



A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY ON THE  
EMERGENCE OF VERB INFLECTIONS AMONG  
ESL LOW-INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is to show the developmental pattern of emergence of verb inflections among adult ESL learners, specifically on low-intermediate learners. Many previous studies have delved into this issue but unlike its predecessors, this study takes a very different approach; instead of using the conventional SOC approach to determine the sequence of emergence, this research opts for functional model. This approach is taken on the basis that it will expand the analysis of both the learners' targetlike and non-targetlike usage. The former approach (SOC) would only examine the targetlike usage of learners' output. Thus, for this purpose, 6 ESL low-intermediate students from UTM Semarak, Kuala Lumpur are chosen; these students are asked to write 4 in-class essays every 2 weeks as well as in a journal and their use of inflectional verbs are observed for a period of 10 weeks. Interestingly, at the end of the study, it is discovered that there is no similar sequence of emergence of English verbal inflections among the learners. The learners showed individual differences in their rates of attainment of the inflectional morphemes. It is then concluded that every learner's developmental acquisition of inflectional morphemes is unique and cannot be 'standardized' based on the overall emergent order of the samples.

## خلاصة البحث

ترصد هذه الدراسة التطورات النمطية التي تظهر في التغيرات الصرفية في الأفعال، لدى الطلاب الراشدين من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية؛ خاصة طلاب المستوى المتوسط الأدنى. وقد تعمقت كثير من الدراسات السابقة في بحث هذا الموضوع؛ عن طريق المنهج التقليدي (السياق الاجتماعي) لتحديد ظهور التغيرات الصرفية، ولكن خلافاً للدراسات السابقة فقد اختارت هذه الدراسة مدخلاً مختلفاً هو المنهج الوظيفي، وتم اختيار هذا المدخل لأنه مبني على التحليل الواسع لاستخدام الدارسين للغة الراغبين فيها، وكذلك استخدامهم للغة غير الراغبين فيها، أما المنهج السابق (السياق الاجتماعي التقليدي) فإنه يختبر حصيلة الدارسين في استخدام اللغة الراغبين فيها فقط. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف فقد تم اختيار 6 طلاب من متعلمي الإنجليزية في المستوى المتوسط الأدنى من جامعة ماليزيا للتكنولوجيا، في سمرات؛ كوالالمبور لكتابة 4 مقالات في الفصل كل أسبوعين، ولكتابتها كذلك في مجلة، وتمت مراقبة التغيرات الصرفية في استخدام الأفعال لمدة 10 أسابيع. والطريف في نهاية الدراسة أن النتائج أشارت إلى أنه لا يوجد تشابه في ظهور التغيرات الصرفية في استخدام الفعل في اللغة الإنجليزية وسط الدارسين، وأظهرت الدراسة فروقاً فردية بين الدارسين في مقدار إدراكهم للتغيرات الصرفية. وهكذا تم التوصل إلى أن اكتساب كل دارس للتغيرات الصرفية، وتطورها يُعدُّ خاصاً به، ولا يمكن النظر إلى تلك التغيرات بمعيار موحد؛ بناء على العينات.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Language Studies).

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Sciences

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Rabiah Tul Adawiyah Mohamed Salleh

Signature .....

Date .....

**INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

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LEARNERS**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY ON THE EMERGENCE OF VERB INFLECTIONS AMONG ESL LOW- INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Morpheme order studies is indeed one of the most frequent subjects in Second Language Acquisition field. Many prominent researchers in this area such as Larsen – Freeman (1975), Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974), Mace-Matluck (1977, as cited in Kwon, 2005) and Perkins (1975) work from the Universal Grammar (UG) theory perspective. In their researches, they found that despite their samples' first language backgrounds, the order of morpheme acquired were similar and consistent. Thus, they were mainly concerned in gathering evidence that support the innatist theory and debunk behaviorist models in the 1950s. The innatist theory posits that language is not a set of learned response but there is an innate device that assists learners to develop their second language competence based on predictable patterns (Kwon, 2005).

