

ENGLISH MORPHEME ACQUISITION ORDER OF MALAY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to determine the English morpheme acquisition order (EMAO) of Malay secondary school students (MSS) in ESL and EFL settings, specifically, to compare whether the acquisition orders are similar as shown in Dulay & Burt's (1974a) study on ESL students in ESL setting. Research design considered the two different settings; urban (ESL) and rural (EFL) and 600 subjects were sampled from 12 classrooms from both settings. Written responses based on the two test types: (1) written composition and (2) translation tasks and not oral tests such as the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) used by Burt, Dulay and Hernandez (1973) which were designed to elicit spoken responses. Two methods of analysis were used; Method I utilized the strictest target-like use (TLU) by Lightbown, Spada, and Wallace (1980) and Stauble (1981) to determine accurate use and distributional patterns for each of the nine morphemes. Method II used (originally by Brown, 1973) to analyze the Suppliance in Obligatory Context Analysis (SOC). The findings showed that the EMAO-MSS of different age groups in the same setting; urban or rural schools follow the same order of English morpheme acquisition but the order was not similar for the students in different setting. Only the urban Malay students (ESL) followed the order recorded by Dulay & Burt (1974a).

Keywords: Morpheme studies, morpheme acquisition order, ESL/EFL learning settings

Abstrak

Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menentukan susunan pengambilalihan morfem bahasa Inggeris (EMAO) pelajar sekolah menengah Melayu (MSS) dalam tetapan ESL dan EFL, khususnya, untuk membandingkan sama ada pesanan pengambil pesanan adalah seperti yang ditunjukkan dalam Dulay & Burt (s)) kajian pelajar ESL dalam penetapan ESL.

Reka bentuk penyelidikan mengambil kira dua tetapan berbeza; bandar (ESL) dan luar bandar (EFL) dan 600 subjek diambil sebagai sampel dari 12 bilik darjah dari kedua-dua tetapan. Jawapan bertulis berdasarkan dua jenis ujian: (1) komposisi bertulis dan (2) tugas terjemahan dan ujian bukan lisan seperti Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) yang digunakan oleh Burt, Dulay dan Hernandez (1973) yang direka untuk mendapatkan jawapan yang dituturkan. Dua kaedah analisis telah digunakan; Kaedah I menggunakan penggunaan target-like use (TLU) oleh Lightbown, Spada, dan Wallace (1980) dan Stauble (1981) untuk menentukan ketepatan penggunaan dan pola pengagihan untuk setiap sembilan morphemes. Kaedah II yang digunakan (asalnya oleh Brown, 1973) untuk menganalisis Suplins dalam Obligatory Context Analysis (SOC). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa EMAO-MSS kumpulan umur yang berbeza dalam suasana yang sama; sekolah bandar atau luar bandar mengikuti susunan pengambilalihan morfem bahasa Inggeris tetapi turutan itu tidak serupa dengan pelajar dalam keadaan yang berbeza. Hanya pelajar-pelajar Melayu bandar (ESL) mengikuti perintah yang direkodkan oleh Dulay & Burt (1974a).

Kata Kunci: Kajian morfem, susunan pemerolehan morfem, suasana pembelajaran ESL/EFL

INTRODUCTION

The settings of learning a second language (L2) have been one of the major factors in determining the thriving of acquiring an L2. Learning settings can be defined as the environment where learners pick up or learn the L2. There are three different settings; (1) the naturalistic environment (for example learning English in England or USA) where learners acquire an L2 as natural as acquiring a first language (L1), (2) formal learning in classroom as well as informal learning in natural setting and (3) in foreign language setting which strictly confined to formal classroom such as in Malaysia in a rural area.

The learning setting of learning English in Malaysia is however very peculiar, since English language has long been considered as an important L2 and is widely used interactively in communication by many especially in urban areas. It is therefore very normal for Malaysian students to have English as their L1 on one hand and others as a foreign language. The majority of rural students are learning English as a foreign language (FL) and they receive input only in the classroom.

