GRAMMATICAL MORPHEME ACQUISITION: AN ANALYSIS OF AN EFL LEARNER’S LANGUAGE SAMPLES *

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an analysis of grammatical morpheme acquisition taken from a Vietnamese English learner’s speech sample. Attempting to answer what grammatical morphemes the subject has acquired and/or needs to acquire accurately, this study analyzes the learner’s speech sample using ‘obligatory occasion’ measure. The instruments were the audio-recording of the sample and theories on grammatical morpheme studies. The finding of this study indicates that the subject has acquired some grammatical morphemes well although not yet accurately. She needs to have more extensive practice on those grammatical morphemes.

KEYWORDS:
Grammatical morpheme, language acquisition, EFL

INTRODUCTION

As one of the approaches in the second language acquisition, behaviorism views language development as a process of habit formation in which language learning is facilitated through imitation, practice and reinforcement (Skinner, 1957 in Littlewood, 1984). This perspective is often linked with contrastive analysis hypothesis which proposes that similarities between the first and second languages may enhance the

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language acquisition, whereas differences would cause difficulties (Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. 1999). In practice, however, many actual errors are not predicted by contrastive analysis, whereas not all predicted errors actually occur (Littlewood, 1984).

Because many aspects of the learners’ language could not be explained by the contrastive analysis hypothesis, a number of researchers attempt to discover what learners really know about the language through error analysis. Brown (1980) argues that the analysis of errors made in language learning reveals the development of an interlanguage, namely a set of rules made up by the learner to map the new language onto their native language.

Regarding the connection between the first and second language acquisition, it is claimed that the first issue is related to ‘the question of the extent to which language acquisition is natural represents, in one form or another, a constant’ (Foster, S.H. & Cohen, 1999, p. 4). The next issue deals with the nature of input and how learners make use of it (Cohen, *ibid*). Finally, the debate is concerned with what exactly the learners store when they have learned some aspects of the language (Cohen, *ibid*). It is further stated that ‘UG explanation for acquisition implies rules and representations account of what is stored whereas a connectionist implies non-rule, non-representation, activated node account of what is stored’ (Cohen, *ibid*).

Complexities of second language acquisition process and lack of agreements among experts on its underlying theories undoubtedly cause confusion on the parts of researchers and educators. However, there is a growing interest of research in this field involving investigations of second language acquisition in both natural and instructional setting (Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (1999). It is further claimed that the data obtained from this method may provide more immediately accessible and applicable resources for teachers and researchers.

It has been shown that language sample provides authentic and practical data on the learner’s acquisition development. In accordance with this idea, Beverly & Goodnoh (2004) propose that language sampling is a well-known, performance-based assessment procedure. In second or foreign language setting, it not only portrays the learner’s language
proficiency, but it may exhibit his/her acquisition development. This study, therefore, attempts to analyze a Vietnamese learner’s speech sample and determine grammatical morphemes she has acquired and/or needs to acquire accurately.

**Review of Related Literature**

1. **Foreign and Second Language Acquisition**
   Stern (1983) as cited by Freed (1991) states that foreign language has usually been used to refer to the teaching or learning of a non-native language outside the country or speech community where it is commonly spoken. Second language, as contrasted with the term foreign language, is applied to non-native language learning or language use, which takes place within one of the speech communities where that language is traditionally used. (Freed, *ibid*). In terms of language acquisition process, Ellis (1986) points out that ‘second language acquisition is not intended to contrast with foreign language acquisition. SLA is used as a general term that embraces both untutored (or “naturalistic”) acquisition and tutored (or “classroom”) acquisition’ (p5). Similarly, Littlewood (1984) proposes that the term second language acquisition would be used as a cover term for both foreign and second language acquisition. Other researchers suggest that foreign language learning should be understood as similar to and within the overall domain of second language acquisition (Anderson 1990, Gass 1990 and Kramsch,1990 in Freed, 1991).

   Freed (*ibid*) further emphasizes the crucial differences of functions and context between EFL and ESL learners. However, she further points out that they may, or may not, account for differences in the process of language acquisition. Another important point to note is that in spite of the existing differences between SLA and EFL, language acquisition research ‘must comprise a multitude of orientations: psychological, linguistics, educational, as well as sociological and anthropological' (Freed, *ibid*).

