

Elicited Tasks: What's Important? (Past Tense)

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INTRODUCTION

Elicited language tasks can provide a time-efficient and valid measure of children's grammatical skills, if indeed the response accurately reflects a child's spontaneous language skills. Although spontaneous language samples can provide a valid measure of expressive grammatical skills, the time to elicit, transcribe and code each sample can be prohibitive. In addition, if the focus of study is an infrequently occurring structure (e.g., full propositional complement clauses), even a lengthy sample may not provide sufficient data per child for analyses. Elicited production tasks and elicited imitation tasks have been offered as alternatives to spontaneous language samples, particularly when a specific and/or infrequently occurring structure is of interest.

In an elicited language production task, the examiner sets up a context, using verbal and nonverbal prompting, that creates a condition for the production of the target structure (Thornton, 1996). It seems that valid measures must satisfy two issues. First, the elicitation task must make it likely that children will attempt the target of interest. Second, the scoring of responses must assure that the child has indeed attempted the target structure.

WHAT RESPONSE(S) INDICATE TARGET PROFICIENCY?

INFINITIVAL COMPLEMENTS (Eisenberg, 2005)	
<i>Donald and Bugs are playing school. Bugs is the teacher. [Raise Donald's hand.] Make Donald say to Bugs: Can I stand up? Donald wants ~ You finish the story. Donald~</i>	
INDICATIVE RESPONSE	INDETERMINABLE RESPONSE
<i>Donald wants to stand up; wants stand up</i>	<i>Stand up; to stand up</i>

FULL PROPOSITIONAL COMPLEMENTS (Owen & Leonard, 2006)	
<i>Cat: I want to eat something. I can't decide. What should I eat? Count, help me decide. [Cat is looking at a cupcake and some cookies.] Count: I'll decide. You should eat the cookies. Count decided ~</i>	
INDICATIVE RESPONSE	INDETERMINABLE RESPONSE
<i>Count decided (that) Cat should eat the cookies; Count decided to eat the cookies</i>	<i>(that) Cat should eat the cookies</i>

REGULAR AND IRREGULAR PAST TENSE (Rice & Wexler, 2001)	
<i>Here the boy is raking the leaves. Now he is done. Tell me what he did. He ~</i>	
INDICATIVE RESPONSE	INDETERMINABLE RESPONSE
<i>raked; He raked; He rake</i>	<i>rake</i>
<i>made, maked, He made, He make</i>	<i>made</i>

The purpose of this study was to explore whether a clausal subject must be produced in a regular and irregular Past Tense (PT) elicited task to provide a valid indicator of a child's production of PT in obligatory contexts. In a group of children who marked PT in an elicited task in at least 60% of obligatory contexts, we asked:

When a child produces an unmarked verb in the absence of a subject, if the child is re-prompted to provide a response that includes a subject, does the child alter the verb to be marked PT when a subject is included?

PREDICTIONS

We hypothesized that when an examiner produces the subject in the elicited prompt and the child response includes only the verb phrase, the child does not always produce an utterance with an obligatory PT context. Rather, the child may produce an utterance with an imperative or an elided auxiliary DO structure. Thus, a re-prompted child utterance that includes a subject – now an obligatory PT context – should more reliably reflect skill in past tense marking.

PARTICIPANTS

Sixty-nine preschool children participated in the study. They ranged in age from 36 months to 64 months. They were recruited from four preschool sites; Of the 87% of children for whom parental education was reported, 98% had one or both parents with a college education. Nearly all participants (96%) were Caucasian. All participants were monolingual speakers of mainstream English dialect. Participants demonstrated typical language skills (see Table 1).

Table 1. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Age in Months	50.43	7.01
PPVT-III SS	111.48	10.65
PLS-4 Total SS	119.03	12.11
TEGI PT Percent Marked	87.79	11.72

METHODS

The study involved secondary analysis of data collected for an investigation of complex syntax in typical language learners (Schuele, 2009); child responses on Regular and Irregular Past Tense Probe of the Rice/Wexler Test of Early Grammatical Impairment (TEGI; Rice & Wexler, 2001) were analyzed.

Task: In the PT probe, children were shown 20 pairs of pictures (2 demonstration, 18 trials); the first picture in each set of pictures depicts a person engaging in an activity. The examiner provided a description of the picture (e.g., *Here the boy is raking the leaves*). The second picture in each set depicts the activity completed. The examiner provided the information *Now he is done* and prompted the child to describe the completed action (*Tell me what he did*). The task is designed to elicit a simple sentence with a third-person subject to evaluate the child's production of the past tense in obligatory contexts (e.g., *He raked the leaves*).