These students from different language setting have mixed exposures to the language. On one hand, the urban students are in a language setting that is similar to learning English in ESL setting and receive a rich exposure to the language since they use it at home and outside the classroom. On the other hand, the rural students do not have a similar ESL setting but the exposure is only constrained to the classroom setting which obviously is an EFL setting. These exposures provide students in different settings with different quality of input which affect their rate and quality in reaching target-like mastery of native speakers.

The rural students receive low quality input and the constraints of input in learning an L2 in FL setting which are usually not present in L1 might affect the developmental processes of acquiring L2 and L1 significantly. Learners who are learning L2 in an ESL setting, do not experience these constraints (poor input) since it takes place in the same way as learning an L1 where most words or morphemes are acquired in contexts which provide the meaning, but L2 learners in FLA setting learn the meaning of words and morphemes explicitly in classrooms, which often lack sufficient contextualized input in the target language. For instance, certain words have different meanings and have to be acquired in different contexts, so teachers need to bring real life situations or provide simulation to give natural language experience. Also, other factors may influence second language acquisition, such as personality, cognitive style, language environment, attitude, motivation, age and the learner's L1 background (Ellis, 1997). In spite of all the differences, the nature of input and the background of the learners' first language, researchers note that there is a general pattern in L2 acquisition of the English language by all second language learners (Cook, 1993).

Since the early 1970s, researchers in ESL setting have been trying to determine if there is a common order in both L1 and L2 acquisition. For example, it is observed that L1 children at an early age seem to leave out grammatical morphemes rather than content morphemes (Wei, 2000). Lightbown and Spada (1999) suggest that there is a high degree of similarity between the way learners acquire their first and second languages and there are predictable patterns in the emergence and development of many features of languages they are learning. These findings as well as other areas of enquiry show us that we have considerable knowledge of what language features learners learn first in their early language development and also how this development occurs.

The different settings of learning an L2, require the students to employ different learning strategies and employ different language skills for their language activities.

The ESL students are immersed in the language setting and will employ listening as a receptive skill and speaking as a productive skill while EFL will not be able to utilize these oral/aural skills. Utilizing oral/aural skills (e.g. the communicative approach) is like submerging the students in learning; swim or sink. Highly motivated students or those who are given extra help (e.g. through the use of ICT) may survive the ordeal of learning an L2. In consequent, our teaching approach which emphasizes oral/aural skills without making any differences between the ESL/EFL students may only benefit the ESL students who would be able to apply what was learnt in the classroom outside in their community. Thus, our teaching approaches in teaching English as a second language in Malaysia are not aligned with the learning styles of the majority of Malaysian students especially learners in the rural areas. As a result, their development of the English language among ESL students fossilizes before it reaches native-like mastery.

The issue of language learning setting is very significant since it has very important pedagogical implication in L2 classrooms. For example Krashen's model of teaching and communicative approach is very influential teaching approach adopted in Malaysia. The belief that L1=L2, has affected the way teachers implement their lessons in the classrooms. Many teachers believe that teaching L2 should be the same way as teaching L1, hence they do not differentiate between ESL and EFL learners and the outcomes are obvious; ESL students have better achievement compared to the EFL students.

In trying to understand the processes in acquiring an L2, this study adopted the framework of Gass's SLA (1988) who suggests that the process of language acquisition occurs in five stages which show overlapping, yet distinguishable sets of processes. First, after being exposed to the ambient input, learners perceive selected aspects of the input, from which they derive some form of meaning representations of the input messages. Comprehension and intake are considered to represent different processes, of which only the latter is used for further processing for learning. Through the processes of hypothesis formation, testing, modification, confirmation, and rejection, the intake may subsequently be integrated into the developing system. Finally, learners selectively use their developing system in their output. The output process is not only a product of acquisition, but also an active component in the overall acquisition processes.