2. **Grammatical Morpheme Studies**

2.1 **Children’s Grammatical Morpheme Acquisition**
   Studies on children’s grammatical morphemes are recognized as part of their developmental sequences. Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N
(1999) point out that there are predictable patterns in the emergence and development of many features as children progress through the discovery of language in the early years. They further state that for children the developmental sequences are related to their cognitive development and gradual mastery of the linguistic elements for expressing ideas (Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N., ibidem).

There have been many studies on how children acquire their grammatical morphemes. Roger Brown (1973) in Littlewood (1984) conducts a study on how three children acquire fourteen morphemes in their first language. The finding shows that the children acquire the morphemes in a sequence. In other words, there is evidence for order of acquisition. Supporting this finding is the cross sectional study of Jill and Peter De Villers (as in Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N., 1999; Littlewood, 1984).

2.2 Grammatical Morpheme Acquisition in Second Language Learning

Studies on grammatical morpheme acquisition in second language setting are conducted using the learners’ language samples. Dulay & Burt (1974) in Littlewood, after analyzing the accuracy order of eight morphemes in the speech of three different groups of Spanish-speaking children, find out that the order for each of the three groups is similar. Another study involving three adults, divided into groups whose mother tongue is Spanish and another group with a different mother tongue, supports the finding of Dulay and Burt (1974). The overall results of these studies suggest an order which is similar among second language learners from different backgrounds. (Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N., 1999).

3. Overview of Vietnamese Grammar

Vietnamese differs from English in many ways (Na, P., 2005). Vietnamese is a tonal language consisting of monosyllabic native words. Since all native words are monosyllabic, there is no inflectional marking done by way of prefixes or suffixes (Na, P., ibid). For example, there are no suffixes indicating tenses or numbers. Such information may be optionally marked by a separate word (i.e., the auxiliary verb ða ‘has already’ before the verb to indicate past tense of the word nhieu; ‘many’ before the noun to indicate plurality). Verbs
are not inflected for subject-verb agreement (Na, P., *ibid*). The personal pronoun system does not mark gender or case. However, often words signifying the addressee’s relationship with the speaker are used in place of personal pronouns (e.g. *ong* signifies grandfather, sir, or mister; *ba* signifies grandmother, ma’m or mrs). There are no definite and indefinite articles; rather nouns are preceded by classifiers, which differ depending on the meaning of the word (e.g. *cai* is the classifier for non-living things; *con* is the classifier for children). *Yes/No* questions do not involve word order changes (Na, P., *ibid*). They can be signaled through intonation or by appending particles such as *khong* or ‘not’ at the end of the sentence. *Wh*-questions are formed with the use of question words; the relative positions of the subject and verb are not changed. There is nothing equivalent to ‘do’ insertion in question formations. The basic word order is SVO (Nguyen, 1967 in Na, P., *ibid*).

Given this brief description of Vietnamese, one might expect that speakers of this language would have difficulties with those aspects of English that are markedly different. These would include all inflections, pronouns, articles, and subject-verb word order inversion in questions and ‘do’ insertion.

A study conducted by McDonald, J.L., (2000) shows that in terms of accuracy, native Vietnamese early acquirers differ from native English speakers on three types of rules, all of which involve inflections—past tense, plural, and third person subject-verb agreement. Furthermore, they are also different in present progressive, articles, and *wh*-questions. In addition, while there was no overall difference between the Vietnamese early acquirers and the native speakers on pronoun, there was for the subset of the sentence that tested pronoun gender agreement (McDonald, J.L., *ibid*).

**METHODOLOGY**

The data of this study was obtained from audio recording of the learner’s spoken language samples. During the audio recording, the researcher tried to minimize distractions caused by the subject’s nervousness or unfamiliarity with the researcher by having other Vietnamese friends to accompany her.
Foster, P. *et al* (2000) states that there are many ways of analyzing spoken second language data. As a point of reference, the data obtained from this research was analyzed using ‘obligatory occasion’ measure (Brown, 1973 as cited in Dulay & Burt, 1982). In brief the concept of obligatory occasion is described as follows:

‘... 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 morpheme supplied in obligatory context, should not be dependent on the topic of conversation or the character of the interaction.