Based on the TEGI manual, a response is not scorable if an unmarked verb is produced in the absence of a clausal subject (e.g., *rake*). Scorable responses include a marked verb and a subject plus a marked or unmarked verb (e.g., *raked, he raked, he rake*).

Data Analysis: Because we were interested in how children modified an unscorable response (unmarked verb with no subject, e.g., *rake, or rake the leaves*), we selected all children who produced an unscorable response at least once ($n = 30$) across the 18 trials of the probe. This selection yielded 82 trial response sequences for analysis.

The TEGI manual indicates that the examiner should re-prompt an unscorable response ([4] below). The examiner re-prompted by repeating the prompt sequence and/or reminding the child to begin the response with a subject, for example, *That was a great story. But tell me that story again. Remember to start your story with he*.

We analyzed the examiner-child verbal interchange in each trial to determine if the child's subsequent responses were scorable and the nature of the subsequent responses. We were interested in the extent to which a subsequent response included (a) a subject plus a marked verb [1] below, or (b) a subject plus unmarked verb [2] below.

Table 2. CODING CHILD RESPONSES

RESPONSE TYPE	EXAMPLE	CODE
Subject + marked verb	<i>He raked the leaves</i>	[1]
Subject + unmarked verb	<i>He rake the leaves</i>	[2]
Marked verb, no subject	<i>Raked the leaves</i>	[3]
Unmarked verb, no subject	<i>Rake the leaves</i>	[4]
Uninformative Response	<i>He is raking the leaves</i> <i>I don't know</i>	[5]

EXAMPLE DATA

Examiner-Child Verbal Interchanges

E here the girl is planting the flowers. now she is done.
E tell me what she did.
C plant flowers. [4]
E can you start with she?
C she plant flowers. [2]
E great story.

E here the girl is kicking the ball. now she is done.
E tell me what she did.
C kick the ball. [4]
E (okay) remember start your story with she.
C she kicked the ball. [1]
E (oh) I like that story.

E here the boy is eating the cookies. now he is done.
E tell me what he did.
C eat the cookies. [4]
E (oh) can you start your story with he?
E tell me he~
C he at the cookies. [1]
E (oh) good thinking.