In providing salient input for the EFL students, teachers should focus on reading as a receptive skill and writing as a productive skill. These two language skills should be employed in providing comprehensible input and output.

In making reading as a salient input, instructional reading materials (Miller, 1995) should be selected and exploited to provide recognition and comprehension of the linguistic cues in the reading text. After every linguistic cue in the text is learned, consequently teachers can focus on production activities such as retelling based on the text they have exploited.

This paper highlights the order of morpheme acquisition by the Malay students in different settings and argues for the teaching approach be evaluated. If the students follow a similar acquisition order as shown in Dulay & Burt (1974) than the belief L1 should be approached the same as L1 is true and if it does not follow that the approach that L1=L2 should be reexamined by teachers. As in the current practices, the adoption of L1=L2 seems to benefit only the ESL students and not the EFL students in the rural areas. The research findings should be able to provide more insight in describing and explaining how L2 learning takes place in different language settings. Ultimately, this is relevant to the practice of language teaching in Malaysia, specifically in terms of sequencing, ordering and grading of grammatical morphemes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This first question was undertaken for four main reasons. Firstly, it was conducted to investigate whether the Malay secondary school students in different language settings; urban and rural exhibit the same or similar acquisition order of English morpheme learning. Secondly, the study determines whether there are similarities and differences in the EMAO-MSS for the same and different age levels. Thirdly, the purpose was to find out whether the EMAO-MSS of different ages in two language settings (urban and rural) are similar to Dulay and Burt's (1974a) subject in the order of English morpheme acquisition of ESL learners. Finally, to find out whether there is a learning sequence in the EMAO of *be* (auxiliary and copula) within specific linguistic environments, which all Malay ESL learners followed regardless of language context and age. The final question enable the researcher to analyze further into specific problem of using *be* writing simple sentences among the Malay students. This provided a more complete analysis of the students' competence and performance in basic grammatical items especially *copula and auxiliary be* and to determine which of the items are easy or difficult for them to learn.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many Malaysian students are unable to carry on a simple conversation or write sentences free from basic grammatical errors in the English language even though they have completed at least 11 to 13 years of English language classes (Lim, 1994; Idris, 1997; Harison, 2002). Grammar has long been noted as an area of difficulty for ESL learners (Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974a; Leonard, 1998) and similarly they pose a great problem to Malay ESL/EFL students especially in learning tenses and verb forms (Idris, 1997; Zuridah, 2001; Harison, 2002). Even though some of the English grammatical items are easy to define and describe, they pose problems for ESL learners at all levels for these items seem to cause a lot of difficulties for the students to use them correctly and repeatedly they make the same errors in their speaking and writing. For example, research on L2 morpheme acquisition (Celcia-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) has shown that the third person singular present tense *s* inflection (*e.g. He plays football every day*) causes persistent problems for learners even at more advanced stages of proficiency. Experienced teachers know that some of these grammatical items are very difficult to acquire. Even though students have learned the items from year one and teachers do teach them regularly, they keep on repeating the same mistakes (Celcia-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). These errors are rampant, if not diehard features in the speech and essays written by Malaysian secondary ESL/EFL school students.

Research Questions

The research involved Malay secondary school students in Form 1 (13 years old), Form 2 (14 years old) and Form 4 (16 years old) who were learning English in ESL/EFL settings. It investigated the interlanguage development of the students by analyzing the use, misuse, or omission of nine grammatical English language morphemes in two samples of their written language, translation and composition. By tracing and analyzing the product of Malay students' writings, this study hoped to determine the pattern of English language morphemes acquisition (EMAO) taken by the Malay students in both ESL and EFL settings.

Research Question 1

What is the English morpheme acquisition order (EMAO) exhibited by (a) the urban students and (b) the rural students?

