reflecting her desire to engage with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This intrinsic motivation was rooted in her aspiration to immerse herself in the cultural practices and perspectives of English-speaking communities, thereby deriving meaningful insights and fostering a deeper sense of connection.

Complementing her integrative motivation, L.A. also demonstrated a strong instrumental motivation for learning English. She perceived English proficiency as a critical asset for enhancing her career prospects, particularly in securing prestigious employment opportunities. This pragmatic outlook aligns with her long-term goal of relocating to an English-speaking country where linguistic competence is expected to serve as a vital tool for sociocultural adaptation and professional advancement. L.A. actively sought internships and networking opportunities that require English fluency, underscoring her strategic approach to leveraging language skills for career development.

L.A.'s language learning motivations are thus characterized by a dual orientation: integrative and instrumental. Her integrative motivation is evident in her aspiration to connect with English-speaking communities and deepen her understanding of their cultural contexts, whereas her instrumental motivation is reflected in her strategic use of English to achieve professional and sociocultural goals. These motivations collectively underscore her commitment to mastering English as a personal and professional endeavor.

### 4.2 Instrument

Ellis (1987) established the theoretical underpinnings of the methodological approach employed in this study. The data collection process was comprised of three distinct tasks: one written narrative and two oral narratives. Each task was strategically designed to elicit different facets of linguistic performance, ranging from controlled and deliberate language use to spontaneous discourse.

### **Written Narrative Task (Task 1)**

The written narrative served as a measure of the subject's ability to produce language under conditions of careful planning and reflection. The subject was provided with ample time to organize her thoughts, select appropriate lexical items, and construct grammatical structures with precision. This task was intended to capture the subject's proficiency in planned language production. To facilitate this, the subject was instructed to compose a story based on a sequence of fifteen illustrations from "Annie & Moon", a narrative extracted from Wordless/Almost Wordless Picture Books (Richey & Puckett, 1992). The story depicts the emotional journey of a young girl and her mother as they navigate challenges following the death of the girl's father. The subject initiated the narrative with the following sentence: "Ten years ago, a sad story happened in my city..." This task, which lasted 45 minutes, was conducted in a single session and emphasized the use of past tense to encourage the production of past tense verb forms.

### **Oral Narrative Tasks (Tasks 2 and 3)**

In contrast to the written task, the oral narratives were designed to capture the subject's spontaneous language use, with varying degrees of planning allowed.

- **Task 2:** For the first oral task, the subject was asked to verbally recount the same story ("Annie & Moon") without prior preparation, thereby minimizing opportunities for pre-planning. This task aimed to assess the subject's ability to produce coherent and grammatically accurate language under time constraints. The subject was given no additional time to review the images before narrating, ensuring that the language produced was largely spontaneous.

- **Task 3:** The second oral task involved narrating a different picture sequence from the same book, "Moog-Moog, Space Barber," which consists of seventeen illustrations. This story follows a young boy who, after receiving an unsatisfactory haircut, is transported by space monsters to the "best barber in the universe," only to return home with an equally disappointing result. The subject was allowed three minutes to review the images before narrating, providing a moderate level of planning opportunity. She began her narration with: "On the last day of summer, Elmo Freem's mother took him to a barbershop to cut his hair . . ." Both oral tasks were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for detailed linguistic analysis.

### *4.3 Data Collection Protocol*

Data collection was conducted over three sessions within a single week, totaling approximately 115 minutes. The written narrative (Task 1) was allotted 45 minutes, while each oral narrative (Tasks 2 and 3) was allotted 30 minutes. The subject was not informed of the specific objectives of the study, to ensure that her language production remained natural and uninfluenced by metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, no strict time limits were imposed within the sessions, allowing the participant to complete each task at her own pace.

#### *4.4 Task Design and Linguistic Objectives*

The three tasks were meticulously designed to evaluate the participant's narrative discourse across a spectrum of planning conditions:

- Task 1 (Written Narrative): This task provided the highest level of planning opportunity, enabling the subject to meticulously craft her narrative with careful attention to content, lexical selection, and grammatical accuracy.
- Task 2 (Oral Narrative—Familiar Story): This task allowed for a moderate degree of planning, as the participant was already familiar with the story, but had limited time to prepare her linguistic output.
- Task 3 (Oral Narrative—Unfamiliar Story): This task required entirely spontaneous language production as the participant was presented with a new story and given minimal time to prepare her narration.