(Brown, 1973 p 255 as cited in Dulay & Burt, 1982)

There were nine grammatical morphemes analyzed from the subject’s language samples. Each grammatical morpheme occasion in the samples was noted and scored: 0 point when no morpheme was supplied; 1 point when a misinformed morpheme was supplied; 2 points when a correct morpheme was supplied. There were two scores obtained for each grammatical morpheme, namely the ‘actual score’ depending on the subject’s performance on that item, and the ‘expected score’ which was always two points for each item. The results of the analysis were then posed as a basis recommendation of grammatical morphemes the subject had acquired and needed to acquire accurately.

This study employed an analysis on the subject’s language samples. Thus, the instruments were the audio-recording of the sample and theories on grammatical morpheme studies.

The subject of this research study was a 28-year-old EFL learner of the Center of English Language Learning at De La Salle University, Manila. She has been learning English at the basic level for 3 months at the language center. She also accelerated her English proficiency through twice-a-week private English course tutored by a Filipino teacher. She
majored in marketing, and she admitted to have learned English for at least 8 years in Vietnam. However, she does not feel very proficient in English, particularly in terms of spoken fluency and grammar.

FINDINGS

The outcome of the aforementioned procedures results in the subject’s speech corpus, as can be seen in Table 1. They provide data on the subject’s expected performance and the correct usage of each grammatical morpheme occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical Morpheme</th>
<th>Occasions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula <em>be</em></td>
<td>... but my English ... not very... not... eh not good. I intern..aaa I online She very aaa active. active? She is a... my a... he is Mr Monk. He is brother Ham... He is brother Wang and me... He is RC (<em>not clear</em>) He is manager (<em>not clear</em>)... RC University. This is ehm.. celebration to 23rd Don Bosco Seminary She is my friend. He is my husband... his err her husband. They are... they are... married. No, they are employer Nooo he is my friend... .. good friend .. is friendly She is a my classmate.. Ahhh.. She is.. she is Vietnam. She very aaa active. active? No I am employer I... am... I’m going to study for one year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Auxiliary be** | He study social work at RC (*not clear*)
They are study social eh learning ah study social at RC (*not clear*)
They are study Don Bosco Seminario.
We are cooking... together.
I'm going to study for one year. |
| **Preposition of time** | I go to school... emm eight...
I go to school...five forty ..ah.. seven ah seven forty five
I finish two thirty at ten am.
Ehmmm every day I go to church five thirty pm at SM Harrison.
I aaa I have a dinner at seven... seven pm and then I study.
After.. after.. after learning homework
I aa I start study... to study at eight am.
Aaa I aaa I aaa I have a class at home from ten thirty am to twelve pm (pause) everyday.
Aaa Seven thirty am. |
| **Prepositions of place in, at, on** | He work... ehh he study Don Bosco Seminio...
Seminario.
They are study Don Bosco Seminario.
They are study social eh learning ah study social at RC (*not clear*)
She live... .in live in here.
I study English in De La Salle very boring...
He study social work at RC (*not clear*)
I take a picture at Baywalk.
everyday I go to church five thirty pm at SM Harrison.
She live in Vietnam.
in Vietnam I have a work. |
| **Progressive inflection – ing** | They are study Don Bosco Seminario.
They are study social eh learning ah study social at RC (*not clear*)
He study social work at RC (*not clear*)
We are cooking... together.
I'm going to study for one year. |
Table 2 exhibits the analysis record of the subject’s grammatical morpheme applications as indicated in the subject’s corpus. As it is indicated in the percentage of correctness, the subject performed well in almost all of the occasions where she needed to supply copula *be*. These findings appear to indicate that the subject has acquired these grammatical morphemes well although not yet accurately. She might need to have more extensive practices. It was also found out that the subject achieved 80% of correctness in the occasions where she should supply auxiliary *be*. Different from the previous finding, the subject produced five occasions. It seems too soon to conclude that she has acquired this grammatical morpheme well.

