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In order to justify the appearance of the verb 'eat' that does not exhibit any systematicity but do show development, it is possible to suggest that *free variation is but one of the several procedures used by the learner when acquiring a second language and developing tense forms*. The role this type of variation plays in IL is much less than what Ellis (1999) proposes. The learner's IL is to a very large extent systematic and 'let us not attribute a variability to the learner that is probably due to the analyst (Schachter, 1986:127).

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This study is a production analysis of the learner's written interlanguage. We have applied a third person perspective via qualitative and statistical analyses and procedures to investigate interlanguage free variation.

As far as systematic horizontal variation is concerned, the analysis of our data indicates that almost all of the verb forms used by the subject displayed a form of systematicity although the systematicity is demonstrated in various forms. There was just one case that we were not able to illustrate any type of linguistic and contextual systematicity, therefore, it cannot provide a basis to support the existence of free variation in IL. We have studied 114 verbs in general and 28 verbs that exhibited some form of variability. Yet, just one verb, 'eat', illustrated the most important case of non-systematic variation for which we have not been able to form any systematic model in our analysis. All in all, it is strongly claimed that the *existence of free variation in the subject's interlanguage is rejected as a general model that Ellis (1994 and 1999) proposes*. He remarks that free variation is an impetus for IL development. Ellis (1985b) claims that free variation plays the central role in IL development. Consequently, the subject was expected to use non-systematic variation in her diaries extensively while developing verb forms. Nevertheless, what we have observed indicates the opposite. If we argue that the systematicity observed is affected by the task that provides ample time for the learner to correct her diaries, we have to accept what Tarone (1988) has borrowed from Labov (1967) about attention and variation which is actually rejected by Ellis (1994). Ellis (1994) believes that task factors are demonstrated in one of the linguistic, psychological, or situational contexts. Also, it is not possible to justify the large number of non-target-forms the subjects have used in her diaries. The systematicity observed is mostly affected by the regularity/irregularity of the verb form, the subject's native language, and the linguistic context.

target-like form to go with an incorrect one in the same diary. There are diaries in which the non-target-like forms were written side by side the target-like forms (e.g. diaries 162 and 172). In other words, we do observe vertical variation but not horizontal variation in diaries written in weeks 22 to 26. Since there is only one case (diary 159) in which two forms appeared and they signified the same meaning and since the correct form ('studied') followed 'so that' which is likely to affect the choice of the correct form, we cannot talk about free variation in this diary (159). The occurrence of the two could be a performance phenomenon.

In order to investigate the final data to observe how the subject handled the two forms, the last three weeks' diaries were surveyed. The subject has employed the verb 20 times in these final diaries. No instances of free variation were observed. The subject continued writing 'study' instead of 'studied'; she has applied this form in writing past perfect sentences too:

**(208)            while I had study every half hour,...**

In the same diary she has written 'should study' (instead of 'had to study'), and 'started to study'. Of course, these two instances are target-like. However, as was mentioned earlier, she might have extended the use of 'study' to include the past form too.

In sum, the subject began using the correct form of 'studied' in her first diaries; but she then wrote the non-target-like form of 'study' for 'studied'. This resulted in vertical variation. The subject had two competing forms ('study' and 'studied' as two past verb forms) in her repertoire although the dominant form was studied. Up to the final diary, she continued using 'study' as a past verb form much more than 'studied'. However, she never used both in the same context.

## **Conclusion**

She has used 'studied' in sentences in which 'study' is required. From diary 23 she began using 'study' instead of 'studied' and in the remaining diaries up to the end of the sixth week she applied this form 13 times all of which referred to past events. This form ('study') appeared twice in three diaries but she never wrote 'studied' and 'study' in these diaries. We do not know why she has come to apply the wrong form while she knew the correct form and wrote it in the first three weeks. But this shift exhibits a vertical variation. In weeks 22 to 26 (diaries 148 to 182) she exercised the verb 17 times; five correct forms and 12 incorrect forms. One of the correct forms appeared in 168:

**(168) when I answered questions as I didn't study all of it...**

If we compare this with the one that appeared in diary 18, *we may say that she has written 'study' after 'didn't' just because she wrote 'study' when talking about past events in these diaries and this is the same as the time she wrote 'studied' after 'did' in diary 18.* However, since 'didn't study' is target-like, we will consider it as the correct form too. Two other target-like forms appear after 'so that':

**(159) so that I studied it till 10:30**

**(161) so that I studied another book in holiday**

Is it possible to say that the appearance of the correct form is connected with the presence of 'so that'? We do not have enough data to account for this question. It should be added that the first sentence (159) is the one that is written along with an incorrect one in sample diary 23. The point that is significant to be added here is the reappearance of the correct past simple form of the verb in the diaries. She has experienced the target-like form in the diaries written in weeks 22 to 26 although the non-target-like form is still dominant in these diaries. Moreover, we do not observe any



61 and 118. The same is true with the sentence in 59 where the present tense form of 'have' is used along with the past forms of other verbs ('started' and 'was') although this is the only instance of 'have' the diary. All in all, in more than 100 instances of various 'have' forms there were only three cases that can be accounted for by neither linguistic context nor L1 interference. Moreover, only two cases might be considered as instances of free variation since two forms are used for the past simple form. However, just two cases cannot be sufficient to support non-systematic variation and more data are required in this regard.

### STUDY

The subject has used this verb ('study') 15 times in her sample diaries and she has employed 10 non-target-forms; that is, two-thirds of the verb forms were not correct. Although the data revealed vertical variation, in sample diary 25 we observe horizontal variation too. However, this variation is caused by the extension of one form to two areas of meaning. She used 'study' referring to present events as well as past perfect tenses. In other words, she has tried to signify new meanings using the same form. But what we observe in sample diary 23 is apparently an instance of free variation because she has used two forms, 'study' and 'studied', referring to past events. In order to investigate this point, the diaries written in the first six weeks, where we observe vertical variation, as well as the diaries in weeks 22 to 26, where we apparently observe horizontal variation, were reviewed.

The results show that the subject began with the correct form of 'studied'; this is exactly what we have observed in the sample diaries. This lasted up to diary 20 in which she used the correct form. In diary 18 she wrote:

**(18) He talked about this course and How did studied our lesson.**

serious problem in using the past simple form of the verb. Diaries 50-70 and 106-126 were reviewed. The results are tabulated in Table 12.