Research Question 2

Are there significant correlations in the EMAO-MSS of different age groups in the urban and rural school settings with Dulay and Burt's (1974a) English morpheme learning order (EMAO) of ESL learners?

Research Question 3

Do the EMAO-MSS in two language settings (urban and rural) exhibit similar order to Dulay and Burt's (1974a) subjects?

Research Question 4

Is there a learning sequence in the EMAO of *be* (auxiliary and copula) within specific linguistic environments, which all Malay ESL learners followed regardless of language context and age.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The outcome of the study advocates teachers to utilize the English morpheme acquisition order in their teaching with the purpose of achieving better academic and social goals for students. Studies on morpheme acquisitions have indicated that students learn morphemes in certain order that can be exploited in teaching and learning to attain higher achievement and greater productivity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework anticipates investigating whether the Malay students EMAO-MSS matches the natural developmental order for English morpheme acquisition postulated by Dulay and Burt (1974a) for ESL learners. The theoretical framework explains the involvement of internal and external independent variables which determine the acquisition order. Several theories of second language acquisition were synthesized to form the theoretical framework for this study: The Monitor Model (Krashen, 1987, 1988), Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), Universal grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 1964, 1965) and the 4-M Model (Myers-Scotton & Jake, 1999).

The Monitor Model (Krashen, 1987) includes i) The Acquisition versus Learning Hypothesis, ii) The Monitor Hypothesis, iii) The Natural Order Hypothesis, iv) The Input Hypothesis and v) The Affective Filter Hypothesis. This model explains most of the factors involved in second language acquisition such as age, personality traits, classroom instruction, innate mechanisms of language acquisition, environmental influences or setting and input.

The variables that play a major influence in the current study can be categorized into three types; independent, dependent and mediating variables. The two independent variables studied are age group and setting, dependent variables are EMAO-MSS, EMAO-DB (1974a) and EMAO of Japanese learners in EFL setting (Makino, 1979), and the mediating variables are the students' L1 background and the quality of instruction.

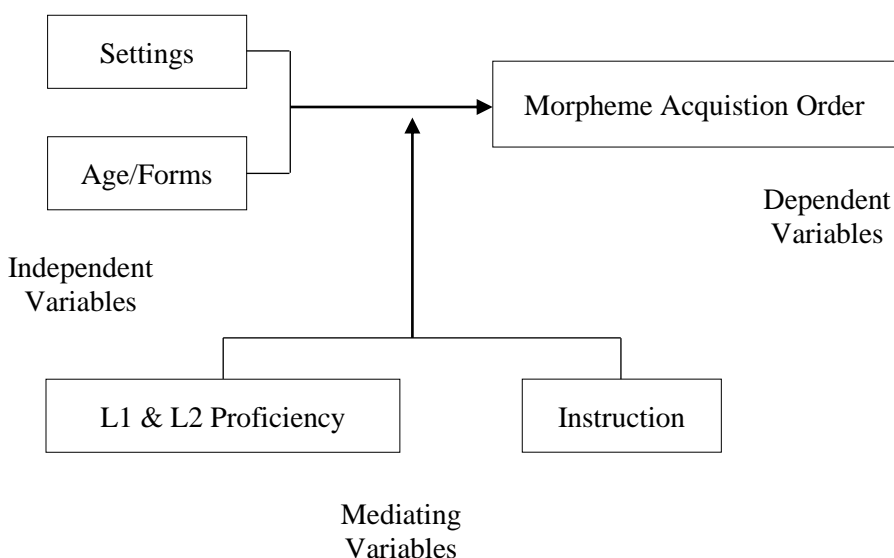


Figure 2.1: A Theoretical Framework of the Malay Student Morpheme Acquisition Order

The first researcher to study grammatical morphemes and their acquisition was Brown (1974), a pioneer in first language acquisition research. Brown (1973) conducted a case study of three children learning English as their first language, found that “content” words such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives were acquired first, while “functors” or function morphemes were acquired later. In addition, Brown discovered that although the three children he studied acquired English at different rates, the order in which they acquired fourteen morphemes was surprisingly consistent.