Therefore, due to this primary concern, Brown (1973) developed the concept of suppliance in obligatory context (SOC), a concept based on traditional grammar that would measure learners' acquisition of morphemes. The basic idea of this concept is that learners are considered to have acquired the morpheme if they are able to supply the correct morpheme in its context. If not, it is assumed that the morpheme is not acquired. This concept indeed has become so central in morpheme studies and is used by many researchers up till the present time.

However, this concept has been questioned for only analyzing the target-like usage of learners' developing morphological acquisition. SOC tends to overlook other

aspects of learners' process of acquisition, for instance the semantic and functional value of learners' language samples.

Apart from the issue on SOC, it is also discovered that with regards to research in morphological developments, there have been very few or no comprehensive studies which specifically investigate the different types of grammatical function words and verb inflections in relation to morpheme acquisition and how these elements (grammatical function words and verb inflections) develop in learners' interlanguage. Also, many of the early SLA research (Brown, 1973; Dulay and Burt, 1974) as well as the recent ones (Widiatmoko, 2008) described the acquisition order simply on its targetlike usage. Instead of investigating the interesting details of how the morphemes gradually emerge in learners' linguistic repertoire, their concern is mainly on the correct occurrence of the morphemes in learners' output, which are in speech and writing corpus.

Thus, the main aim of this research is twofold; first, to investigate the emergence and development of verb inflections among ESL beginners and to provide evidence that SOC does not accurately analyze the acquisition, or the emergent order of verbal morphology in ESL learners' interlanguage.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

As aforementioned, morpheme studies is one of the very frequent subjects in L2 acquisition theory. However, while there has been numerous research in the field, most of these prominent studies focus on the acquisition of morphemes as a whole. They have included free and bound morphemes, lexical and grammatical, derivational and inflectional morphemes and all these are mixed and not specified (Brown, 1973; de Villiers and de Villiers, 1973; Dulay and Burt, 1974).

There are indeed very few or perhaps no comprehensive studies on the development of specific types of grammatical function words and inflectional morphology in learners' interlanguage. Pioneering research by Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1974) may have included the acquisition of inflectional features such as plural *-s* and 3<sup>rd</sup> person *-s* but their discussion on the acquisition is descriptive and offers no explanation on the process of the emergence of the morphemes and the constraints of the features on the development of learners' interlanguage (Wei, 2000).

In addition, many research in the literature of morpheme studies focus exclusively on learners' targetlike usage, or the correct occurrence of morpheme production in learners' output (Barrot, 2010; Disbrow-Chen, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 1974; Widiatmoko, 2008; Wei, 2000b). The researchers are merely concerned with the endpoint of acquisition and the acquisition order is determined solely based on the use of correct morpheme in learners' speech and writing and thus neglecting targetlike and non-targetlike usage of morpheme among the learners.

Apart from the sole focus on learners' targetlike usage, it was discovered that many studies in morpheme acquisition opt for Brown's obligatory context (SOC) as their framework. This concept put great emphasis on learners' and speakers' ability to supply the correct morphemes in certain contexts. The morpheme is deemed acquired if the subjects manage to supply 90% of correct morphemes in their contexts. This method of scoring the data is developed from rule-based traditional grammar in which language is seen as a rule-based system. For traditional grammarians, every single word can be explained using outlined rules, with the exception of a few cases, as explained by Reid (1991), "Proponents of sentence grammar are well aware that not everything within the sentence is susceptible to formal treatment ...Sentence

grammarians point instead to the fact that many lexical and grammatical choices appear to trigger automatic morphological responses unrelated to expressive intent” (p.3)

However, it is argued that this model would not be able to accurately analyze the acquisition of morpheme because certain anomalies exist. Sentence like “Statistics is my favourite subject” (Subramaniam Govindasamy, 2010, p.2), is an anomaly and sentence-based grammarians regard this simply as an exception. However, from the point of view of the functional model proponents such as Subramaniam Govindasamy (2010), this is due to the meaning assigned by the speakers. Thus, the main discrepancy with SOC approach is that its excessive focus on the outcome of the acquisition makes it overlook the interesting aspects of the process of the acquisition and learners’ developmental pattern.

Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap on theoretical knowledge with regard to learners’ morphological development and the discrepancy in SOC approach. Furthermore, it seems that researches in this subject predominantly revolve on children’s first language morpheme acquisition or that of ESL advanced learner’s. Thus, it is vital that an empirical research is conducted to gauge the emergence of morpheme among low-intermediate ESL learners.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study strives to investigate the sequence of emergence of verb inflections among ESL low intermediate learners. Though there are numerous research in the area of natural order studies, most of them are only focusing on the emergent order of morphemes as a whole (Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1974; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973). Therefore, this study would enrich the literature of

morpheme order studies by examining the development of the specific types of morpheme, namely English verb inflections.

Apart from this, this study also aims to observe the developmental process of the emergent sequence of English verb inflections in the interlanguage of ESL low-intermediate learners. It aims not only to look at the endpoint of the acquisition but to observe the gradual processes involved in learners' interlanguage.

Finally, this research also intends to observe the acquisition patterns of verb inflections among the learners using the new approach, the functional model. This model combines form and structure and meaning perspectives. It would provide new theoretical perspectives on the acquisition of verb inflections on ESL low-intermediate learners.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study aims to answer the following questions;

- 1) What is the emergence sequence of verb inflection acquisition among ESL learners?
- 2) Based on the functional model, do learners approximate target language form?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

It is firmly believed that the outcome of this study would be very relevant and extremely beneficial to linguists because, as aforementioned, there are very few studies which investigate the developmental pattern of a specific morpheme emergence in learners' interlanguage. Most of the researches are mainly concerned



with the development of morpheme as a whole and only look at the endpoint of acquisition.

Thus, this particular study would greatly benefit teachers, educators as well as language instructors as it would provide useful information on ESL beginners' linguistic competence, especially in terms of their understanding and acquisition of verb inflections. Knowing the learners' weakness and strength would assist the teachers greatly in designing and tailoring classroom syllabus.

The outcome of this research would also be of great importance to linguists because there has yet to be an empirical research on morpheme studies which employ Subramaniam's (2010) functional model. This model is able to further shed light on certain inconsistencies in sentence-based grammar. Since meaning, as opposed to mere form and structure, are emphasized in this approach, the findings would give different perspectives and intriguing details on the process of the acquisition of morpheme among low-intermediate learners.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

### **Emergence**

For this study, instead of using the term learners' acquisition, the researcher opts for the term emergence. Many researchers in the studies of accuracy order use the term acquisition which refers to 60%, 80% and 90% of correct usage or targetlike usage of morpheme in its context (Palotti and Peloso, 2008).

Pienemann (1998) also prefers to use the concept of emergence than acquisition. The emergence construct, according to him, is the first systematic use; "Emergence is the first systematic use of a structure, so that the point in time can be located when a learner has in principle grasped the learning task" (as cited by Pallotti,

2007, p.365). However, for this study, the researcher opts for Pallotti's (2007) definition of emergence. Emergence, according to him is described as when learners have begun to use certain structures or forms across different lexical items with some regularity. Research and studies that focus on emergence attempt to document when certain structures establish themselves in the learners' interlanguage repertoire. Thus, the focus is not only on the endpoint of acquisition, but also in the process of acquisition itself.

### **Verb Inflections**

Verb inflections in this study refer to only certain inflections, namely: the third person singular present (-s), the simple past tense (-ed), the past progressive tense (was/were + -ing) and the present progressive tense (is/are + -ing). Since the study is only a 10 week study, only selected inflections are chosen. However, if other verb inflections such as the irregular past tense, the present perfect tense, the pluperfect and the past participle tense are present in the corpus, the inflections would be included in the analysis.

### **Low-intermediate Learners**

Finally, low-intermediate ESL learners used in this study refer to students who obtain lower than 50% in their English Placement Test in their university entrance exam. This group of learners is chosen because of their elementary level of English, despite being postgraduate students who, many would have thought, should have higher proficiency in the English language.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section consists of pioneering studies on temporality, followed by verb inflections, issues on the concept of suppliance in obligatory concept (SOC), the development of morpheme studies and recent findings on morpheme studies.

#### **PIONEERING STUDIES ON TEMPORALITY**

In the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), natural order studies, particularly those conducted on grammatical morphemes have made major contributions in the quest to understand the intricacies of acquiring a second or foreign language. Natural order studies is also known as tense/aspect morphology. In fact, tense/aspect morphology occupies a central place in the pedagogical accounts of language learning. The study of temporal expressions or tense/aspect morphology is a recurrent presence in SLA research literature. It first gained popularity in the 1970s and has continued to be a subject of interest up till the present time.