*Table 12 Frequency of 'have'*

Verb form	Frequency
Had	47
Have	11
Will have	3
Had (aux) taken	1
Would have	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

Various forms of the verb occurred 63 times in the 42 diaries studied. She has used six non-target-forms:

(57) ... said that we haven't test today

... said we haven't test on Sunday

(58) then started to reading storybook in afternoon I have a test of it and it was difficult

(61) at 3 we have test

(118) today I had class... in the morning I had lab... at 7:30 untill 11, we have lab

(122) I so wish I haven't...

The first two in 57 are clearly affected by the Persian structure of reported speech. The one in 122 seems to be the result of lack of knowledge about the relevant rule since we do not have such a construction in English and Persian. Moreover, it is the only case in the diary. We have already said that we would not have any justification for the use of 'have' for 'had' in

*Table 11 Logistic regression of verb "have"*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	WEEKS	-.166	.069	5.875	1	.015	.847	.740	.969
	Constant	4.697	1.532	9.397	1	.002	109.575		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: WEEKS.

The logistic regression model for the verb indicates a systematic variation (11) because  $p = 0.015$  is significant at 0.05 level and the confidence interval (at 95%) for Exp (B) is between 0.740 and 0.969. Therefore, we have to pinpoint some independent variable(s) that might have caused the appearance of more non-target-forms in her later diaries. The non-target-forms are:

(61) at 3 we have test

(118) Today I had class... in the morning I had lab... at 7:30  
untill 11, we have lab...

(126) he said, he hasn't C.D.

(127) if I didn't go to my hometown in 80 I hadn't problem  
now

(128) we went to self and ate lunch, then we have class untill 7  
o'clock

The verb forms in 126 and 200 seem to be affected by the Persian structures. The one in 208 is the only case of 'have' in the diary; therefore, at most it exhibits vertical variation. Nevertheless, the first two instances in 61 and 118 display some form of horizontal variation because in both 'have' and 'had' are used side by side referring to past events. Since they appeared in weeks 9 and 17, the diaries written in weeks 8-10 and 16-18 were surveyed to investigate instances of free variation; however, it should be mentioned that the subject did not seem to have any

In sum, although the manipulation of various forms of 'get' displays a highly variable construction, the variation is vertical and systematic. This systematicity is highly linguistically oriented.

A final point should be added about 'got ready'. As we have said, the subject has used the construction as a fixed expression. It seems what follows this expression is also fixed. She has used 'got ready to went', 'got ready and went', 'got ready to go' repeatedly in her diaries. All in all, she has used the above expressions 130 times in all of her 217 diaries. The first expression appeared 86 times; the second one has been used 26 times; and the last one occurred 18 times. That is, the wrong expression 'got ready to went' consists of 66.15% of the total number of the verb use. There is only one diary in which both 'got ready to went' and 'got ready and went' appeared:

**(90) - then I got ready to went out  
-all of us get ready and went out**

We have already discussed this matter.

In general, these three expressions provide a very striking example of vertical variation that the subject has not been able to resolve up to the final diary; yet no free variation has been observed.

## **HAVE**

The subject's main problem with this verb was using the present simple form instead of the past simple form; 4 out of the 5 non-target-forms were connected with this phenomenon. All in all, the verb appeared 44 times in the sample diaries.

Nevertheless, other instances in which this verb was used did display some variation. As far as 'get up' is concerned, the subject utilized it 28 times. First, she wrote it correctly in a couple of diaries. Later, she used 'get up' instead of 'got up' (diary 20). All in all, she wrote 'got up' 12 times while she exercised 'get up' instead of 'got up' 10 times in these diaries. She never used both forms in one diary although they were manipulated along with other expressions of the verb. For example she wrote:

**(76) -then get up and go to bathroom  
-all of us get sad and both of children get bulk**

These two sentences appeared in one diary. Yet, as I wrote, 'get up' and 'got up' did not occur in one diary. That is, these two forms are used variably but this variation is vertical and it does not display free variation that is supposed to be horizontal. The occurrence of 'get up' instead of 'got up', therefore, has been affected by some independent variables that can be either linguistic or non-linguistic. For example, 'can't get up' appeared twice that indicates the problem the learner has had with 'can't'. Also, 'not get up' has been written twice. We observe that linguistic context affected the verb form choice.

Such a vertical variation is observed in the use of other expressions too. The subject has used 'get tired' seven times: 'get tired' is used correctly three times; 'get tired' is employed instead of 'got tired' three times; 'got tired' is used once. However, all of these appeared in various diaries and not in one. The subject used 'get happy' six times. She wrote 'get very happy' instead of the past form but 'got happy' has been used correctly. In other words, the presence of 'very' in the expression has affected the choice of 'get' or 'got'. Yet, all are vertically variable and they did not appear in the same diary. 'Got wet' appeared two times and was correctly used but 'get sad' was written two times instead of 'got sad'.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step 1 WEEKS	.055	.041	1.828	1	.176	1.057	.975	1.145
Constant	.339	.660	.264	1	.607	1.404		
Step 2 Constant	1.157	.346	11.213	1	.001	3.182		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: WEEKS.

The logistic regression models for both 'get' and 'get/get up' (Tables 9 & 10) do not represent any significant improvement in the use of the verb forms because  $B=0.055$  which means it is not significant at the 0.05 level where the odds ratio (Exp (B)) is 1.057 but the confidence interval (95%) for the Exp (B) is between 0.975 (less than one) and 1.1454 for 'get/get up' (Table 10). The models do not indicate any significant systematic improvement over time. The same is true with 'get' (Table 9). Therefore, as was mentioned, we need to review more diaries to reveal the nature of the observed variation.

Various forms of the verb appeared 153 times in the first 98 diaries. 'Got ready' appeared 80 times (more than half of the total occurrence of the verb forms) and it has been employed correctly by the subject. This is quite significant because she has not made even one spelling mistake in writing this expression. Considering other variations of the verb, it seems she considered the expression as a fixed expression and she has learned it as a unit. Of course there are two cases in which the presence of other words and expressions has affected the use of this expression. In diary 44 she wrote 'I started to got ready' which shows the expansion of the expression to other contexts. The second one appeared in diary 90 in which she wrote 'all of us get ready and went out' which is meant 'got ready'. This is the only case in which 'all of us' has been used before 'got ready' and it seems it has affected the use of it. Yet, as was mentioned, the expression 'got ready' is used 80 times without any non-target-forms.

the verb non-systematically in the first three weeks since the odds ratio is 1.009 but the confidence interval for Exp (B) is between 0.896 and 1.137. This is similar to our qualitative analysis. Moreover, Table 8 supports the point that the subject, in general, used the verb quite systematically in the first seven weeks. It has been an increasingly systematic presentation of the verb because the odds ratio is 1.103 ( $p=0.002$ ) and the confidence interval is between 1.038 and 1.172. This is especially acceptable because as we said the period of non-systematicity was quite short and the subject began to write the correct form quite soon.

