

THE ACQUISITION OF INFLECTIONAL MORPHEMES: THE PRIORITY OF PLURAL –S

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to shed light on the acquisition of inflectional morphology in learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) whose first language (L1) is Persian. This research has been occurred with participation of totally 377 English learners (from intermediate to Upper proficiency level). The present study investigated if plural –s is prior among the same types of inflectional morphemes (possessive –s and third person –s) or not. Specifically, this paper sought to determine the grammatical. In short, L2 learners' failure to correctly supply inflectional morphemes may be due to transfer of either phonological or Morphosyntactic constraints from the L1. However more than a lack of salience seems to underlie the difficulty of verbal inflection. Agreement and these marking are known to be problematic even for instructed learners, who receive explicit training in their form and use. There are numerous studies concerning the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes; however, no paper to the knowledge of the authors has explored the accuracy profile and acquisition of grammatical morphemes of Iranian EFL learners in such a way. In this article, it aimed to find out whether there is any significant difference between the performance of male and female learners in learning inflectional morphemes or not.

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

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that nowadays the development of morphology in second language acquisition can be thought of as the consequence of building mental grammars subconsciously by language learners. The acquisition of English morphology as a second language has been under investigation by many researchers to come up with a descriptive generalization. Research has shown that there are some typical stages in the development of morphology and syntax (Lightbown and Spada, 2000.) However there is an undeniable belief on the difficulty of acquisition in English bound and free morphemes, in that free morphemes are acquired with a considerable ease compared to bound morphemes, and there is a general path for the acquisition and sequence of grammatical morphemes, there are some trivial disagreements on the precise order according to which grammatical morphemes appear. Researchers' focus on the acquisition of morphemes started in the 1970s when they were investigating the "independent grammars assumption". The underpinning idea of comparing L1 and L2 morpheme acquisition orders was that if a universal morpheme acquisition order could be established, then the process of acquisition would be proved to be internally driven. Accordingly, it could be argued that second language acquisition is independent of external factors such as the age, the teaching method, the type of exposure (naturalistic vs. instructed) or the L1.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study the data were collected from a questionnaire completed by a random sample of 377 students and an interview form with the participation of 120 English teachers. The grammatical judgment test questions were in the form of statements. Next questionnaire was in the form of interview which teachers wrote down their point of views about some related questions to the mentioned subject As data collection takes place in rather normal conversations at a place familiar to the informants, it is possible to elicit rather natural speech data, without or with only few disturbing effects that may occur with (laboratory) experiments or standardized testing situations. The data elicited may allow insights not only whether

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participants are able to recognize certain syntactic construction. Thereafter here we present the details of our empirical studies. In keeping with the perceived importance of the methodology we have decided to begin by introducing the method that we have adopted in this paper. To conduct the present study, four instruments were employed. They were as follow:

1. Y/N grammatically judgment test (Teacher made)
2. Teachers Interview form

The sole source of materials in the present study is from two types of questionnaire that are used in this research population during the study. As the purpose of enhancing EFL learners' knowledge of morphemes the major instrument was used in this study related to inflectional morphemes. However, for the, Y/N questionnaire students were instructed to read the questions in order recognize and mark ungrammatical sentences. If they did not know the answers, they were told to guess or say nothing and go to the next question. Most students were able to correct themselves directly after writing a wrong answer, but no student corrected him/herself at the end of the Y/N test. Thereafter there has been an interview form to reach teachers opinions and beliefs.

Wuwan (1982) indicates that "written questionnaire can be utilized to investigate practically any aspect of teaching or learning process in order to obtain information from teachers about their teaching practices, or learner's learning style preferences." In this research, the main objective in designing and administering the questionnaire is to draw out types and the frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategies reported to have been employed. The questionnaire consists of 22 items especially in the field of morphology and grammar. The questionnaire that is used in this research consists of a grammatical judgment test like task include 25 items to record respondents ' responses on their inflectional learning. In the following task the researcher interested in the students intuitions about whether they are able to distinguish grammatical sentences and recognize the mistakes in un grammatical ones or not. 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.