This finding led to important support for there being an innate language mechanism in the human brain, thereby helping to illuminate the workings of the mind when acquiring a second language (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001). Soon after Brown's (1973) the first study to look at morpheme acquisition was carried out by Dulay and Burt in 1974. They discovered that there was a natural order of acquisition despite the L1 differences of their subjects.

The review discusses the main variables involved in the current study in order to highlight to complexity of EMAO-MSS. The variables include; first, age and settings which consider SLA in naturalistic setting versus foreign language setting, innate ability or LAD and the role of conscious and unconscious learning. Second, the researcher discusses mediating variables that are also important in influencing the order of acquisition; the importance of instruction and third, other researches that are related to this study; Interlanguage (IL), the natural acquisition order, the English morpheme acquisition order in Naturalistic Environment (ESL) and Foreign Language Setting (EFL), Error Analysis (EA), the causes for learner errors, the pattern of errors, transfer and the Malay students' ESL/EFL development. Each of these variables is examined in turn.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was a cross-sectional study investigating the order of English morpheme acquisition by Malaysian, Malay secondary school students. It used quantitative method in data collection and analysis. In the quantitative methodology, data were collected through the use of written tests adapted from Hatch and Farhady (1982) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991). The topics used in the composition tests and translation items were piloted for appropriateness. All the test items were piloted with Cronbach's Alpha 0.9. Suitable statistical analyses were used to examine data from the designed tasks: Kendall coefficient, to find out whether there are any correlations between the variables such as settings, and age. In order to gather enough data for the study, topics and translation items were selected in order for the subjects to produce wide certain range of possible sentences.

To answer the four questions comprehensively, this section discusses: (1) the type of data collected, (2) the sampling of subject, especially in determining the type of settings (urban and rural), (3) the types of morphemes studied, especially

the nine morphemes by Brown (1973), Dulay and Burt (1974a) and others, and (4) the methods of data analysis used to show whether there is correlation between the rank order of the English morpheme and the variables involved in this study.

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. It describes the relationship between the variables being investigated (age, settings and acquisition order) in terms of correlation coefficient of the quantitative data. The findings explained the morpheme learning order of the Malay students and predicted other behaviors such as learning strategy adopted by the Malay students in the process of learning English as a second language. The EMAO were correlated with Makino's (1979) findings to compare subjects of similar age groups learning English in EFL setting and also Dulay and Burt's (1974a) to determine whether there is a natural order of acquisition.

Subjects and Sampling

Firstly, the correct settings for the urban (ESL) and rural (EFL) subjects were selected. This was done by interviewing teachers and students from more than twenty schools and finally two from each setting were chosen. In order to get an acceptable sample size for a correlational study, Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) suggest for the sample to be more than 30. As a result, 50 students (25 boys and 25 girls) were selected for each group (*i.e.* Form One urban) amount to a total number of 600 subjects sampled from 12 classrooms from both settings. The subjects were randomly selected through cluster sampling and the teachers, fortunately, all volunteered to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

The data collected were written responses based on the two test types: (1) written composition and (2) translation task. These tests were designed to measure the adolescents' acquisition of written English grammatical structures. In written composition, the subjects were given 5 topics for them to write;

1. My English language learning experience
2. My family
3. My school holiday
4. Write a story beginning with;

“I was walking home from school one day

5. Write a story based on interesting events that have happened to you.

In translation, a set of 80 questions were given. These tests were pilot tested and enabled the researcher to elicit the morphemes for the study.

Data collection procedures

The subjects were asked to write an essay of about 200 words and to translate Bahasa Malaysia sentences into English. Once the tests were administered, each script was numbered consecutively throughout the study. Thus, the student's first entry was coded S1F1TU (Student number 1, in Form 1, using translation elicitation technique, from the urban setting) and S2F1TR for (Student number 1, in Form 1, using translation elicitation technique, from the rural setting).