### GET and GET UP

The subject has used 'get' and 'get up' 35 and 11 times respectively with several non-target-forms. All in all, she has used 11 non-target-forms most of which were concerned with the use of 'get' instead of 'got'. Since this verb exhibits one of the most interesting cases of variation, the first 98 diaries are studied here. These diaries are all written in the first term.

*Table 9 Logistic regression of verb "get"*

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	5.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step 1 WEEKS	.026	.049	.279	1	.597	1.026	.933	1.129
Constant	.990	.836	1.402	1	.236	2.692		
Step 2 Constant	1.386	.423	10.762	1	.001	4.000		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: WEEKS.

*Table 10 Logistic regression of verbs "get/get up"*

may observe a type of free variation in the learner's IL, it covers a short period of time and a small amount of her diaries.

**Table 6 Logistic regression of verb “eat”**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	5.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step <sup>a</sup> 1 WEEKS	.292	.259	1.269	1	.260	1.339	.806	2.226
Constant	.934	1.232	.575	1	.448	2.546		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: WEEKS.

Yet in order to investigate any systematic variability concerning the use of the verb in the first 18 and 50 diaries, we have carried out logistic regression analyses. The results are presented in Tables 7 and 8. The reason that these two series are

**Table 7 Logistic regression of verb “eat” used in the first 18 diaries**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step <sup>a</sup> 1 DIARIES	.009	.061	.022	1	.883	1.009	.896	1.137
Constant	.713	.642	1.231	1	.267	2.040		
Step <sup>a</sup> 2 Constant	.795	.322	6.094	1	.014	2.214		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: DIARIES.

**Table 8 Logistic regression of verb “eat” used in the first 50 diaries**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	5.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step <sup>a</sup> 1 DIARIES	.098	.031	9.973	1	.002	1.103	1.038	1.172
Constant	.152	.487	.097	1	.755	1.164		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: DIARIES.

chosen is the fact that the subject resolved the problem in diary 18, that is, she stopped writing ‘eat’ for ‘ate’. Table 7 shows that the subject used



In diary 13, she wrote 'can't eat' and 'eating'; both of them referred to the past simple form. The first case seems to be affected by the presence of 'can't' because in the first 50 diaries surveyed she has used this construction twice and both were in the present form referring to past events, that is, this expression has been systematically employed by the subject. As far as 'eating' is concerned, it seems as if she has been experiencing a new construction in her IL because she has used this form in other sentences; for example:

**(12) - Then, I went to self and eating my lunch and took another lunch for tomorrow.**

**- I came to my room and reading book of Grammar**

Essentially, she globally used the ing-form. The context seems to be different too. She used this form as the second verb in the sentence.

In sum, she used the correct past form of the verb in the second week and the non-target-forms were systematically oriented. In the third week, she came to use the two forms alternately in the first three diaries but from diary 18 up to diary 50 she used 'ate' correctly in various linguistic contexts. The problem has been resolved and she terminated her 'learning' of the past simple form of the verb although she still had problems in using 'eat' after prepositions such as 'for'. She expanded her use of 'ate' to such a context too.

What we observe in Table 6 shows that the subject did not use the verb with any significant systematicity (the lower and upper figures are 0.806 and 2.26 respectively with 95% confidence interval for Exp (B) which is not significant). *This is because she resolved the problem in a short period of time in the first three weeks and essentially in the first and third weeks while the remainder diaries that consist of the main body of diaries were written by the subject after this period.* In other words, although we

This indicates that the presence of a new linguistic item has affected the choice of the verb form. This becomes more salient if we know that this was the first use of 'can't' with the verb in the sample diaries.

However, in order to investigate the matter, the first 50 diaries were reviewed. The subject has used 115 various forms of 'eat' in her first 50 diaries (Table 5).

*Table 5 various forms of 'eat' in the first 50 diaries*

Verb Forms	Frequency
<b>ate</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>eat (for 'ate')</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>eating (for 'ate')</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>eat</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>to eat</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>after eat</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>for eat</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>after ate</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>for ate</b>	<b>2</b>

It seems she used 'eat' and 'ate' as two possible forms of the past simple form of 'to eat' in her first 17 diaries. She used 13 out of the 14 'eat' forms referring to past in her first 17 diaries. She wrote these two forms alternately in these diaries. These two forms appeared in diaries 1 up to 5 as well as 15 to 17. In other words, she began with the two forms used in the same context with no significant differences and written in identical sentences in diaries 1 to 5. In all of these the object of the verb was either 'breakfast', or 'lunch', or 'dinner'. *It is possible to claim that the subject began with the two forms and she freely employed both when she talked about past events. Therefore, this period (the first week of diary writing) displays some form of free variation.* However, this stopped in the second week. She used the past simple form correctly. She flooded the use of this form even after 'for' and 'after' in the second week.

*diaries*. The only case that cannot be explained via the ‘flooded’ phenomenon is the second sentence in diary 143. In this sentence she has used the present tense instead of the past. Considering the context of the diary and what she has reported, it seems it has been affected by the Persian structure: (**hameh anha ta’ajob kardand ke ma mia’eem**). In sum, the variation observed in the use of ‘come’ is systematically affected by the presence of ‘new locative’, ‘the introduction of new structures’, and ‘the interference of the learner’s L1.

### **EAT**

‘Eat’ was used 29 times with only two non-target-forms in sample diaries 1 and 6. The subject used ‘eat’ three times in the first sample diary; two correct past simple forms and one present simple form instead of the past form. They are:

**(4) I ate breakfast**

**I eat lunch at 12:30**

**after class I went to self and ate supper**

Actually, she had written ‘eat’ in the third sentence but, as her diary shows, she corrected it and wrote ‘ate’. This shows that she was aware that the past form was ‘ate’ and the correction shows her ‘consciousness’. Perhaps some performance factor had deviated her attention and she had written ‘eat’ first. That is, this instance cannot be considered free variation since it seems the subject probably responded to some performance (and non-linguistic) factor.