Both Klein (1994) and Bardovi- Harlig (2000) describe three main approaches to the acquisition of temporality: form-only studies, meaning-oriented approach and form-oriented approach. The first type of research to investigate tense-aspect morphology was form-only studies. The research focused exclusively on the formal aspects of temporality, notably verb morphology (Klein, 1994). These studies are also known as studies on the accuracy order or natural morpheme order studies. The most well-known examples of the form-only approach are the morpheme studies by Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1974).

As aforementioned, studies on natural morpheme order began in the 1970s, pioneered by Brown (1973) and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973). These two studies were very significant, “not only for their historical value but also for their continuing influence” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, p.4). Brown’s research was a five-year case study that observed three native English children at a stage when they were just starting to produce multi-word utterances. His research revealed that although the children’s speech developed at varying rates, there were certain orders of morphemes that were very consistent. This order is shown in the following table:

Table 2.1  
Morpheme order acquisition for English as a First Language (Brown, 1973, p.281)

Order	Morpheme
1	Present progressive (verb + ing)
2-3	In, on
4	Plural (noun + s)
5	Past irregular (ran, saw, went, etc)
6	Possessive (noun + s)
7	Uncontractible copula (is, am, are was)
8	Articles (a, the)
9	Past regular (verb + -ed)
10	Third person regular (verb + -s)
11	Third person irregular (does, has)
12	Uncontractible auxiliary (am, are, was)
13	Contractible copula (I’m, she’s, they’re)
14	Contractible auxiliary (I’m going)

Similarly, de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) also discovered a consistent pattern of morpheme acquisition among 21 children aged 16-49 months. These two pioneering studies work on the perspective of first language users.

The first groundbreaking morpheme order study that investigated ESL learners was conducted by Dulay and Burt (1974). ESL or English as a Second Language is a

term which refers to the study or use of English by speakers and learners of different native language (Yearwood, 2008). Dulay and Burt (1974) replicated de Villiers and de Villiers' research on 115 children from Chinese and Spanish first language backgrounds. They began the study with the question "Is there a common sequence with which children acquiring English as a second language learn certain structures?". In their findings, Dulay and Burt discovered that there was a consistent pattern of acquisitions among the children (1974).

### **Verb Inflections**

A morpheme is literally defined as the smallest unit of meaning in a language, either as a whole word such as 'man' or as part of a word such as 'un-' in 'unsafe' (Coates, 1999). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, as cited in Barrot, 2010) added to this meaning by dividing morphemes into two types: bound and free morphemes. The former consists of derivational and inflectional morphemes. The latter, on the other hand, is further classified into two subgroups: free morphemes with lexical content which represent the major parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) while free grammatical functional morphemes include articles, prepositions and conjunctions. Barrot (2010) aptly summarized these classifications through the following diagram:

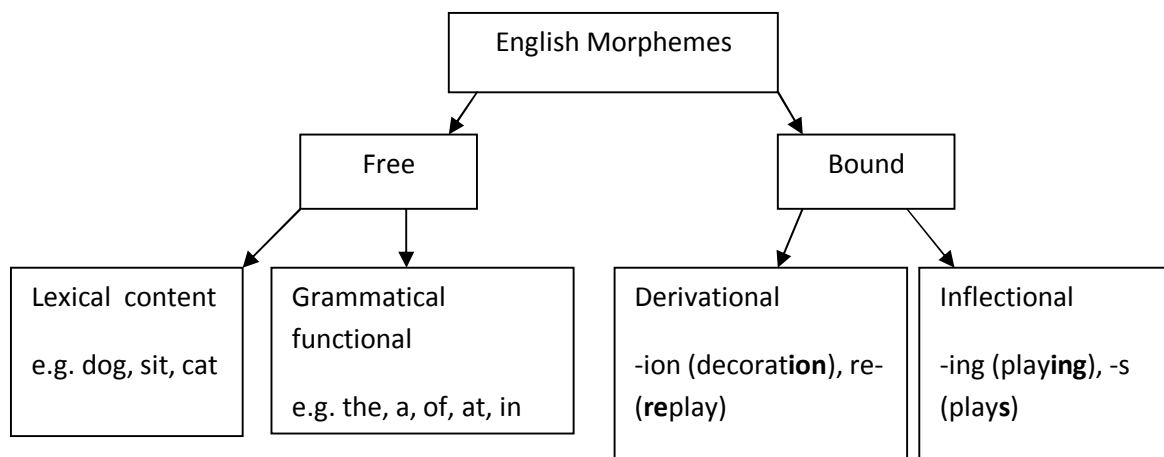


Diagram 2.1

According to Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003), many languages, including English have bound morphemes that have a strictly grammatical function. Such morphemes are called inflectional morphemes and they never change the syntactic category of the words they are attached to. There are a total of eight bound inflectional affixes in English language:

English Inflectional Morphemes	Examples
i. -s third person singular present	she call- <b>s</b>
ii. -ed past tense	she call- <b>ed</b>
iii. -ing progressive	she is call- <b>ing</b>
iv. -en past participle	she has writt- <b>en</b>
v. -s plural	she takes the book- <b>s</b>
vi. -'s possessive	Lisa' <b>s</b> <b>book</b>
vii. -er comparative	she is tall- <b>er</b> than her
viii. -est superlative	she is the tall- <b>est</b>

For this study, only inflectional affixes attached to verbs are examined. Unfortunately, there are not many researches that delve into the study of verb inflections. Most of them focus on the emergence order of morpheme as a whole. In Wei (2000), he found that among all the inflected verbs, the progressive –ing is most accessible to learners because it contains the meaning of an ongoing action. On the other hand, the third person singular –s in English is a late system morpheme because it only signals certain grammatical relations hence making it difficult for learners to internalize in their interlanguage.

In Barrot (2010), the focus of his study is on the accuracy order of selected grammatical morpheme and interestingly, it was found that the possessive –'s gains the highest percent of accuracy level. Similar to Wei (2000), Barrot (2010) discovered that the third person singular –s is among the grammatical morpheme with the lowest percentage of accuracy. Therefore it can be concluded that inflectional morphemes which carry meaning are more easily accessible to learners than the ones which only signify grammatical relations.

So far, there is yet to be a specific study which observes the developments of English verb inflections in learners' interlanguage. Thus, it is hoped that this study would enrich the literature by contributing in this area.

### **Issues on the Concept of Suppliance in Obligatory Context (SOC)**

In his study, Brown (1973) introduced his most significant benchmark in the field: the concept of SOC. It is a form of measurement and a method to quantify the data in order to see whether a certain morpheme has truly been acquired by speakers/learners. Brown (1973) elaborated upon the concept as follows:

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 incorrect. This performance measure, the percentage of morphemes supplied in obligatory contexts, should not be dependent on the topic of conversation or the character of interaction. (p.255)

Therefore, if a speaker manages to supply the correct morpheme, he or she is regarded as having acquired it. de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1974) also used Brown's SOC to analyze the acquisition order of their samples. Using this concept of SOC, these early morpheme order studies tried to determine the acquisition order of grammatical morphemes by ranking the selected morphemes in terms of correctness in obligatory contexts.

The researchers deemed the morphemes as acquired if the respondents used it in target-like form without considering any other semantic or functional value (Klein, 1994). Apart from this, further analysis would reveal that most of the research on form-oriented/morpheme order studies has utilized the framework of generative (UG) studies of language. Klein (1994) illustrated this by stating that:

Focus in these studies is exclusively on the acquisition of the syntactic properties of inflectional morphemes and their abstract underlying representations: The language learner must learn how to coordinate both the semantic and syntactic properties of temporal markers as verbs may surface in different syntactic slots, depending on whether they are finite or non-finite. Usually, research in the UG framework does not consider conceptual properties of the linguistic means used and consider verbal markings as person-agreement (Parodi, 2000) or as purely "tense-markings" not distinguishing tense and aspect functions. (p.3)

However, SOC continues to serve as the underpinning for research on the acquisition order of morphemes today, though many prominent linguists have questioned its usage. In a recent study, Wei (2000) investigated morpheme acquisition among Japanese ESL learners using the 4-M model. This model identifies four types