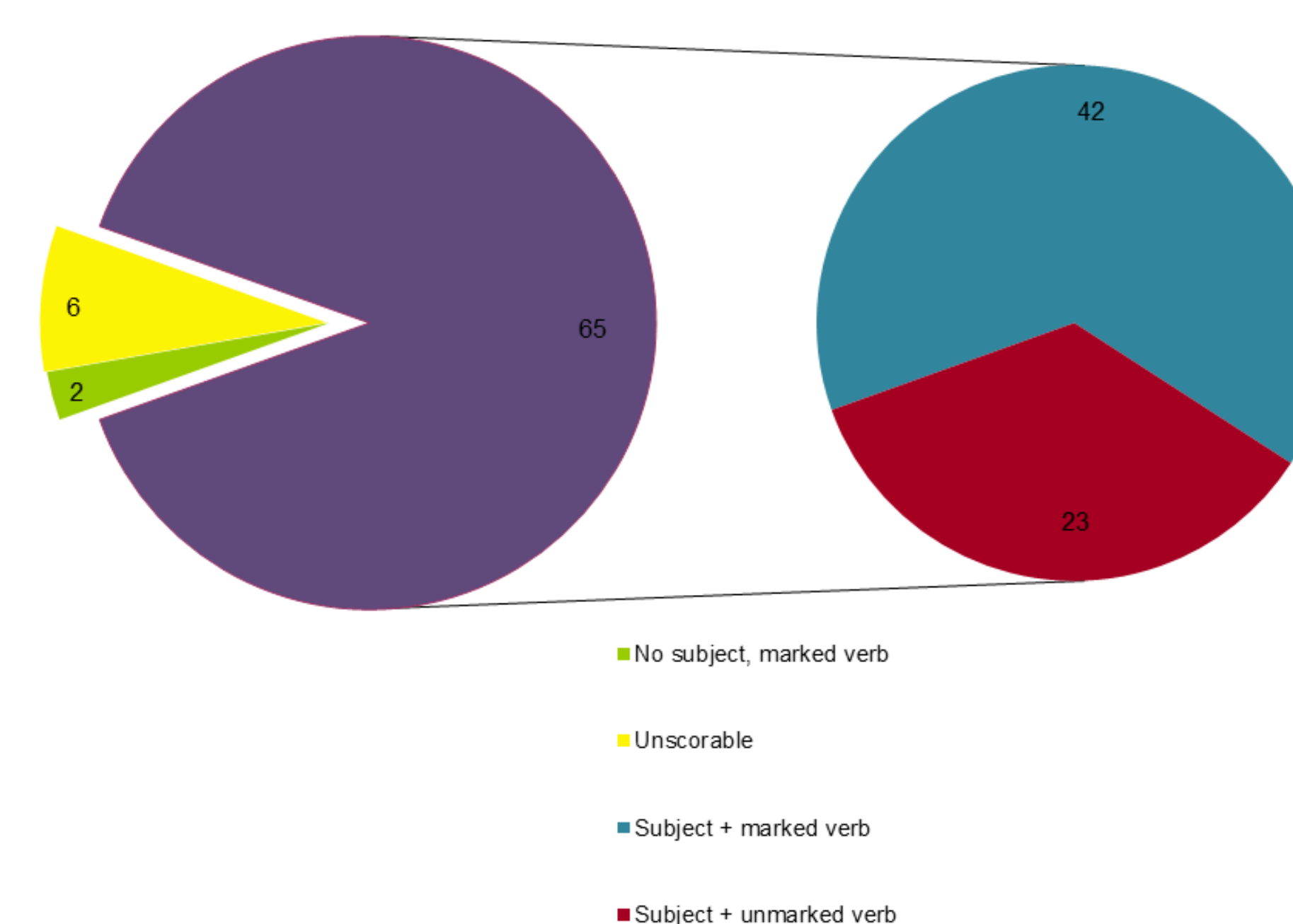
RESULTS

Of the 82 trials in which the child's response was an unmarked verb without a clausal subject (i.e., [4]), 73 trials were re-prompted by the examiner and provided data for analysis. Of these 74 trials, the child's subsequent or final responses were categorized as follows.

- 42 responses included a subject plus a verb marked for past tense [1]
she painted
- 23 responses included a subject plus an unmarked verb [2]
she paint
- 2 responses included a verb marked for past tense but no subject
painted
- 6 responses were uninformative
I don't know
she is painting fences

To test our hypothesis, we noted two frequencies: (a) the number of interchanges in which the child changed an unmarked verb without a subject to a subject plus a marked verb (i.e., [4] [1] sequence), and (b) the number of interchanges in which the child changed an unmarked verb without a subject to a subject plus an unmarked verb (i.e., [4] [2] sequences). We calculated the percent past tense marking in these total interchanges: $a / a + b$, or $42 / 65 = 65\%$. The majority of re-prompted trials that included a response with a third person subject also included a main verb marked for past tense.

Figure 1. Distribution of Response Types Following Prompting



RESULTS

In further analysis of the 65 trials where prompting led to the production of a response that included a third person subject, we examined whether the child (a) maintained the original verb from the unscorable response (e.g., *paint*) to the scorable response (e.g., *she paints, she paint*), or (b) altered the response to include a new verb (e.g., *she colored*).

Table 3. ANALYSIS OF VERB SELECTION

	ORIGINAL VERB	NEW VERB
Marked verb	36	6
Unmarked verb	23	0

Children were more likely to use the same verb (59/65 or 91%). When children did alter the verb, they marked for past tense in 100% of responses.

DISCUSSION

This study continues a line of inquiry focused on the development and use of elicited tasks of language production. A prior investigation from our lab examined the necessary components in a child's response to ensure a valid measure of grammatical performance on the third person present (3S) structure (Eisenband, Schuele, & Barako Arndt, 2011). In this study, we have examined this question with respect to the study of PT tense/agreement marking. Specifically we questioned whether when using the elicitation procedures from the TEGI PT probe, a valid measure of PT marking requires that the child produce the subject of the clause and not just the verb phrase and its complements or adjuncts. Our findings supported our hypothesis that responses to the PT probe that include only the verb phrase with an unmarked verb are not obligatory PT contexts for preschool children. This finding is consistent with our previous 3S study. Thus, child responses that include an unmarked lexical verb without a subject do not provide information about the child's ability to mark tense in obligatory contexts. Such responses must be discarded from analysis. The TEGI manual's requirement that these responses be classified as unscorable is empirically supported, as is the suggestion to re-prompt these responses.

Elicited language tasks can provide an efficient method to collect data on children's language skills for research as well as clinical purposes. However, all elicited language tasks must be carefully designed and tested to assure that the accepted responses provide a valid reflection of the child's language production abilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Data collection was supported by NIH/NIDCD (PI: Schuele). Completion of this study and preparation of this poster were supported by a US Department of Education Personnel Preparation Grant H325K090304 (PI: Schuele).

LIST OF CITED REFERENCES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST
<http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/linguagelab>

Poster Presented at the Annual Symposium for Research on Child Language Disorders, Madison WI June 2012

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