The second non-target-form concerns the use of ‘can’t’ with the verb in the sixth sample diary:

**(38) I can't eat breakfast.**

**(29) after test we come to home.**

Nevertheless, this is just one non-target-form and it can be due to some performance factor.

In the second term, the subject displayed some fluctuations in the use of the verb too. In sample diary 15, She wrote 'came' instead of 'have come'. She extended her use of the verb. She used it in new tense forms but she applied the old familiar form of the past. A similar procedure was employed when she came to use the past perfect form; she applied the past simple form instead of the past perfect form.

As was mentioned, diaries 120 up to 154 were surveyed to check the use of 'come' since the sample diaries display variation in weeks 19 and 22. The results showed that the subject used the verb 46 times in these diaries. She wrote seven non-target-forms:

**(127) I from now hopeful these days finish quickly and I came back to Arak.**

**(131) They want to came back today**

**(138) now that they came back**

**(140) but I should came back to Arak**

**(142) wife of my brother that came before was said that M. don't like came to D.**

**(143) - all of our family want to came home  
- all of them got surprize that we come.**

As is observed, the subject applied the past simple form when she intended infinitive, to-less infinitive, and past perfect forms. In 131 and 143 she has written 'want to came' twice as well as 'like came' in 142. Moreover, she has written 'should came back' in 140. The past simple forms used in 142 (the first case) and 138 are meant to be the past perfect form although they are not incorrect. In other words, *she has 'flooded' the past simple form over all of the new verb structures she introduced in her*

(5) **-when I camed on the house I felt the weather was cold for me**

**-on 3 I came to house**

The form 'camed' was used only once and it was the first appearance of the verb in the subject's diaries. She began with this form but she wrote the correct form in the same diary. She immediately corrected non-target-forms. She continued using the correct form up to diary 15 where she employed the present simple form instead of the past form. In the first two weeks she used the past form ('came') eight times and all of them are correctly used. The important point is that in all these cases the verb is followed by 'house', 'room', and 'dormitory' or no locative is used. But in diary 15, in which she wrote the first non-target-form, she wrote:

(15) **we come to home by taxi.**

She must have used 'came'. It seems the introduction of 'home' and 'by taxi' has affected the choice of tense forms. This was followed by the introduction of 'to Arak' as well as 'come back'. This occurred in diaries 15, 17, 20 and 21. In all of these diaries the subject used the present instead of the past form. That is, the introduction of new locatives affected the subject's use of tense forms. She used only the incorrect form. In other words, she did not exhibit any free variation in her diaries. Furthermore, she made all of these seven non-target-forms in week 3; that is, in diaries 15 up to 21. From week four (diary 22) onward she wrote the correct past form of the verb; both 'came' and 'came back'. Therefore, the non-target-forms she has written could have been affected by some other non-linguistic factors too. This can be accepted because she has written these non-target-forms just in one week.

However, there is only one case in the first term that demonstrated the non-target-form:

*Table 4 Verbs used variably (\*vertical variability)*


---

are	*read		
		*arrive	*rest
be	*say		
come	*solve		
come back	*speak		
eat	study		
		*finish	*take
get	*tell		
get up	*think		
go	want		
have	*wake up		
is	was		
		*know	were
		*listen	*write

---

**COME and COME BACK**

The subject has used verbs ‘come’ and ‘come back’ 23 and 24 times respectively. There were four non-target-forms in either case. We observed that the subject began using ‘come’ correctly in sample diary 2 but with the introduction of ‘come back’ she wrote three non-target-forms in sample diary 3. This was followed by a non-target-form in sample diary 5 in which ‘come’ was used instead of ‘came’. The subject continued using the correct forms of ‘came’ and ‘came back’ up to the end of the first term (sample diary 14). In the next term, she used a non-target-form in the first sample diary in which she used a past form instead of the present perfect form. Moreover, she misused the verb forms in sample diaries 19 and 21. In order to investigate any free variation, therefore, diaries written between weeks 1 and 5 as well as weeks 18 and 22 must be reviewed. The subject first used the verb in diary 5 where she wrote the following:

events. Accordingly, the variability observed is systematically determined by the presence of the –ed marker as in ‘ashamed’ and ‘certained’ or the use of objects as in ‘ready myself’ and ‘afraid from something’.

### **Verbs in Context**

The subject used 28 (out of 114) verbs variably; eight regular verbs and 20 irregular verbs. They are listed in Table 4. Although these verbs were used variably, 14 of them did not display any horizontal variation (They are displayed with an asterisk in Table 4). They showed vertical variability. This variability was partially due to the use of past tense forms instead of the infinitive and to-less infinitive verb forms:

**(94) -Today I wanted to waked up at 7**

**(159) we should solved their exercise**

**I can solved them**

**We went there and started to solved**

The subject also used some verbs with various forms referring to past events:

**(29) I took a taxi**

**(36) I taked a nap**

**(45) we take a taxi**

However, since the focus of this study is free variation, we will study those verbs that exhibit horizontal variation. The remaining 14 verb forms exhibit some instances of horizontal variation. All of them were analyzed and studied regarding their linguistic context. The analyses revealed highly systematic variability. Only in one case (the use of eat/ate) were we not able to provide any linguistic contextual justification. The analyses of seven verb forms are presented here.

**(78) I afraied from it.**

It seems the subject viewed this 'afraied' as a transitive verb while the other one was considered an adjective. She has used 'afraid' (target-like) when she accepted it to be intransitive (was afraid) but when she supposed it was a transitive verb (afraid from something), she used it incorrectly as a verb. A similar line of discussion can be carried out about 'ready'. As was mentioned, she used this adjective as a verb too. She has used 'ready' 20 times in her sample diaries. It was used in the expression 'got ready' 18 times and all referred to past events. There are two cases where it was used as a verb:

**(86) and ready things that want to take them tomorrow to hometown****(110) and I should ready myself for hard examination**

As is observed in these two sentences, 'ready' is used as a verb. Both were considered to be transitive verbs by the subject ('ready things' and 'ready myself'). She has considered it a verb that required an object. This is similar to what we said about 'afraid'. *She has used these adjectives as verbs variably but she maintained a systematic procedure. As adjectives, she has used the target-like forms correctly, but as verbs she employed the overgeneralized form of an adjective transformed into a verb.*

'Event' was used once in sample diary 16:

**(110) as this evented for me**

'Ashamed' and 'certain' were also used once:

**(167) we didn't ashamed.****(176) I was certained that I will falled it.**

In all of these cases the subject took the adjectives and nouns for verbs and she applied the regular past tense marker '-ed' referring to past



significant because the critical value at 1% significant level is 6.63 ( $p < 0.01$ ) for  $df=1$ ; that is,  $6.67 > 6.63$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and irregularity of the verb affects variation in the subject's tense development. This result is significant since the subject did not make considerable progress in her tense development in the sample diaries.

