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IS THE PROFICIENCY AS AN EXPLANATORY FACTOR OF GRAMMATICAL MORPHEMES AMONG EFL LEARNERS IN LOW PROFICIENCY OR NOT?

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ABSTRACT

The variability in L2 learners' production of inflectional morphology is a well documented phenomenon (Lardiere, 1998b; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; White, 2003; among others). In this study we have been guided mainly by the approach that focuses on the investigating the proficiency of morphological competences. The purpose of this paper is to explore a set of proposals pertaining to learning, grammar, proficiency. We will try to explore an apparent contribution that these proposals make to understanding why EFL learners are not proficient. Several studies of students learning English as a foreign Language (EFL) in Iran have indicated that certain grammatical morphemes are acquired before others, regardless of age, first language (L1), length of EFL instruction or amount of exposure to English. Researchers of previous EFL studies have concluded that L1 has little effect on the acquisition order of English morphemes. This study employed a quasi-experimental research design involving 54 Persian students learning English as a Foreign Language as part of their university course curriculum in Payam Noor University (PNU) in Tonekabon. The students were between the ages of 18 and 26 and had been learning English for a term through regular instruction in their courses. Explicit instruction of the grammatical morphemes had been included in the curriculum, but was not included in the current academic year. Written data were collected in October, 2014 respectively, using a series of pictures and multiple choice tests. Students were simply instructed to describe the pictures and the target morphemes were not included in the instructions.

Keywords: *Accuracy Profile, L2 Acquisition, Order of Acquisition, Grammatical Morphemes*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to investigate the acquisition of inflectional morphemes with a view to examining the occurrences as well as the misuse of these morphemes in the English essays of some Yoruba learners of English. Statistics show that the level of performance of secondary and post-secondary school students in English has been deteriorating over the years. The decline in their performance in English is attested to by the alarming rate at which students fail English language in public examinations such as the grammar (1&2) final exam at Payam Noor University. Moreover, the quality of English, which many of our students speak and write, is so substandard that one begins to doubt the fact that they ever sat for and passed the English language in university examination and similar examinations by themselves. This poor performance is not a recent trend. Every year for the past few years, the performance has tended to be worse than the previous years, but this year, there has been a noticeable decline in general and there is certainly grave cause for concern about standard of English teaching and learning in our universities.

Review of the Literature

Studies on grammatical morpheme acquisition in second language setting are conducted using the learners' language samples. It is necessary to start the review of the literature in the field of Morpheme Order Studies (MOS), by making reference to what is considered to be the first of many studies about the order of acquisition of morphemes; that is Roger Brown's longitudinal study of three North American children, acquiring English as their native language (Brown, 1973b). The data was collected during a year for one of the participants, who were 18 months old at the beginning of the study, while five years were employed to collect the data of the other two, who were 27 months old. Brown discovered that the order of acquisition of a set of 14 morphemes was very similar; the three children acquired the morphemes following a common sequence, although at a different rate. Another characteristic of the findings that