The English morphemes considered in this study

Six verb-related and three noun-related morphemes were chosen for analysis based on previous research (e.g. Brown, 1973; Burt & Dulay, 1974a) on English morpheme acquisition common to SLA researchers.

Verb-related morphemes

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Regular past | He <u>played</u> in the street. |
| 2. Irregular past | He <u>saw</u> the school. |
| 3. Progressive – <u>ing</u> | He is <u>playing</u> in the street. |
| 4. Progressive BE | He <u>is</u> playing in the street. |
| 5. Copula BE | He <u>is</u> a good student. |
| 6. Third person singular, John like <u>s</u> school. | (present tense) |

Noun-related morphemes

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 7. Regular plural | They are good students. |
| 8. Possessive – 's | We went to Mary's house. |
| 9. Definite article "the" | <u>The</u> teacher has a book. |
| 10. Indefinite article "a" | The teacher has <u>a</u> book. |

The nine English morphemes were chosen because they are the key elements in the process of morphological acquisition in students' writing. Even though, these morphemes have been introduced in the syllabus and text books to the students since the first year of learning English, majority of the students still have problems in mastering them (Idris, 1997; Norizan, 2002; Wong & Quek, 2007).

One of the major learning problems is the ability to use auxiliary be and copula be correctly. Question 4, was intended to find out the order of accuracy of the both items.

Method I

This method utilized the strictest target-like use (TLU) by Lightbown, Spada, and Wallace (1980) and Stauble (1981) to determine accurate use and distributional patterns for each of the nine morphemes. This analysis of a morpheme based on its suppliance in obligatory contexts includes whether a subject can use a morpheme in a required linguistic environment and whether the subject has also acquired appropriate distributional pattern of using the morpheme.

Target-like use of morphemes in the data of the present study was scored according to guidelines from Lightbown, Spada, and Wallace (1980) and Stauble (1981). Morphemes were first scored for correct use in obligatory contexts. This score then became the numerator of a ratio which included in its denominator the sum of both the number of obligatory contexts for suppliance of the morpheme and the number of non-obligatory contexts in which the morpheme was supplied inappropriately using the formula for Target-Like Use Analysis (Pica, 1982).

Method I Tests Analysis

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) She take it. | = 0 (no form supplied) |
| (b) She taked it. | = 0 (misformed) |
| (c) She did take it. | = 0 (misformed) |
| (d) She takes it. | = 0 (misformed) |
| (e) She was take it. | = 0 (misformed) |
| (f) She was took it. | = 0 (misformed) |
| (g) She took it. | = 1 (correct form supplied) |

Method II

Suppliance in Obligatory Context Analysis (SOC) was used originally by Brown (1973) for first language acquisition research to determine accurate suppliance of each of the eight morphemes in obligatory contexts and this procedure subsequently was also used by Dulay and Burt (1974a) in second language acquisition research. According to Dulay and Burt (1974a), the subject appears to have actually acquired the rule to apply for the morpheme, but has generalized the rules of application to an exceptional case. In this analysis, for example, if a subject produces an utterance such as *She eats two apples every day*, this speaker creates an obligatory context for use of the plural *s* inflection. The context is then scored according to whether the plural *s* morpheme is supplied (2 points), an incorrect morpheme is supplied (1 point), or no morpheme at all is supplied (0 points). In addition, for irregular morphemes, if a subject offers the base form + regular inflection, (*e.g.* goed instead of went), the Past Irregular morpheme is scored as a misformation (1 point) and the Past Regular morpheme is scored as correctly supplied (2 points). When each context has been scored, the score values are added.

This sum is then divided by the product of twice the total number of contexts requiring suppliance of the morpheme in the subject's speech using the formula for Supplied in obligatory Contexts Analysis (Pica, 1982).