As we reported, she has written 63 verbs with some type of variation. There are 35 verb types that were used just once or twice and do not provide any possibility to investigate free variation. The other 28 verb types were used frequently and we will focus on them in a moment.

### **Adjectives as Verbs**

The subject has used four adjectives (afraid, ashamed, ready, and certain) and a noun (event) as verbs. They all referred to past events. 'Afraid' was used three times in the sample diaries. In diary 6 it was correctly used (as an adjective) but she used 'afraied' with an extra 'e' before the final letter and 'afraid' in diary 26. The first was used as a verb without a form of 'be'. The presence of 'e' shows that she considered it a regular verb. The second one was used in the following sentence: (The number next to each sentence refers to the number of the diary in which that sentence has appeared.)

#### **(78) all of my friend were like me and afraid**

It is not clear whether she meant 'were afraid' or 'afraid' as a past form of the supposed verb. Yet, we can stick to the written sentence and propose that she has written the correct form of 'afraid' as an adjective in this sentence. That is, in this diary the subject has used 'afraid' twice; one as a verb and the other as an adjective. If we consider the sentence in which the verb form appeared, we will observe the difference in context:

diaries. Some examples will be presented when we discuss some of the verb forms in more detail. She has introduced 9 verbs first in one of the mentioned tense-less verb forms while other non-target-like forms were those where the present was used instead of the past. In order to check whether she has gradually improved the introduction of target-like verb forms, a logistic regression analysis was carried out and the results are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3 Logistic regression of the first verbs**

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	5.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	WEEKS	-.037	.021	3.093	1	.079	.963	.924	1.004
	Constant	1.255	.291	8.593	1	.000	3.507		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: WEEKS.

Although it is not significant ( $p = 0.079$ , and the odds ratio is 0.963) and the confidence interval for Exp (B) [that is 0.963] is between 0.924 and 1.004, the subject tended to use a bit more incorrect first verbs in her later sample diaries ( $b = -0.037$ ). We can say that she has not made any significant progress in the introduction of the target-like verbs.

### Regular versus Irregular Verbs

The subject has written 114 verb types in her sample diaries. More than 55 percent of the verbs show variation (63 verbs); 32 are regular and 31 are irregular. That is, more than 70 percent of the regular verbs exhibit variation in their use while this is 46% for the irregular verbs. It seems variation is determined to a large extent by the regularity/ irregularity of the verb. The chi-square for the 2 \* 2 contingency table was estimated with the following null hypothesis: *variation is independent of the regularity/irregularity of the verb*. The chi-square is 6.67 which is

for the subject. The correlation between the past and present simple forms is  $-0.326$  but  $p = 0.073$  that is not significant. But the partial coefficient correlation between the two is very high ( $r = -0.9449$ ) and significant ( $p = 0.0001$ ). The proportions of target-like present and past simple forms show correlations with 'weeks' too. She has written fewer target-like verb forms in her later diaries.

All in all, the subject did not progress in using target-like verb forms significantly in her diaries. The progress in some areas (e.g. she used fewer present forms instead of past) was very slow but in others (the proportion of target-like present simple forms) it was actually negative. The use of tense-less verb forms seems to be affected by some other variable than the tense forms in her diaries. The subject has employed the L1 structures in her IL. The text she has written will be largely incomprehensible if the reader does not know Persian. It is important to add that her IL was also affected by her local dialect. This made her diaries be incomprehensible for those who do not know the dialect.

*Table 2 Weeks for the introduction of tense forms*

PS	PRS	PP	PC	FS	PRP	PRC
1	1	3	0	5	19	13

Although she wrote just 12 cases in the past perfect, future simple, present continuous, and present perfect tense forms, she had used only two non-target-like future tense forms in diaries 6 and 22. Both of these were used in reported speech sentences that were affected by Persian. As we said, we expect the subject to have problems when she applied the present simple form instead of the past. Now we should add that she has also used tense-less (infinitive, ing-form, and to-less- infinitive) verb forms instead of other tense forms especially the past in her sample

The subject has written 26 tense-less verb forms in her sample diaries. Moreover, she has used more future simple forms than other tense forms (present and past simple forms are not included here).

*Table 1 Verb and tense form frequency*

Verbs	Past Simple	Present Simple	Past Perfect	Future Simple	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Tense-less
749	528	183	4	5	2	1	26

As far as the use of past and present simple verb forms is concerned, there is only one diary in which she has not used any non-target-forms of the present simple. In general, she wrote the present simple instead of the past simple, and, consequently, we should expect to observe variation in this area. Also, she has used very few other verb forms. The mean for the correct present simple proportions is 0.34.

She has used fewer verbs in her later diaries ( $r = -0.592$  which is significant at the 0.01 level--;  $p = 0.0001$ ). A similar result was attained for the past simple form; that is, she gradually used fewer past simple verbs in her diaries. This is due to the use of fewer verbs because both present and past verb forms displayed highly positive correlations with the number of verbs in the sample diaries; the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level where  $p = 0.001$  and  $p = 0.008$  for the past and present simple forms respectively. Accordingly, the past simple form exhibited a higher correlation than the present simple form. This indicates that the subject gradually used more past verb forms in her diaries. She used more target-like past simple forms, which is the result of using fewer present simple forms instead of the past simple form. This process was quite slow

mother tongue of the subject is Persian and she was 19 when she started the course.