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Brown discovered that every speaker of English as an L1 acquired these morphemes in the same order independently of the input they had received. Brown's study made a starting point in what came to be called "the morpheme order studies" (Brown, 1973b). From that moment onwards, the number of studies concerning the order of acquisition of morphemes, most of them showing very similar results, started to grow considerably, and despite the fact that Brown's study did not present data from L2 learners, it is important to mention that the results obtained gave rise also to other studies about the order of acquisition of morphemes in a second language. Another important aspect in Brown's study is the concept of Suppliance in Obligatory Context (SOC), which consists on, when analyzing the data, paying attention to whether a given morpheme has been supplied or not in cases where it is obligatory. Brown (1973b), explained that Grammatical morphemes are obligatory in certain contexts, and so one can set an acquisition criterion not simply in terms of output but in terms of output-where-required. Each obligatory context can be regarded as a kind of test item which the child passes by supplying the required morpheme or fails by supplying none or one that is not correct. This performance measure, the percentage of morphemes supplied in obligatory contexts, should not be dependent on the topic of conversation or the character of the interaction". SOC was widely used in later studies as Goldschneider & DeKeyser put it, "this method for scoring the data was adopted by many later studies" (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001). The criterion followed by Brown in order to determine whether a given morpheme was acquired or not was by first analyzing the speech data produced by the three children and then, identifying the occasions in which the appearance of a particular morpheme was obligatory, after that, analyzing the data by looking at each morpheme separately, and finally, setting a cutoff point at 90% of correct appearances out of the total number of obligatory contexts. Brown considered that the morpheme had been acquired if it was correctly used in more than a 90% of the cases in which it was obligatory. Dulay and Burt moved MOS to the area of Second Language (Dulay & Burt, 1973). Acquisition (SLA), which had until that moment been focused on the behaviorist idea that second languages were learnt by means of practice and constant exposure to stimulus-response patterns (see, overviews in e.g., (Cook & Cook, 1993; Gass & Selinker 1994); for the original behaviorist papers see, cf. (Bloomfield, 1933; Lado, 1957). This theory may find its chronologic point in the 1960s, and basically states that receiving positive reinforcement from a given response would imply that response become a habit. Similar to this theory is that of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which, having the concept that languages are a group of habits learnt and to be learnt, claims, that second languages were learnt having the first language as a reference, and that "difficulty and ease in learning are determined by differences and similarities between the two languages in contrast" (Gass & Selinker, 1992a). Therefore, errors must be considered by comparing L1 with the target language and the differences between L1 and TL should be taught; TLs which have more difference with respect the L1 will be acquired causing more errors. Thus, the L2 was thought to be acquired by means of positive and negative transfer from the L1. In the 1960s, the generative tendency to assume that children acquire their first language by creating their own grammar having as reference the input they receive (Cook & Cook, 1993), gave rise to the study by Dulay and Burt, which, among other reasons "was designed to provide systematic empirical data on the 'habit' formation vs. 'creative construction' nature of second language learning by children" (Dulay & Burt, 1973). A subsequent study by Dulay and Burt was published in the year, 1974, they employed the same methodology that was used in their previous study, but in this occasion they observed 11 functors (pronoun case, article, progressive -ing, contractible copula, past regular, past irregular, long plural -es, possessive -'s and third person singular -s) and, the most important difference with respect to their previous study is that they observed two groups with different L1s; the first group had 60 Spanish-speaking children aged 6-8 whereas the second group contained 55 Cantonese-speaking children, also aged 6-8; both of them were learning English as a second language in the USA (Dulay & Burt, 1974b). They found that in spite of the fact that the Spanish speakers supplied the morphemes more frequently than the Cantonese children; the morphemes which were supplied more often in one group were the same in both groups. This reaffirmed the order of acquisition found in their previous study and demonstrated that there exists a consistent order in the acquisition of the L2 morphemes with a small influence of the L1. The first group received

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instructed exposure in a classroom environment; the second one received naturalistic exposure, and the third one was a group which received a mixed exposure, that is to say, they received both classroom and naturalistic exposure. The method employed by Pica (Pica, 1983), to score the data, called the Target-like Use (TLU), was based on Dulay and Burt's SOC, with the difference that in this study, the oversuppliance, also called Suppliance in Non Obligatory Contexts (SNOC) is accounted for in the denominator by adding it to the obligatory occasions (OC), which are the number of occasions in which the morpheme to analyze should be provided, whereas in the numerator there were placed the correctly supplied forms, also called Suppliance in Obligatory Contexts (SOC) (Dulay & Burt, 1973). The rank order of the three groups was very similar to Krashen's "natural order" and the correlations between them were highly significant, which made Pica suggest that "different conditions of exposure to English L2 do not significantly alter the accuracy order in which grammatical morphemes are produced" (Pica, 1983). Errors differed from groups; Suppliance in Non Obligatory Contexts occurred more often in the instructed group, whereas omission was more common among the naturalistic learners, a finding which according to Muñoz (2006.111), "led Pica to suggest that instruction triggers over suppliance of grammatical morphology". A fairly limited number of languages and morphemes have been investigated in search of sequences of development. English as the L2 has been the main focus of most studies and there has been little comparative work on other ILs, especially on ILs of non-Indo European languages. The acquisition orders of negation (e.g. Hyltenstam 1977; Wode, 1976), word order and interrogatives e.g. (Carroll, 1989; Huang cited in Sato, 1990; Ravem cited in Towell & Hawkins, 1994; Wagner-Gough, 1975) have been studied extensively in English, German, and to a lesser extent, Dutch. The native languages of the learners have tended to be Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Turkish and Arabic (see Lalleman, 1996 for an overview). Most studies have focused on the acquisition of forms and not of functions since they have looked at particular languages rather than compared sequences cross-linguistically. In addition, the languages which have been studied tend to belong to the Indo-European family and these results cannot necessarily be generalized to languages with different typologies, such as the agglutinative African languages (unless, perhaps, one considers a functional rather than a formal view).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodology

Morphology is indisputably one of the traditional branches of grammar; the other branch being known as syntax. It (i.e. morphology) is the study of the internal structure of words (Tomori, 1977). The importance of morphological competence has been successfully recognized as a goal of language teaching and learning in the field of second language acquisition. The present study followed a quasi-experimental design of study. The participants of this study were selected from Payam Noor University students, and the study was conducted in Tonekabon (PNU) branch. Next attempt was to perform participants' tests for finding their proficiency knowledge in order to control their performance and recognition. The study has both quantitative and qualitative.

