

MASTER'S THESIS

An analysis of the acquisition of the English unaccusatives by secondary students in Hong Kong

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**An Analysis of the Acquisition of the
English Unaccusatives by Secondary
Students in Hong Kong**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master philosophy**

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Abstract

The study seeks to illuminate the complexities of second-language (L2) learning by focusing upon the acquisition of English unaccusative verbs. Unaccusatives have the argument structure across languages: ___[vp V NP] (i.e., [___ [vp arrive John]]). The English unaccusativity or ergativity is one of the most difficult areas of English grammar for Chinese speakers to acquire. Very often, Chinese learners even advanced learners overextend passivization to this class of verbs. For example, they produce sentences like **The problem was existed*. The major aim of this project is to investigate the acquisition of English unaccusativity by Chinese speakers from the perspective of the current Interlanguage theory, Universal Grammar (UG) theory and Learnability theory. The 130 subjects for the study consist of four groups of Chinese learners of English who are secondary students in Hong Kong and one group of native English speakers who are used as the control group. The four groups of Chinese learners represent four proficiency groups — late beginning, lower immediate, higher intermediate and advanced level. By examining production data (essays) and judgment data, the findings from the two sets of data supplement each other to ensure a comprehensive picture of the developmental patterns in Hong Kong students' acquisition of English unaccusative verbs. This current research may have significant implications for learnability problems which may provide valuable insights into the development of pedagogy in second language teaching.

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