Validity and Reliability

In order to assure the validity and reliability of the study, the researcher utilized several procedures. Validity of the translation instrument was obtained from Bahasa Malaysia experts who provided their judgment on the accuracy of the translated items. In scoring the written composition and translation tests, four expert assessors and one inter-rater who were all experienced English language teachers scored the tests.

Statistical treatment

The statistical tests adopted for this study are percentage and Spearman rank order correlation. In order to rank the order of the grammatical morphemes, Dulay and Burt's Group Score Method (1974a) in determining percentages of morphemes supplied in each obligatory context was used. The morphemes were ranked in descending percentage order for each group, and for all subjects.

FINDINGS

The EMAO-MSS of different age groups in the same setting; urban or rural schools follow the same order of English morpheme acquisition but the order is not similar for the students in different setting. Only the urban Malay students follow the order recorded by Dulay & Burt (1974a) and the other major findings reported in this chapter can be summarized as follows: (1) the EMAO-MSS is highly correlated among all groups in the same setting, (2) the EMAO-MSS of the urban and the rural students is not similar, (3) the EMAO-MSS is highly correlated with Makino (1970), (4) the EMAO-MSS in the urban setting is highly correlated (Table 2) to Dulay and Burt (1974a). The morphemes (presented in the order in which they are acquired) are: Plural, Article, *ing*, Progressive, Uncontractible Copula, Contractible Copula, and Contractible Auxiliary. (5) The EMAO-MSS in the rural setting is not correlated to Dulay and Burt (1974). The order obtains for these morphemes is: Uncontractible Auxiliary, Third Person Regular, Past Irregular, Past Regular, On, Possessive, and Third Person Irregular.

Table 2 *Correlations of the EMAO-MSS in the rural by written translation elicitation technique using two methods of scoring procedures*

	M1R	M2R
Makino	.817**	.817**
Dulay & Burt	.367	.417
M1F1R	.867**	.833**
M2F1R	.767*	.750*
M1F2R	.950**	.983**
M2F2R	.895**	.929**
M1F4R	.883**	.933**
M2F4R	.517	.717*
M1R	1.000	.933**
M2R	.933**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 *Correlations of the EMAO-MSS of different age by two methods of scoring procedures using written translation*

	Makino (1979)	Dulay & Burt (1974)
M1F1	.817**	.400
M2F1	.417	.400
M1F2	.833**	.450
M2F2	.750*	.500
M1F4	.983**	.183
M2F4	.929**	-.017
M1	.933**	.417
M2	.717*	.433

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

A comparison of rural students projected order of acquisition with Burt and Dulay's L2 learners, using a rank order correlation, reveals a statistically non-significant correlation (+.23). (3) The urban students in the same language setting follow the same order of morpheme acquisition and reveals a statistically significant correlation at +.9, +.667, +.85, +.833, +.8 and +.767, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 3) (4) The rural students in the same language setting follow the same order of morpheme acquisition and reveal a statistically significant correlation at +.867, +.767, +.95, +.895, +.883 and +.517, $p < 0.01$.

The use of the percentage in considering the occurrence of the morphemes in non-obligatory contexts provides information that cannot have been ascertained with obligatory contexts only: (a) Most urban students' morphemes go through stages in their rule learning that result in the occurrence of interlingual errors (interference) and developmental errors. (b) The rural students do not have as good control of some of the morphemes (in particular past and regular and irregular) as the obligatory contexts indicated. (c) The order of morpheme acquisition of *be* in different linguistic context is similar for all groups of students whether they are in urban or rural. (d) The students use different learning strategies such as generalization, L1 transfer as well as avoidance in the process of learning English as a second language.