The evaluation involved identifying both correct and incorrect usage of three targeted morphemes in original sentences produced by the participants. The number of correct and incorrect recognition and productions of the target morphemes were collected and recorded for each student. Additionally, the types of errors made by the students for each morpheme structure were recorded for each of administration testing instrument. The instrument was incorporated into the regularly scheduled tests for the course both to conceal its function and to make it more closely part of the normal classroom production. For the proficiency morpheme test which considered in pictorial test, the directions were "Describe some related activities in pictures." The pictures depicted a story happened at launch time in a school. However the students had the story in pictures; but they were listened to a related story which orally considered by us in L1. They had to try their best when they want to concentrate their think through spending the time for writing till in one hand they could write a paragraph for if they understand the relation between pictures and have a good comprehension about the story and on the other hand help we to find out their morphological knowledge level of proficiency.

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Participants

To draw the study the data for requested situation is elicited from the samples through the participation of 54 junior students who were studying in English translation branch, and were selected from among 80 students, participated in the descriptive test. The range of their age were 18to 25. None of the participants has the experience of living in English speaking country. Number of independent who participated in this study elaborated in Table1.

Table 1: Number of Independent Participants

Group	Learning Setting	Number	Age
1	Junior Students at Payam Noor University	54	18-25

Also the gender of participants in this study mentioned in a pie diagram:

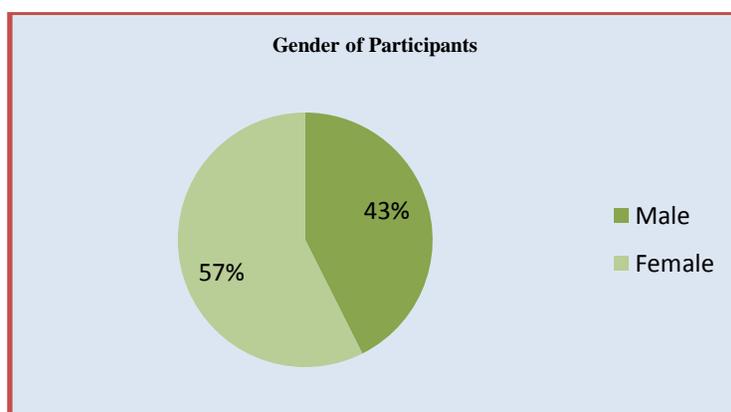


Figure 1: Gender of Participant in Interview form

Instrument

To conduct the present study's hypothesis, a descriptive pictorial task was used. The reliability of the test (task) was evaluated by 8 EFL faculty members and it was 0.8. The whole achieved data gathered from this type of test entered to SPSS software and also descriptive analysis was used when all the data collected. The main path for data collection was a picture composition task which represents clinical elicitation and enabled us to compile learners' corpus. In fact, picture composition task is very close to naturally occurring samples of language. Additionally, picture composition task, aim to elicit of a general, rather than a focused sample of learner language. Students were allowed 15-20 minutes to complete the task and were provided with the entire series of pictures along with a reduced word-list that included mainly nouns they may not know. Our decision to give the subjects plenty of time is justified by the fact that he did not want them to feel stressed which would obstruct their concentration and probably distort their language. On the other hand, our choice to give learners a reduced list of relevant words was based on previous decision in relation to the nature of the elicitation task. That is, the task should not be cognitively demanding in order to facilitate the production of authentic learner language.

Scoring

In this scoring system is concerned with meaning in language acquisition rather than just form. Grammatical morphemes carry properties of the language's grammar (form), but knowledge of these forms does not imply knowledge of the actual use of the language. Scoring system is mentioned below:

- i. (-) point: Wrong morpheme supplied in production
- i. (+) point: Correct supply in production
- i. Total: High equal number of (+)has the knowledge and high equal
- i. number of (-)doesn't have the knowledge

Figure 2: Scoring system

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis and Finding

Disregarding the scoring anomaly of these morphemes in this study, the order of the remaining three morphemes is the same as Stauble’s order. We applied the acquisition criterion to the results of the quantitative analysis. We used two kinds of criteria: the emergence criterion and the accuracy criterion. The emergence criterion defined as the first systematic and productive use or appearance of a form/structure (Pinemann, 1987, 1998). In this study we specifically paid attention to the presence of lexical variation (apples-animals) and morphological variation (talks-talkes). The accuracy criterion is usually expressed in percentages, which is set arbitrary by individual researchers without much theoretical reasons even though it is used to draw conclusions about acquisition (Pallotti, 2007) . We used the accuracy criterion to gauge the extent of acquisition (or mastery) to complement the point of acquisition as measured by emergence criterion. The accuracy criterion in this study was set at near 50 percent correct supply of the morphemes in obligatory contexts. The data gathered on variables using both descriptive and inferential statistics through SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean and standard deviation of each group of each gender based on individual variables.