The students were permitted to sit in their desks with no assigned seating. They had as much time as they wanted to complete the instrument, but as it was only one part of a larger test, they were forced to budget their time for the later sections of the test. On the first pretest, the students used roughly 20 minutes of the available 90 minutes for the testing instrument. During the first administration of the testing instrument, because of the fact that the students had never seen the instrument before, they were uncertain what the expectations were. To prevent the students from learning from the test instrument itself, they were allowed to see their scores on the test afterward, but not permitted to retain the actual test papers. Additionally, approvals from the school administration and instructors, as well as voluntary participation by the students with full disclosure were obtained before proceeding. Bias on the part of the administrator of the instrument was eliminated by purposively selecting the participants who would provide writing samples and carefully constructing the instrument to avoid cultural or experiential bias. Language bias was not a factor in the instrument beyond the task directions because the actual task involved the participant's interpretation of a picture without any captions. In order to answer the research question for the present investigation, the structured interview was used for data collection. Interview was used for data collection. Interview is widely used in social studies research because it helps the researcher to get data about participants' personal information, beliefs, attitudes and opinion. It is regarded as a directed conversation between an investigator and individual or group of individuals in order to gather information. It is also one of the most powerful ways the researchers have of understanding others. This instrument in type of structured interview including 6 related questions helped us to find out the teachers' point of view about the best strategic way of teaching morphemes in order to enhance their opinion to which of the mentioned morphemes in term of acquisition is prior for recognizing and correct producing and why.

However, by using open interviews as an elicitation method, we have almost no influence of the type of data elicited. Certain syntactic features may only be investigated when they occur by chance. Nevertheless, we decided to use open interviews to elicit data from participants, for the reasons

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mentioned above. While the directions do not employ any of the targeted morphemes, they do seek to elicit the desired morpheme structure.

To draw the study the Data for requested situation is elicited from the sample through the participation of 377 EFL learners in intermediate and upper-intermediate level majoring in English institutes and high schools. However, there was an interview form available for collecting EFL teachers in whole Mazandaran and Guilan with participation of 120 teachers among them to take their opinion about easiest kinds of mentioned inflectional morphemes and on the other hand to choose the helpful and effective strategies of teaching.

As it is exhibited in figure 1 we tried to show the number of participants (male/ female teachers) in our first step of data collection through participation of teachers which individually divided by their gender as:

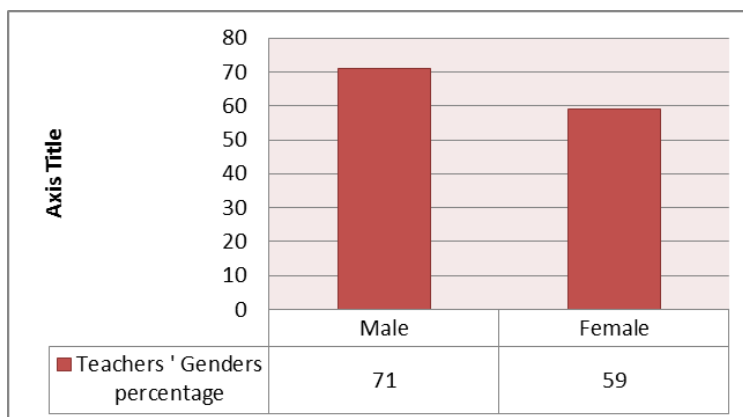


Figure 1: Relative Gender of Teachers

Also number of different Iranian EFL learners who participated in Y/N questionnaire based on their genders put in the figure 2.