| Article a, the | He is manager (not clear)... RC University Am... No I am employer This is ehm.. celebration to 23rd Don Bosco Seminary. I think that.. good friend .. is friendly ehmm... I have a big breakfast at home. She had err company. but I don’t have plan I take a picture at Baywalk Me... ahh a father, a brother... take a picture I don’t know Aaa I aaa I aaa I have a class at home in Vietnam I have a work Two...two hour... per day, sixteen day a month |
| Irregular past forms | I take a picture at Baywalk. Me... ahh a father, a brother... take a picture I don’t know *(talking Vietnamese)* She went back home |
| Plural inflection –s | Two...two hour... per day Sixteen day a month No, they are employer. |
| Third person singular-verb inflection –s | She live... in live in here. She live in Vietnam. She have two children |
Table 2
Findings of the subject’s grammatical morpheme applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical Morphemes</th>
<th>Number of Occasions</th>
<th>Expected Score</th>
<th>Actual Score</th>
<th>Percentage of correctness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula <em>be</em></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary <em>be</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions of time</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>in, at, on, to, from, before, after</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions of place</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>in, at, on</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive –<em>ing</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article <em>a, the</em></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular past forms</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural –*s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person singular –*s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subject showed slightly above 60% of correctness in the application of preposition of time. This finding might signify her inaccurate acquisition of this structure since she could make correct sentences using prepositions of time in more than half of the occasions. Less percentage of correctness was identified in the use of articles and irregular past forms. Furthermore, out of 12 occasions where the subject supposedly supplied the article *a* or *the*, she was able to supply eight correct applications of the articles. There were three occasions identified for the subject to supply irregular past forms. Again this finding implied that she appeared not to be in a complete acquisition of grammatical morphemes yet. Almost similar findings were obtained in the use of the progressive inflection-*ing*. As the table portrays, the analysis of this study also suggested that the subject had not acquired plural inflection -*s*, regular and third person singular-verb inflection –*s*.  

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DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the findings suggest that there are some grammatical morphemes that the subject has acquired. It is stated in Dulay and Burt (1984) that when a learner achieves 90% of accurate supplies of certain grammatical morphemes, he/she is already in the perfect acquisition of those morphemes. As indicated in table 2, the percentage of correctness of the most acquired morpheme is 85%. It implies that the subject has not been in a full acquisition of that grammatical morpheme.

Another interesting point to discuss is related to the order of the subject’s grammatical morpheme acquisition as compared with the finding of the study conducted by Brown (1973) as cited in Dulay & Burt (1982) and Krashen (as in Littlewood, 1984). Different from Brown’s order of acquisition, Stephen Krashen does not list individual morphemes but as a hierarchy of groups of morphemes (Littlewood, 1984).

Table 3
Comparison of grammatical morpheme order of acquisition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The subject’s order</th>
<th>Brown’s order</th>
<th>Krashen’s order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula <em>be</em></td>
<td>Progressive <em>ing</em></td>
<td>Progressive <em>ing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary <em>be</em></td>
<td>Preposition <em>on</em></td>
<td>Plural <em>s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions of time <em>in, at, on, to, from, before, after</em></td>
<td>Preposition <em>in</em></td>
<td>Copula <em>be</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions of place <em>in, at, on</em></td>
<td>Plural <em>s</em></td>
<td>Auxiliary <em>be</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive –<em>ing</em></td>
<td>Irregular past forms</td>
<td>Articles <em>a/the</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article <em>a, the</em></td>
<td>Possessive <em>s</em></td>
<td>Irregular past forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular past forms</td>
<td>Uncontractible copula <em>be</em></td>
<td>Regular past <em>ed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural –<em>s</em></td>
<td>Articles <em>a/the</em></td>
<td>Third person singular –<em>s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person singular –<em>s</em></td>
<td>Regular past <em>ed</em></td>
<td>Possessive <em>s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third person singular <em>s</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncontractible auxiliary <em>be</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contractible copula <em>be</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Auxiliary <em>be</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be observed from Table 3, there are some differences and similarities of grammatical morpheme order of acquisition worth discussing. As has been stated in the finding, copula *be* is the subject’s most acquired morpheme. Brown’s order shows that this grammatical morpheme is acquired later in the learners’ development. However, there is a similar order when we compare the subject acquisition of this grammatical morpheme to the one in Krashen’s order. According to his order, copula *be* is categorized into the first three grammatical morphemes acquired earlier in the learners’ development. Similarly, the subject’s acquisition of auxiliary *be* is also shown to be in a different order as compared to Brown’s and Krashen’s. In relation to progressive *ing* acquisition, there is a similarity of order between Brown’s and Krashen’s, which is identified as different in the subject’s order.