### **Diaries**

The subject was supposed to write a report on her daily affairs every day as a partial requirement of their 'grammar and writing' course. It was announced that she might have her own interpretation of what a daily affair could be. However, it was remarked that she could report on what she usually did during a day; such activities as getting up, having breakfast and lunch, and studying. It was also announced that grammatical and spelling mistakes were not taking into account in evaluating her diaries. What was considered crucial was the extent to which she was able to communicate her ideas with the reader who was supposed to be their teacher (hence, the researcher) and this was actually announced, too. This was intended to free the subject from any anxiety such as problems she might have regarding the grammaticality of her writing since the diaries covered a part of the course requirements. The subject wrote diaries for two successive terms; each term covered a period of 17 weeks. However, the subject wrote fourteen-week-diaries in the first term, and seventeen-week-diaries in the second term. That is, all in all, the subject wrote diaries for 31 weeks. The subject wrote 217 diaries in 31 weeks. The diaries were collected every week. No feedback was provided on the diaries since it was intended not to interfere with the subject's natural route of writing diaries. A sample of 31 diaries was selected using systematic sampling procedure.

### **Results and Discussion**

The subject has used 114 verb types and 749 verbs with a mean of 24.16 verbs in the sample diaries. She has written 528 past simple forms and 183 present simple forms while she has used only 12 other tense forms.

sample diaries were reviewed and all the verbs that carried tense markers were identified. The frequency of each verb was completed. Furthermore, any variation and fluctuation in the use of each verb was studied regarding the linguistic context and the meanings that the verb signified in such a context. Any verb which is used with a high frequency (about 30 and more) in the subjects' sample diaries was analyzed using a logistic regression procedure.

Following the criteria proposed by Ellis (1999), the preliminary step was to detect free variation in the subjects' diaries. Two forms are considered to be in free variation with each other if they fulfill the same meaning and if none of the criteria proposed by Ellis (1999) could justify the use of the two forms in question. Any variability of this sort was traced back to the early diaries. In other words, if the subject demonstrated free variation in one of her diaries, it was presumed that it would be possible to trace back to find just one of the two forms in question to have been employed to accomplish the same meaning or function. Moreover, the attempt has been made to discover if the two forms at issue were utilized in two different linguistic environments (Ellis 1999).

### **Subject**

The subject registered for the course on 'grammar and writing' which was held in two succeeding terms from September 23rd, 2000 to June 12, 2001. The learner was a freshman majoring in 'English language and literature' at Arak University. The English courses students studied in the first year are 'reading comprehension', 'speaking and listening', and 'grammar and writing'. Each of these courses was held two sessions a week; each session was 100 minutes. Moreover, each course was presented in two succeeding terms each of which lasted 17 weeks. The researcher was the subject's teacher of 'grammar and writing'. The

variation still requires more empirical research to deal with the phenomenon.

### **Method**

This study is expected to illustrate instances of free variation in the learner's interlanguage supported by qualitative and statistical analyses. The data for this study were the learner's diaries written over a period of nine months. Therefore, the study is a longitudinal research. Tarone (1988:115) remarks the need for longitudinal research to investigate interlanguage variation. She argues that the type of data collected in such a study meets the requirements of variation studies much better than cross-sectional studies. Moreover, considering the data collected for the research, the study is actually a production analysis of the learner's interlanguage. The data present a rather less vernacular style of the learner's interlanguage (Labov 1967; Tarone 1988). Therefore, such data are assumed to exhibit a large amount of variation.

### **Procedure**

Diaries were collected weekly in two succeeding terms. The first diary was written on September 30, 2000 and the last one was reported on June 12, 2001. Using the systematic sampling method, 31 diaries were selected from the subject's 217 diaries. Every diary was studied and analyzed regarding tense constructions. Different forms of tense constructions were separately identified and tabulated. The proportion of each of these forms to the total number of the structures was estimated in order to touch on the tense development in the subject's interlanguage. Moreover, the proportion of correct tense forms to the total frequency that these tense forms appeared in each sample diary was estimated. These findings were further analyzed employing some statistical procedures such as correlation to check any variation observed in the diaries. The subject's

investigated account for learners' linguistic choices, the appropriate conclusion is that the variation is non-systematic'. In other words, the null hypothesis would be the non-systematicity of interlanguage.

A question that is left to be answered is when free variation occurs in interlanguage. To answer such a question is to account for all variables that cause systematic variation. That is, if the variables that cause systematic variability in interlanguage are identified, one is able to fix free variation in so far as s/he is able to demonstrate that the variability in question is not effected by any one of those variables. In this regard, Ellis (1999) postulates that Free variation can be held to exist when two or more variants of the same linguistic variable are seen to be used randomly by individuals with regard to *all* of the following:

1. the same situational context(s)
2. the same illocutionary meanings
3. the same linguistic context(s)
4. the same discourse context(s)
5. the same planning conditions.

These are the variables that research has demonstrated to generate systematic variability. In other words, if any variation is not caused by any of the above factors, it can be inferred that it is unsystematic (Ellis, 1999).

Although the above review reports some of the studies done on free variation, it is quite clear that these studies are not enough to lead us to the conclusion that free variation is an 'inherent' part of second language acquisition process. It seems since Corder's (1967) influential contribution to the study of second language learners' language, the systematicity and systematic variability in learners' interlanguage have been more or less established. That is, there is a large body of research which illustrates that learners' interlanguage is systematic and systematically variable (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). However, free



Although this lack of systematicity mentioned in the above studies was not due to the use of formal style on the part of the learners since the data collected were generally induced from the vernacular style, Ellis (1999) claims that the above-mentioned studies did not use profound and precise statistical procedures to analyze their data. This may make any claims about the existence of free variation not to be convincing. He emphasizes the point that only through a longitudinal study is one able to trace free variation.

Huebner (1985) carried out a longitudinal research studying Hmong, an adult, who was learning English in an informal setting. Huebner showed that 'what appear to be irregularities may be highly revealing of how functions are mapped onto target-like forms' (p. 145). Huebner analyzed the use of 'da' (the) by his subject. The subject underwent various stages using "da" (the) in his IL. Although these stages show a vertical systematic variation, Huebner was not able to observe any systematicity in the use of 'da' when it 'flooded' all noun phrase environments. Actually, the learner did not use 'da' with some nouns. He used and omitted 'da' randomly.

Towel *et al.* (1993) also discovered instances of free variation in their study of the use of French prepositions ('à' and 'de').

Employing a multivariate procedure, Young (1988; 1993) studied the use of plural -s by learners of English with Chinese, Czech, and Slovak L1 background. Although he found evidence of systematicity, he did not observe any evidence of free variability. A problem with Young's (1993) study is that he has used a cross-sectional procedure for data collection. Accordingly, the study does not exhibit how a learner acquires a linguistic element over time.