#### *4.5 Methodological Considerations*

Two critical methodological considerations were incorporated into the study design. First, the participant remained unaware of the study's specific aims to prevent any conscious alteration of her linguistic behavior. Second, the absence of rigid time constraints within each session ensured that participant's language production was not artificially pressured, thereby maintaining the ecological validity of the data.

In summary, the tripartite task design provided a comprehensive framework for analyzing the participant's narrative abilities across varying levels of planning, ranging from highly controlled to entirely spontaneous language use. This approach allowed for a nuanced examination of the interplay between planning time and linguistic performance in the narrative discourse.

#### *4.6 Scoring Criteria and Operationalization of Accuracy*

Accuracy was scored on a binary scale (correct/incorrect) based on the appropriate use of past-tense morphology in context. Errors were categorized as follows: (1) omissions (e.g., “had move” instead of “had moved”), (2) substitutions (e.g., “has” instead of “had”), and (3) overgeneralizations (e.g., “runned” instead of “ran”). Each verb was evaluated independently, and no partial credit was awarded for the partially correct forms. This scoring system was adapted from Brown (1973) to ensure consistency and reliability of the analysis.

### **5. Data Analysis and Discussion**

This study investigates the use of grammatical morphemes in past tense constructions, focusing on three categories: (1) regular past tense, characterized by the suffix-ed; (2) irregular past tense, which involves morphological alterations; and (3) past tense forms of auxiliary and copular verbs, including was, had, did, could, and would. The primary objective is to explore variability in planning and its impact on grammatical accuracy within narrative discourse.



### 5.1 Overview of Results

Table 1 presents accuracy percentages for past tense forms across three tasks: written narrative (Task 1) and two oral narratives (Tasks 2 and 3).

**Table 1. An Overview of Results (% Correct)**

Task	Regular Past	Irregular Past	Past Copula	Total
Written Narrative	85%	82%	90%	85%
Oral Narrative 1	65%	88%	83%	70%
Oral Narrative 2	46%	70%	76%	65%

The data indicates a notable decline in accuracy for regular past tense forms, from 85% in the written task (Task 1) to 46% in the second oral narrative (Task 3). In contrast, irregular past tense accuracy remained relatively stable, with only minor fluctuations. Copular past tense accuracy was consistent between Tasks 1 and 2 but declined in Task 3.

### 5.2 Statistical Analysis

A chi-square test confirmed a significant difference in accuracy between regular and irregular past tense forms across tasks ( $\chi^2 = 12.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that regular forms were more variable. Additionally, an ANOVA test showed a significant effect of task type on regular past tense accuracy ( $F(2, 36) = 8.76$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with post-hoc tests revealing that accuracy in Task 1 was significantly higher than in Tasks 2 and 3.

### 5.3 Interpretation of Findings

These results suggest that style shifting—defined as the variability in linguistic performance across different tasks—is most pronounced in regular past tense constructions. This pattern may be attributable to the cognitive demands of applying morphological rules under time constraints. The participant performed best in Task 1, in which ample planning time was available, supporting the argument that regular past tense formation benefits from conscious monitoring (Krashen, 1982). Conversely, under increased time pressure, the participant exhibited a greater tendency to default to unmarked (base) forms, aligning with Ellis's (1987) findings that learners struggle to effectively apply morphological rules without sufficient planning.

In contrast, irregular past tense forms showed less variability, likely because they were stored as whole units rather than constructed through rule-based processing. Copular past tense forms demonstrated moderate variability, suggesting a middle ground between rule-based regular forms and memorized irregular forms.

Overall, the findings indicate that task type and planning time significantly influence grammatical accuracy, particularly for rule-based structures such as the regular past tense. This study provides statistical support for the claim that increased cognitive load and reduced planning time lead to greater

variability in morphological accuracy, reinforcing existing theories on second language processing.