In terms of the acquisition of the articles *a* and *the*, the three orders of development show similarity. It is acquired in the middle of the orders before the irregular past form-*ed*. Another similarity is also identified in the acquisition of the grammatical morpheme third person singular-*s*. As the table indicates, this grammatical morpheme is found to be acquired later in the subject’s order and Krashen’s. However, Brown’s order suggests differently. Finally, the plural-*s* is shown to be the last acquired one by the subject of this research; however, different finding is identified in the other two orders.

The above discussion seems to indicate that there are some similarities of grammatical morpheme orders that the subject has or has not yet acquired as compared with the other order. Littlewood (1984) states 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 whether the learners are children or adults, whatever their mother tongue, and even if they have received some formal instructions.’ (p 39)

In this paper a contrastive study between Vietnamese and English structure is presented, as an effort to find possibilities of the subject’s later development of the grammatical morphemes of the plural-*s* and third person singular-*s*. Nor are verbs inflected for subject-verb agreement. As has been stated at the review of related literature, in Vietnamese there is no inflectional marking done by way of prefixes or suffixes including the ones indicating tense or numbers. Thus, by conducting a comparison
between Vietnamese and English, we might have an insight toward one of the findings of this study. These examples illustrate the uses of the plural inflection-s in both structures.

I have a dog.
Toì chô mot chôn chô.

I have three dogs.
Co ay co ba con chô.

The following are examples of contrastive structures between the uses of inflection verb-s in Vietnamese and in English. An example of the regular past tense-ed is also presented to provide a clearer idea that there is no verb inflection in Vietnamese.

I walked.
Toì da di.

She walks.
Co ay di.

The above examples show that there are differences in terms of grammatical morpheme applications of plural noun and verb inflection between the two languages. An analysis based on contrastive hypothesis, that first language structure interferes with the second language acquisition, would probably conclude that the later development is caused by Vietnamese interference. Similar conclusion would also emerge referring this finding to the result of the study conducted by Kenji Hakuta (1974) in Littlewood (1984). In this study, it is found out that the plural-s is acquired later. It is further stated that ‘Hakuta points out that the notions of plurality and the definite/ indefinite distinction do not exist in Japanese grammar’ (p 40).

Other studies have showed a different idea concerning this matter. Dulay and Burt (1982), Nathalie Bailey et al. (1974) and Brown (1973) in Littlewood (1984) propose that the natural acquisition of morpheme acquisition is not dependent on the learner’s first language. In other words, ‘first language transfer 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 acquisition of the grammatical morpheme-s and plural-s identified in the subject’s samples are due to this fact.
Another discussion related to the subject’s language development deals with the repetition of words frequently done when the subject attempts to construct full sentences, for example:

I... am... I’m going to study for one year. For one year...
Am... No I am employer.... employer... (not clear)... vice... vice *(talking Vietnamese)*
Because... because I aaa... in Vietnam I have a work.
They are... they are... married. For one... about a month... a month.

Repetitions found most in the subject’s utterances can be categorized as self-repetition or same-speaker repetitions (Schnelby, 1994 in Sawir, 2004). They refer to repetitions occurring when the speakers repeat themselves. Furthermore, the aforementioned findings seem to indicate that the repetitions are mostly due to her uncertainty of constructing correct sentences. Tannen, (1989), Murata, (1995), Perrin et al., (2003) in Sawir, (2004) call these repetitions as ‘stalling’, that is to gain time while thinking about the next utterances.

**CONCLUSION**

This study points out some aspects regarding the acquisition of grammatical morphemes as shown by a Vietnamese learner of English. First, some of the acquisition orders of her grammatical morphemes show similarities and differences as compared with previous related studies (Brown (1973) as cited in Dulay & Burt (1982) and Krashen (as in Littlewood, 1984). Second, different sentence structures between English and Vietnamese exist concerning the subject’s grammatical morpheme orders. However, further investigations are necessary to determine whether they are caused by the interference of the first language. Finally, somewhat related to the study of grammatical morphemes, it might be concluded that the repetitions are due to the subject’s language planning before speech and grammatical encoding.
REFERENCES