Generally, Ellis (1999) claims that the default position is to accept free variability so far as the researcher is not able to support the systematicity. That is, 'if the researchers fail to demonstrate that the variables they have

variable that might explain the phenomenon. Moreover, in order to accept this as an instance of free variability, more empirical studies are required. Nevertheless, Eisenstein, Baily, and Madden (1982) observed that their subjects (beginners) used the simple and continuous verb forms interchangeably. Vogel and Bahns (1989) also observed instances of free variation in using the two forms in their study. Dušková (1969; 1984 as reported by Young 1993) claims that Czech speakers learning English use some IL forms in free variation.

Instances of free variation are also evident in the learners' use of pronouns. Nicholas (1986) reports on his subject, Cindy, a learner of German at the age of three, who used the three German pronouns (ich, mich, and mir) to fulfill the same functions. Nicholas asserts that his subject realized that different forms could be used to perform the same function.

Following Gatbonton (1978), Ellis (1994: 137) claims that the above-mentioned findings show that 'free variation occurs during an early stage of development and then disappears as learners develop better organized L2 system.' In her study, Gatbonton (1978) postulates that there are two phases of IL development: 'acquisition' and 'replacement' phases. In the acquisition phase, the learner produces one form in different situations and contexts. Afterwards, a second form is introduced which is employed in free variation with the first form in all types of context. In the second stage, the learner begins to produce one of the forms in one context and gradually eliminates the other form from the context and so on and so forth. By early stages, it is meant the early stage of learning an element of the target language and not necessarily beginners. When a linguistic feature first appears in learners' interlanguage, free variation might occur. This is due to the point that, as Ellis (1985a) states, when a learner learns a new linguistic element, s/he cannot identify the precise language functions performed by that element.

maintains that although many instances of variation can be accounted for by providing some contextual explanation, 'there are many more that operate in quite unpredictable ways.' Tarone (1998) and Ellis (1985a, 1985b; 1994; 1999) emphasize the need for empirical research to settle the phenomenon in SLA research. Moreover, Preston (1996) accepts the possibility of non-systematic variability. Schachter (1986) does accept that learners retain linguistic elements for later use; this, according to Ellis (1999), will result in free variation. Gatlinton (1978), Bickerton (1973), Huebner (1979), and Ellis (1985a; 1985b; 1994; 1999) have attempted to provide instances of free variation and explain the phenomenon. In sum, this field of second language acquisition research requires empirical research to substantiate the phenomenon.

Cancino, Rosansky, and Schumann (1978) observed that their subject, Jorge, used various forms to signify negation at different stages in his development.

Ellis (1999) mentions various studies in which free variation is studied. He mentions Wagner-Gough (1975), Eisenstein *et al.* (1982), Nicholas (1986), and Vogel and Bahns (1989) whose 'studies all testify to L2 learners using two or more linguistic forms to perform the same function in a quite random manner'. In other words, these early studies hinted on free variation.

Wagner-Gough (1975) reports on a longitudinal study in which a Persian boy named Homer used English simple and progressive verb forms to refer to identical functions. This is maintained as an example of free variation. However, we may doubt this conclusion because the use of these two forms might have been the result of the interference of Persian structures in Homer's interlanguage. In Persian one marker is used to construct both simple and progressive forms. The marker is pronounced /mi:/ as in 'har ruz be madrese *miravam*' (I go to school everyday.) and 'daram ghaza *mikhoram*' (I'm eating.). Therefore, it seems there can be a

s (copula) depending on linguistic environments. Tarone (1988) summarizes studies which attempt to investigate systematic variability in IL focusing on psychological factors such as the learner's attention to form and content. Moreover, there are social and psychological factors as well as function-form relationship which are considered to be the causes of style shifting and systematic variation in ILs. (See also, Eisenstein, 1989; & Gass, Madden, Preston, & Selinker, 1989a & b). Young (1991 & 1993) found systematic (as well as non-systematic) variation in his studies. Others such as Towell *et al.* (1993), Bailey and Preston (1996) can be mentioned who report on systematic variation, too.

In general, Ellis (1994:135) maintains that 'systematic variability arises as a result of external factors to do with the linguistic context, the situational context, and the psychological context' and that 'form-function variation is also systematic and is contextually induced' and is determined by the above-mentioned types of context.

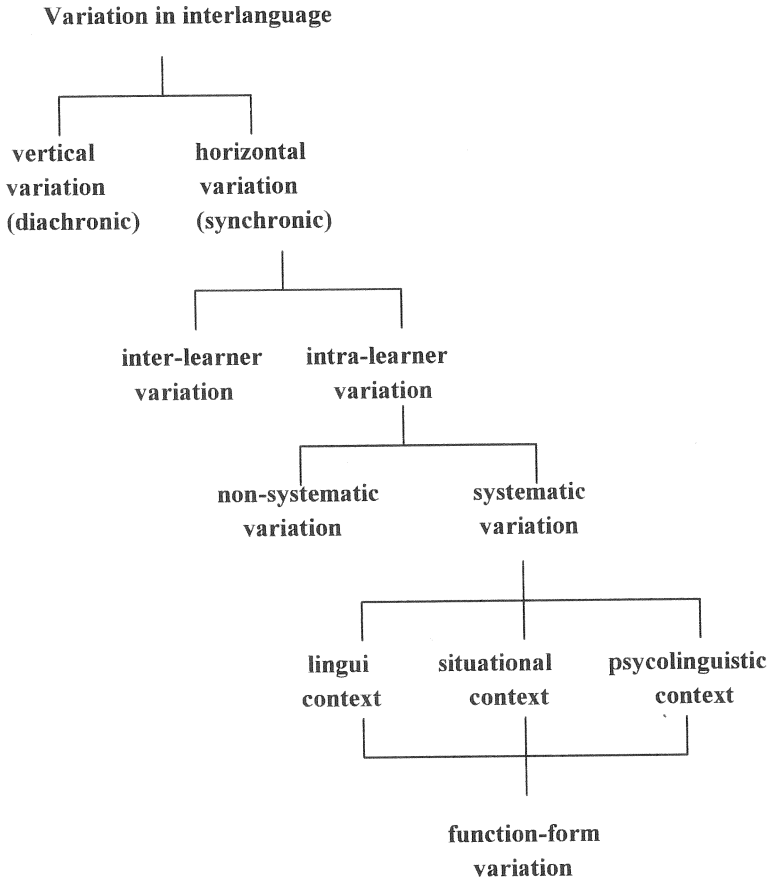
### **Free Variation in Interlanguage**

Non-systematic variation has not been considered to be theoretically significant (Gregg, 1990). Schachter (1986: 127) states that 'those isolated occurrences of a structure prior to onset remind me of the puts-puts of a motor just before it catches on with a roar'. Preston (1996) mentions the point that a researcher may fail to unfold the cause of a variable that is supposed to be an instance of free variation. That is, the element that is considered to be non-systematic is actually quite systematic. Ellis (1985a: 80) believes that 'non-systematic variability has not received much attention from linguists, who have preferred to explore systematic variability.' These remarks display what might be called lack of interest in free variation on the part of researchers.