### **Illustrative Examples of Performance Variability**

The participant's linguistic performance exhibited significant variability across tasks. For instance, in Task 1 (written narrative), the participant produced the following passage:

*"Annie's family lived in my city two blocks away from my house. She is a unique daughter with a cat that was always her company. When her father died, she and her mother decided to move to another city because they were not able to afford the rent. In their new apartment, Annie's mom bought a cat to keep her daughter company because Annie did not have friends in the neighborhood who were her age."*

By contrast, in Task 2 (oral narrative), the participant produced the following version of the same story:

*"This story happened ten years ago. It talks about a girl who has a cat as his best friend and looks like her. She might be 7 years old. After her father died, she, Annie, and her mother had move to another city and bring with them all her furniture."*

These examples highlight clear style shifting, particularly the use of past -tense forms. In the written narrative, the participant consistently applies a past-tense morphology. However, in the oral narrative, errors increased, including auxiliary verb omissions (*had move* instead of *had moved*) and present-tense substitutions (*has a cat* instead of *had a cat*).

Style shifting is also evident in copular past tense constructions, particularly between Tasks 2 and 3. Frequent errors involved copula deletion, likely due to the lower semantic weight of copular verbs compared to lexical verbs. This aligns with second language acquisition research, which indicates that function words are more prone to omission than content words. For example, the participant produced:

*"During two weeks Annie feeling so bad..."*

*"He found two space monsters in the kitchen beside the refrigerator and taking food from the refrigerator."*

Contrary to expectations, irregular past-tense forms exhibited less variability. The participant demonstrated relatively high accuracy (82%), possibly due to the high frequency of specific verbs (*said*, *went*, *saw*, *took*), which are often memorized as lexical chunks rather than generated through rule-based processing. Common errors included overgeneralization (*runned* instead of *ran*) and base-form substitution (*have a friend that lived* instead of *had a friend that lived*). Examples include:

*"Moon had runned away again."*

*"Therefore, the best way to forget all these things to forget this bated was living with her grandmother."*

*"Ten years ago a sadness story happened in my city. I have a friend that lived a awful experience."*

### **Theoretical Implications**

Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) examined the effects of time pressure and grammatical focus on the accuracy of adult L2 Dutch learners. Their findings indicated that, while time pressure had no

significant effect on accuracy, directing attention to grammar did. This contrasts with the present study, which demonstrated a clear decline in accuracy as planning time decreased. However, Hulstijn and Hulstijn differentiated between tasks that focused on meaning versus form, whereas the current study examines planning variability within a single discourse type.

These findings suggest that style shifting is influenced by both the nature of linguistic structures and the cognitive demands of discourse planning. Regular past tense forms governed by explicit morphological rules are more susceptible to style shifting than are irregular forms, which are often acquired as lexical units. Copular past tense forms exhibit intermediate variability, with their accuracy dependent on planning time.

Table 2 illustrates the decline in past tense accuracy across tasks, reinforcing the claim that increased planning time facilitates grammatical accuracy.

**Table 2. Accuracy Orders for the Three Tense Forms Required for the Three Tasks**

	Written Narrative	Oral Narrative 1	Oral Narrative 2
Correct	40	44	39
Incorrect	7	19	21

Table 3 shows how accuracy rankings fluctuate based on task type. The copular past tense was the most accurate in Tasks 1 and 3, whereas irregular verbs were the most accurate in Task 2. The regular past tense was consistently the least accurate, except in Task 1.

**Table 3. Accuracy Orders for the Three Tense Forms Required for the Three Tasks**

Rank	Task1	Task2	Task3
1	Copula Past	Irregular Past	Irregular Past
2	Regular Past	Copula Past	Copula Past
3	Irregular Past	Regular Past	Regular Past

The results align with the hypothesis that planning time systematically affects accuracy levels. The highest accuracy was observed in Task 1, where the participant had sufficient time to plan both the narrative content and lexicogrammatical resources. The lowest accuracy occurred in Task 3, in which planning was more spontaneous. Intermediate accuracy was observed in Task 2 where the narrative content was familiar, but time constraints limited expression. Thus, style shifting is correlated with discourse planning opportunities.