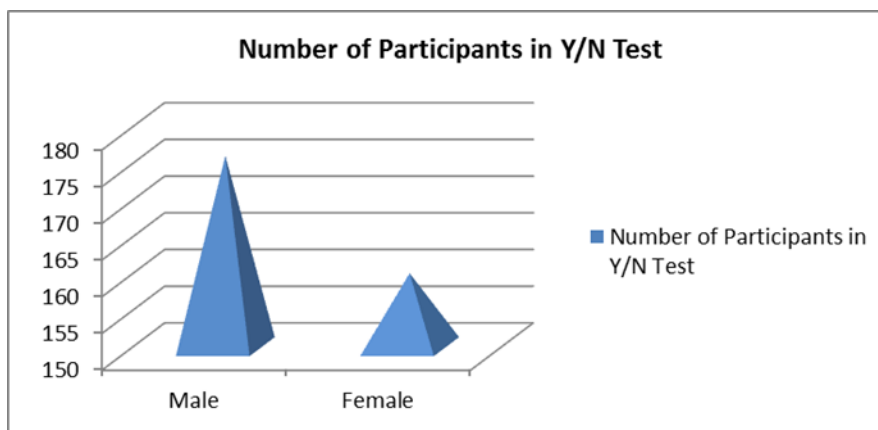


Figure 2: Relative Gender of participants of Yes/No tests

To conduct the research and to verify the hypothesis of the research, already put forward the following steps were taken to tackle the procedure of homogenized and group assignment. The researcher based on the purpose of the study selected 2 types of test for students. The study started with the aim to act of recognizing of inflectional morphemes to the importance of acquisition of grammatical morphemes. Regarding the framework and questionnaire learners were asked to answer a variety of questions that focus on both the level of understanding morphemes and finding suitable way for more effective usage and

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contextualization of morphemes. As data analysis took place the following scoring system mentioned by the researcher:

+1 point for each correct answer and recognition

0 point for each incorrect answer and misrecognition

Total: The equal of correct answers

In the above scoring system +1 stands for a group of participants with higher knowledge of high morphological awareness, and 0 stands for a group with lower knowledge of morphological competence. After scoring the exam, it was determined that such a difficulty, i.e. low proficiency level of producing inflectional morphemes existed even among learners who reported as good or excellent students during the semester. To suggest a way to eliminate or to help students encountering this problem to overcome it, the following process has been done which is presented to you in the following parts.

The steps taken in analyzing the test results will be fully elaborated while the researcher will interpret the results with regard to the central purpose of the study. The data were analyzed as follow: Here the researcher used quasi- longitudinal study which compares the accuracy profiles of the mentioned population. The data were collected in 5 weeks during second semester of 2013-2014 in Mazandaran and Guilan private institutes. At the beginning session the students were informed the tests supported to tap their overall English knowledge and it does not have any negative point after scoring the mean and standard deviation were calculated. After recognition they are requested to put cross in the correct blank square. The reliability of test is evaluated by 8 EFL faculty members and it is 0.78. The whole accelerated data gathered from this type of test were entered in MATLAB software, SPSS software and descriptive analysis were done on all the data gathered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of this study is plural –s acquire first in term of acquisition between these three kinds of grammatical morphemes or not. For collecting the data to prove this hypothesis the researcher tried an interview form for teachers. Also a teacher made Y/N questionnaire which validated by 8 inter-rater faculty members and applied it by participation of 377 students, EFL learners. The result from applying this test in tables and figures below:

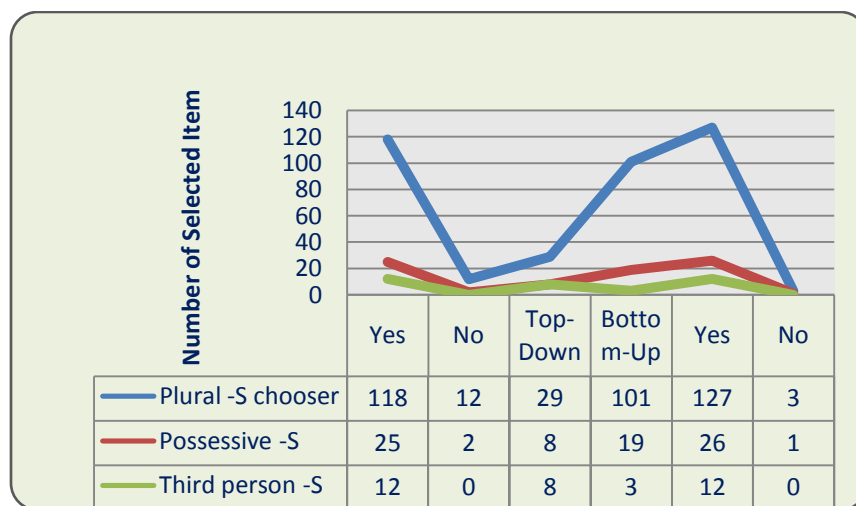


Figure 3: Result of Items Chose By Teachers from Interview Form

According to the results of interview form Figure 3 the blue line trying to show the analyzed data in the form of three colors. The researcher divided the data by numbers of participants. The blue line in figure 3 helped the researcher to prove the first hypothesis in first hand. Numbers shows that most of teachers believe in that plural –s is prior in the term of acquisition in their English classes. So they gave special agreement to the highest rank of this figure. Next the researcher tried to prove this hypothesis by

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evaluating the results which gathered from grammatical judgment test (questionnaire) mentioned in figure 4 and 5.

ERROR%	ACCUR	FALSE	TRUE	No.QUE
0.257485	0.742515	86	248	1
0.363636	0.636364	120	210	2
0.438438	0.561562	146	187	3
0.313433	0.686567	105	230	4
0.254545	0.745455	84	246	5
0.290909	0.709091	96	234	6
0.490964	0.509036	163	169	7
0.300595	0.699405	101	235	8
0.358553	0.641447	109	195	9
0.53869	0.46131	181	155	10
0.490964	0.509036	163	169	11
0.378378	0.621622	126	207	12
0.616766	0.383234	206	128	13
0.540541	0.459459	180	153	14
0.355422	0.644578	118	214	15
0.510511	0.489489	170	163	16
0.271903	0.728097	90	241	17
0.47546	0.52454	155	171	18
0.471471	0.528529	157	176	19
0.483582	0.516418	162	173	20
0.439759	0.560241	146	186	21
0.341538	0.658462	111	214	22
0.576119	0.423881	193	142	23
0.520958	0.479042	174	160	24
0.347561	0.652439	114	214	25

Figure 4: The Accuracy Result (Y/N Questionnaire)

Figure 2 provide information about items, number of true answers to each question, number of incorrect answers to each question, the accuracy of each question and the standard error measurement for all questions separately. Then for better understanding the results the researcher considered the below figure:

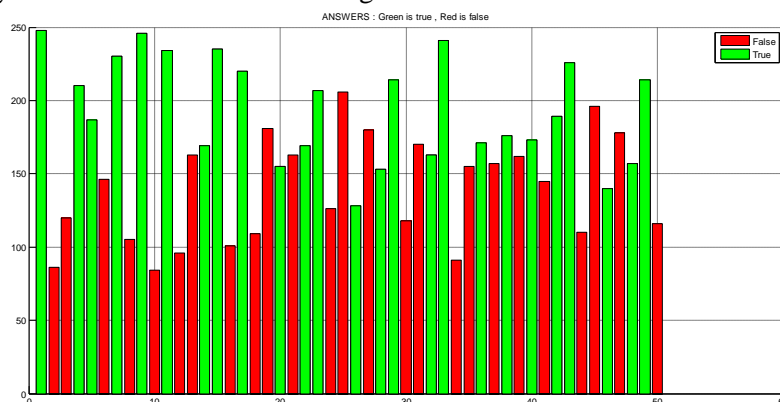


Figure 5: The Distribution of Answers(Y/N Questionnaire)

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As it is seen in figure 3, the green line shows the level of correct answers and the red one is related to incorrect answers. The questionnaire which considered by the researcher had 25 items; So it is clear that each green line shows the stage of correct answers and the red one represent the incorrect answers. In case of discussing statistically the researcher had focused on investigation through mean, standard deviation, variance of the results which summarize findings about proving this hypothesis. Table1 and table 2 show these points in both levels with specializing between genders.