However, Labov (1971) reports some instances of variation that are not possible to account for systematically. Bickerton (1975: 183) also

systematic at any stage of their development. Moreover, their errors are also systematic. Selinker (1972) also talks about a linguistic system which is said to be the result of the learner's struggle to produce target language norms. Moreover, Nemser (1971) argues for 'Approximative Systems'. These theories and models initiated a large body of research focusing on the systematicity of IL, both horizontally and vertically (See, among others: Dulay and Burt 1973; 1974a; 1974b; Larsen-Freeman 1975a, 1975b; Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky, and Schumann 1975; Huang 1970; Schumann 1979; Gass and Madden 1987; Fuller 1999; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Goldscneider and Dekeyser 2001).

However, Dickerson (1974) demonstrates that the learner's IL at every stage is both systematic and variable. Dickerson (1974) and Dickerson and Dickerson (1977) claim that both linguistic and situational environments systematically determine the variability. Gatbonton's (1978) study shows that the phonological environment affects the production of sounds. Hyltenstan (1977) investigated adult learners learning negation constructions in Swedish. The result of the study indicated that the position of the negator systematically depended on the place of the clause in the main or subordinate as well as the type of the finite verb. Moreover, Hyltenstan (1978) studied subject-verb inversion by adult learners of Swedish. The results of this study also indicated that linguistic context determined the inversion variation pattern systematically. Wolfram (1969 & 1991) maintains that systematic variation is explained via an analysis of several language phenomena such as phonetic and discourse levels. In his study of sixteen Vietnamese learning English, Wolfram (1969) demonstrated that the use of past tense forms was systematically determined by a surface linguistic environment such as regular versus irregular past forms. In his longitudinal study of three children learning English as a second language, Ellis (1988) also demonstrated that one of his subjects used -s (third person singular) and –



*Figure 1 Ellis' (1994:134) modified typology of variation in IL*

### **Interlanguage Systematicity and Variation**

The systematicity of interlanguage has been the focus of the studies carried out by researchers working on learners' IL since Corder's (1967) 'The Significance of Learners' Errors' and Selinker's (1972) 'Interlanguage'. Corder (1967) remarks that learners' language is

(Labov 1971 as reported by Tarone 1988). In other words, although Labov substantiates that variation in language is systematic, he does not refute the existence of free variation in language use.

Following Labov's study, researchers in the second language acquisition field employed his procedures and views in studying second language learners' IL. It was observed that ILs exhibit both horizontal (synchronic) and vertical (diachronic) variation (Tarone 1988; Larsen Freeman and Long 1991; Ellis 1985b; 1999). Ellis (1985a) provides a typology of variation in interlanguage (also adopted by Tarone 1988); later, Ellis (1994) puts forward a modified and more elaborated typology of variability in interlanguage (Figure 1). As is illustrated in Figure 1, systematic variation is determined by linguistic, situational, and psychological contexts. Ellis (1985a) classifies non-systematic variation into two types: free variation and performance variation. Ellis claims that performance variability is not part of the speaker's competence, but free variation is 'the result of competing rules in the learner's competence.' These rules, Ellis claims, are used freely.

Ellis (1985b) reports what now can be called a classical example of free variation in the speech of a Portuguese boy (called 'J') who produced the following two utterances spontaneously: 1) **No look my card.** and 2) **Don't look my card.** Ellis (1994) considers these utterances as examples of free variation.

to form, social causes like topic and social norms, and language function as the causes of the IL variation.

However, ILs are reported to display some sort of variation that cannot be explained via the above-mentioned factors. This type of variation is referred to as free or non-systematic variation that is said to occur when two or more forms are used to fulfill the same function and purpose. In other words, the above-mentioned factors do not cause the use of parallel forms (Tarone 1988; Preston 1989; Ellis 1994; 1999). Although there are some studies that report on free variability in IL, this issue is still controversial and the actual existence of free variation in learners' ILs is to be supported by further research (Tarone 1988; Wolfram 1991; Ellis 1999).

### **Background**

The study of variation is much influenced by the research carried out by Labov (1966). He studied the sociolinguistic variables which are defined as 'a set of alternative ways of saying the same thing, although the alternatives will have social significance' (Fasold 1990:223-24). In other words, Labov studied the relationship between social functions and language forms; that is, the social status of the speaker and the social context in which s/he is uses language determine the style s/he chooses (Tarone 1988; Fasold 1990). Language forms varied according to various social variables affecting the speaker. Labov claims that this variation is both systematic and unsystematic although it is basically systematic



# Interlanguage and Free Variation: A Case Study

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This study attempts to investigate the existence of free variation in interlanguage; an issue that is still a controversial debate among researchers in second language acquisition field. The subject, a nineteen-year-old freshman student of 'English language and literature', wrote 217 diaries in two successive terms. The diaries were analyzed and studied regarding the subject's tense development in order to examine the random use of various verb forms. The results revealed a highly systematic variability. The linguistic context as well as the regularity/irregularity of the verb forms and the subject's native language were, among others, the main sources of systematic variability in using various tense forms in her interlanguage.

**Keywords:** Interlanguage, Free variation, Tense, Linguistic context

## Introduction

A crucial and current concern in second language acquisition (SLA) research is the study of variation in learners' interlanguage (IL). Actually, learners' ILs show a large amount of variation. This variation is claimed to be highly systematic and rule-governed (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). Various factors are mentioned to cause systematic variation in IL. Ellis (1985a 1994) believes that linguistic, situational, and psycholinguistic contexts determine systematic variation. Tarone (1988) talks about linguistic context, psychological processes, such as attention

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