The findings of this study demonstrate consistent patterns of style shifting across tasks, with accuracy levels systematically influenced by planning time. This contrasts with Tarone's (1985) study that found inconsistent patterns of style shifts across discourse types. Tarone attributed these inconsistencies to

learners attending to discourse cohesiveness for some structures but not others. However, in the current study, style shifting was examined within a single discourse type (oral narrative), controlling for the potential confounding effects of text-type variability. This suggests that planning variability, rather than discourse type, may be the primary driver of style shifting in past-tense morphology. Future research should explore whether these patterns hold across other discourse types such as conversations or formal presentations to further disentangle the effects of planning and text-type variability.

These findings align with processability theory, which predicts that learners acquire regular past tense forms earlier than irregular forms because of their rule-based nature. However, the high accuracy of irregular past tense forms in this study suggests that high-frequency verbs may be acquired as lexical chunks, thus bypassing rule-based processing. Additionally, the observed variability in copular past tense forms supports the interface hypothesis, which posits that structures requiring the integration of syntax and discourse are particularly challenging for learners.

This study offers valuable insights into the roles of planning time and linguistic complexity in second language acquisition, which can be interpreted using several theoretical frameworks. First, the results align with processability theory (Pienemann, 1998), which predicts that learners acquire grammatical structures in a specific sequence based on processing constraints. For example, the higher accuracy of regular past tense forms in planned tasks suggests that learners can apply rule-based morphological rules more effectively when given sufficient processing time. This supports Pienemann's claim that simpler rule-governed structures are acquired earlier than more complex ones. However, the relatively high accuracy of irregular past tense forms, which are typically acquired later according to processability theory, suggests that high-frequency irregular verbs may be learned as lexical chunks, bypassing rule-based processing.

Second, the findings resonate with the interface hypothesis (Sorace, 2011), which posits that structures requiring the integration of syntax and discourse (e.g., copular verbs) are more challenging for learners. The observed variability in copular past tense accuracy, particularly in the unplanned tasks, supports this hypothesis. Errors such as copula deletion ("*Annie feeling so bad*") highlight the difficulty learners face in integrating syntactic and discourse-level information under time pressure. This suggests that copular verbs, as interface structures, are particularly vulnerable to variability in planning.

Finally, the results can be interpreted through the lens of skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2007), which emphasizes the roles of practice and automatization in language learning. Higher accuracy in planned tasks reflects the benefits of controlled processing, in which learners can consciously apply grammatical rules. In contrast, the decline in accuracy in the unplanned tasks suggests that learners have not yet fully automatized past-tense morphology, particularly for regular verbs. This aligns with DeKeyser's argument that explicit knowledge must be proceduralized through practice before it can be accessed fluently in spontaneous language use.

In conclusion, this study underscores the interplay among linguistic complexity, cognitive demands, and planning time in shaping grammatical accuracy. This highlights the need for further research to elucidate the effects of discourse type and planning variability on style shifting in second language acquisition.

## 6. Practical Implications

The findings of this study enabled the formulation of practical recommendations for second language teaching, particularly in addressing the challenges associated with past tense morphology in narrative discourse. Below are key strategies for ESL/EFL instructors:

### 6.1 Incorporate Planning Time and Balance Task Complexity

Teachers should provide learners with pre-task planning opportunities (e.g., brainstorming, outlining) to enhance accuracy in language use, especially for rule-based structures, such as regular past tense forms. They should design tasks that gradually increase in complexity while allowing sufficient time for planning and production. For example, familiar topics and high-frequency verbs can serve as starting points before less common vocabulary and structures are introduced. This approach aligns with the findings of Khoram (2019), who found that pre-task planning had positive effects on complexity, accuracy, lexis, fluency, idea density, and coherence of learners' oral production. Additionally, tasks should be characterized by balance between complexity and time constraints, with instruction beginning with familiar topics and high-frequency verbs before progressing to more challenging content. This orientation is supported by Ellis et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of task sequencing in promoting language development.

### 6.2 Teach Irregular Verbs as Lexical Chunks

Instructors should focus on high-frequency irregular verbs (e.g., *went*, *saw*, *had*) and teach them as fixed expressions. This approach reduces cognitive load and improves accuracy, as irregular forms are less susceptible to style shifting. This recommendation is consistent with Etengeneng's (2022) work, which highlighted the benefits of formulaic language in enhancing fluency and reducing errors.