Table 2: Results of Pictorial test for both Genders

Test	Level	Gender	N	Total N	Mean-Accuracy	Std. Deviation	Variance
Pictorial Task	PNU	Male	31	54	48.28	0.18	0.0324
	Students	Female	23		50.2	0.10	0.01

The approached information from applying of the pictorial task showed in the above table. As is seen in table1, 54 students participated in the first test in which females in intermediate level achieved the higher accuracy in responding the pictorial test with the accuracy of 50.2 and variance of 0.01. Through the accuracy level numbers and analytical results of the study which formed as above given table and the result of previous questionnaire equally we found the disability in production and their ability in considering a good rank of recognition in their performances. Hence we can affirm that Stauble’s (1984) schema works in lower proficiency levels since it is there that students actually proceed in the composition of linguistic forms. In former stages, Stauble’s (1987) pattern was observed only partly due to the extended use of the declarative memory system, which disregards the actual difficulty of each morpheme based on the underlying structural properties. It is essential to say that study the differences in individual groups between genders is an arbitrary part for giving more clear result in that case of better understanding of the reader and it didn’t mention for individualism. In this chart, pictorial test is administrated and distributed between EFL learners. The subjects showed slightly above 50% of correctness in the application of inflectional morphemes. This finding might signify their inaccurate acquisition of this section of grammar since they could make correct sentences using third person –s in more than half of the occasions. Again this finding implied that they appeared not to be in a complete acquisition of grammatical morphemes yet. Almost similar findings were obtained in the use of third person –s. As the table portrays, the analysis of this study also suggested that the subject were’nt proficient in using inflectional morphemes.

General Discussion

The morpheme is the minimal linguistic element that carries grammatical and/or semantic meaning; it is not further divisible into smaller grammatical components. This definition is in line with Farinde and Ojo’s view of the morpheme. According to them: The morpheme can be defined as the smallest meaningful grammatical unit of English. Although it is the smallest in our rank scale, it exerts a lot of influence on the word, which is the next higher unit of the rank scale. The morphemes with grammatical meanings, which of course, are limited in English, are inflectional morphemes and they are not capable of changing the class and/or the meanings of the words to which they are attached. Learners undoubtedly use various morpheme discovery strategies, exploiting semantic, syntactic and phonological information. It is also likely that

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learners use the frequency and distribution of words and their substrings as sources of evidence. Distributional information can be straightforwardly extracted from the data and it can be used prior to any linguistic analysis: learners can later use more sophisticated linguistic information to refine the coarse guesses on morphological structure made on the basis of distributional information. During the research it was found that all previous researchers had a common opinion about the effect of L1 on second language acquisition mainly in term of inflectional morphemes As a matter of fact this opinion failed by the results of this study. Because not only by teachers opinions on interview forms with high percent of mention in their cause of L1 as a key for simplification of teaching L2, but also by scoring students tests result and their own opinion , the effect of L1 on learning English as a second language is undeniable. A good point that there is expectation on the result of this study through previous one in term of effect of L1 on learning L2 is that there is some similarities in Persian language and this essential affect on students knowledge for considering and choosing the correct answer in addressing a related subject. Based on picture test which used by means of finding the level of proficiency in Iranian EFL learners, and by focusing teachers interview forms, it has found that most teachers prefer to use repetition strategy for striking this section on their students‘ mind and through comparing some papers of intelligence and mid-level knowledge students find that however the intelligence of students (as researcher found from type of schools and institutes) have both modern and classic enhancements but their production ‘s quality weren’t good .

Conclusion

However, it is beyond the coverage of this study to conclude that the later acquisition of the different types of grammatical morpheme-s identified in the subject’s samples is not due to this fact. As it is indicated in the percentage of correctness, the subject performed well in most of the occasions where they needed to supply these three kinds of inflectional morphemes. These findings appear to indicate that the subjects have acquired these grammatical morphemes well although not yet accurately. They might need to have more extensive practices. It was also found that the subjects achieved near 50% of correctness in the occasions where they should supply inflectional morphemes. It seems too soon to conclude that they have acquired these grammatical morphemes well but based on the achieved percentage of data it is brightly obvious that EFL learners from PNU who participated in this study weren’t proficient in using inflectional morphemes.

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