Table 1: Result of Yes/No Questionnaire in Upper- Intermediate level

Gender	N	Mean	Std.	Variance
Male	82	42.2	0.23	0.0529
Female	80	42.1	0.15	0.0225

Table 2: Result of Yes/No Questionnaire in Intermediate Level

Gender	N	Mean	Std.	Variance
Male	98	52.7	0.31	0.0961
Female	77	50.2	0.12	0.0144

The table of 1 and 2 shows that the mean for each part represent different numbers. As it is seen in the first table our upper-intermediate levels students don't have enough knowledge of plural –s and our intermediate learners did better. However the importance of these tables focused on the percentage of their community. All the students did better in this point among the other parts and their mean took higher place in here. Other tables for investigating next kind of –s brought to the appendix. Providing to the mean in previous tables and also figures help to conclude that the hypothesis is affirmative and acceptable.

Discussion

Empirical research from the 1980's indicates that adolescence and young adult L2 learners are faster in the initial stages of L2 learning than young children on all linguistic measures, i.e., syntax, morphology, pronunciation and lexis. But with continued exposure, young children become more native-like than adolescent and adult learners. Related studies involving morpheme acquisition in ESL learners studied adults than children instead. These learners were all receiving formal instruction in intensive English programs in schools. Different investigators have indicated that the accuracy of oral and written production should not be judged on the same criteria, which is a major criticism of the morpheme order studies that I will return to later. The issue remains under solved and more research is needed in oral skill. The issue remains unresolved and more research is needed to clarify the influence of sex on second or foreign language learning. One of the major objections in the morpheme order studies is that most of the findings are specific for L2 English. According to previous researches in the branch of morphology like (Burt, 1982), (Brown, 1973), (Nathalie, 1974), (Littlewood, 1984), (Hakuta, 1974).

Dulay and Burt (1984) state that when a learner achieves 90% of accurate supplies of exact grammatical morphemes, he/she perfectly acquired those morphemes. Next other researches like Littlewood (1984) mentioned that 'with some differences of details, a number of English morphemes are acquired in a predictable and natural sequence. The sequence seems to be similar with different ages (adults or children), whatever their mother tongue, and even if they have received some formal instructions' (p 39) Dulay and Burt (1982), Nathalie *et al.*, (1974) and Brown (1973) in Littlewood (1984) propose that the acquisition of morpheme acquisition is not naturally dependent on the learner's first language. In other words, 'Transferring of first language is not the major factor; the sequence is not only natural, but also universal' (Littlewood, 1984). However, it is beyond the coverage of this study to conclude that the later

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acquisition of the different types of grammatical morpheme-s identified in the subject's samples are not due to this fact.

Results

The results of this study show that learning of plural –s is prior in term of acquisition between inflectional morphemes. However according to this investigation most of teachers pointed that acquisition of plural –s is prior among others. On the other hand it is obvious that learning of plural –s as an inflectional morpheme has a higher rank percentage among other inflectional morphemes, which mentioned by the researcher. 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 acquisition. 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.

Conclusion

Understanding the nature and difficulty of second language acquisition in the term of inflectional morphemes is a long standing and valid goal of linguistic research and a necessary subject for fluent speaking in EFL learners. This study clearly shows that there is indeed an acquisition order when learning English grammatical morphemes by EFL Learners. Returning to the original research questions, this study also provides evidence that the acquisition order of grammatical morphemes by English as Foreign Language learners is similar to the order of English as Second Language learners .Disregarding the scoring anomaly of the plural morpheme in this study, the order of the remaining three morphemes is different from other researches in the result. In addition, this study exhibits support for some differences between researches, and that it does play a role in grammatical morpheme acquisition. The results of this study cannot provide a thorough answer as to whether text books play a larger role in acquisition than researchers have previously thought. Lastly, grammatical morpheme acquisition may have implications for teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language. Further exploration of these ideas holds the promise of substantial progress in understanding the nature of second language acquisition and may ultimately contribute to the more practical pedagogical concerns of teachers and curriculum designers .

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