### 6.3 Address Copular Verb Errors Through Targeted Feedback

Accentuating the essentiality of copular verbs (e.g., *was*, *were*) and providing targeted feedback, such as recasts or prompts, helps learners self-correct errors. Recent research by Choo et al., (2021) and Sato (2022) underscore the effectiveness of corrective feedback in improving grammatical accuracy, particularly for high-frequency structures.

### 6.4 Leverage Technology for Engaging Practice

Using digital storytelling tools (e.g., PowerPoint, Canva) and language learning apps (e.g., Quizlet, Grammarly) allows for engaging practice and instant feedback on past tense usage. The advantages of integrating digital tools into language instruction are confirmed by Al-Amri (2020), who discovered that technology-enhanced tasks increase learner engagement and accuracy.

### 6.5 Promote Metacognitive Awareness

Teachers are advised to encourage learners to independently monitor their work using checklists and reflect on their performance. Metacognitive strategies, such as identifying errors and setting goals for improvement, can clear the way for students to cultivate greater control over their language production. The value of metacognitive practices is reinforced by Mowlaie (2024), who demonstrated that self-monitoring strategies considerably elevate the grammatical accuracy of L2 learners.

By integrating these strategies into their teaching practices, ESL/EFL educators can support learners in mastering past tense morphology and improving their proficiency in narrative discourse. These recommendations align with theoretical frameworks, such as Krashen's (1982), monitor hypothesis and Ellis's (1987) work on planning time, emphasizing their relevance in contemporary language teaching contexts.

## 7. Limitations

As with any other study, the current research is encumbered by several limitations. First, the single-participant design, while useful for exploratory research, constrains the generalizability of the findings. Second, familiarity with the narrative content in Task 2 may have influenced performance, as the participant was retelling a previously known story. This familiarity could have reduced cognitive demand, potentially inflating accuracy rates compared with performance under less familiar tasks. Finally, the cognitive loads during oral tasks, such as time pressure and attention to pronunciation, may have contributed to the decline in accuracy independent of planning time. These factors highlight the need for future research to control task familiarity and cognitive load when examining the effects of planning time on grammatical accuracy.

## 8. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research can build on this study in several ways. To begin with, expanding the sample size to include a larger and more diverse group of learners, such as those at different proficiency levels and from various language backgrounds, would enhance the generalizability of the findings and enable other researchers to validate the patterns observed in this work. Investigating the role of individual differences, such as working memory capacity or motivation, can also provide deeper insight into the cognitive processes underlying style shifting and grammatical accuracy. Moreover, future studies should examine the long-term impact of targeted interventions, including teaching irregular verbs as lexical chunks or incorporating structured planning frameworks, to determine their effectiveness in improving accuracy and fluency over time. Finally, expanding the scope of analysis to include other grammatical structures (e.g., future tense and conditionals) and discourse types (e.g., argumentative writing and formal presentations) is expected to ascertain whether the patterns of style shifting observed here are specific to past tense morphology or apply more broadly across language domains.

Altogether, these directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between planning time, task complexity, and grammatical accuracy in second language learning.

## 9. Conclusion

This study examined style shifting within a single discourse type, focusing on the effects of planning time on the accuracy of past-tense morphology in narrative discourse. The results support the hypothesis that accuracy levels in interlanguage morphology vary systematically between planned and unplanned discourses, with higher accuracy observed in planned tasks. These findings suggest two key points: first, learners, including the participant of this study, appear to possess multiple rules for certain structures and apply them differently depending on the availability of planning time; second, planning variability can be systematic and consistent, particularly for past-tense forms.

The findings of this study align with theories such as Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis and Ellis's work on planning time, which emphasizes the role of conscious monitoring in rule-based structures. However, the study results also highlighted the need for further research to explore whether style shifting occurs across other grammatical structures and discourse types, such as conversations or argumentative writing. In addition, future research should investigate the role of individual differences, such as working memory or proficiency level, in mediating the effects of planning time on accuracy.

Interlanguage variability remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and understanding its mechanisms is crucial for advancing second language acquisition research. By exploring further factors that influence style shifting, researchers can deepen their understanding of how learners acquire and use grammatical structures in diverse contexts, ultimately contributing to the creation of more effective language-teaching practices.

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