Question 4 was set to investigate a learning sequence in the acquisition of English morpheme *be* (auxiliary and copula) within specific linguistic environments which all Malay ESL learners followed regardless of language context and age. Acquisition in these linguistic environments were investigated because copula *be* and auxiliary *be* are two very interesting morphemes which pose a lot of difficulties to Malay students in learning ESL. The difficulties may arise due to the linguistic environments that contribute to different forms, functions and meaning of *be*. Copula *be* and auxiliary *be* can have different functions in English and Malay. Copula *be* can have similar function in Malay, however, this morpheme is always omitted in English by Malay learners due to the fact that the copula is optional in Malay (*i.e. ialah* and *adalah*). Auxiliary *be* can be a structure morpheme in English but is a content morpheme in Malay. The functions of copula *be* and auxiliary *be* are not similar to Malay as can be seen in the following examples.

1. NP1 + *be* + NP2
He is a teacher. (Dia guru) *ialah* is omitted.
2. NP + *be* + Adj P
He is fine (Dia sihat) *adalah* is omitted.
3. NP1 + *be* + Prep P
There is a book on table. (Ada di sini) *berada* is omitted.
4. There *be* NP1 + Prep P
There is a book on table. (Ada buku di atas meja)
5. NP + *be* + present participle (+ NP + Prep P + Adv P)
He is taking the books to the library
Dia sedang membawa buku ke perpustakaan (is – sedang)
6. NP + *be* + past participle (+ NP + Prep. P + Adv. P)
The books are taken to the library
Buku dibawa ke perpustakaan (is – di passive determiner)

In 1, *be* is a linking verb, to link Subject with Nominal Subject Compliment and in Malay, *be* means *ialah*. In 2, the function of copula *be* is to link the Subject to the Adjectival Subject Complement and in Malay it means *adalah*. Both Malay copulas have the same function as in English. In 3, the function of *be* is to link the Subject to the Adverbial Phrase of time or place and in Malay it means *berada*. All the three Malay copulas are optional and normally omitted. Beginner Malay students learning English normally omit *be* in these sentences due to the negative transfer of L1. In 4, a null subject or non referential sentence usually begins with *there + is* and in Malay the sentence starts with *ada* or *terdapat*. In 5, *be* is an auxiliary and in Malay it is aspect which means *sedang*, *masih* or *tengah* take the form of a content morpheme. In 6, auxiliary *be* can function as *di* (Malay passive form) and both are structure morphemes. These shades of forms, functions and meaning have made these morphemes difficult to learn and this current study would like to investigate which of the forms are acquired early or late.

In order to uncover the use of copula *be* and auxiliary *be* in L1 and L2, the morpheme *be* in the compositions and translation was analyzed according its linguistic environments and it was hypothesized that all Malay ESL students would follow the same sequence in acquiring this specific morpheme in its linguistic environment as suggested by Ellis (1997).

Table 4: *The order of be (copula and auxiliary) in specific linguistic environments by urban Malay secondary school students of different age groups using translation elicitation technique*

	M1CUF1	M1CUF2	M1CUF4	M2CUF1	M2CUF2	M2CUF4
be + NP C	1	1	1	1	1	1
be + Adj C	2	2	2	2	2	2
be + Prep. P C	3	3	3	3	3	3
There + be	5	5	5	5	6	5
Prog Aux	4	4	4	4	4	4
Pass Aux	6	6	6	6	5	6

Table 4 gives an overview of the order for *be* in specific linguistic environment for all groups using compositions. The results of the analysis using both methods (Method 1 and Method 2) demonstrate that the order is the same for all groups.

Students learned copula *be* in the following ascending order from the easiest to the most difficult: (i) *be* + NP C, (ii) *be* +Adj C, (iii) *be*+ Prep.P.C, (iv) Prog Aux, (v) There +*be* and (vi) Pass Aux, respectively. 5/6 groups followed similar learning sequence of *be*.

As suggested by the 4M-Model, the order of accuracy of the Malay students acquiring *be* can be predicted based on its different linguistic environments in the following order; Noun Phrase Subject Complement, Adjectival Phrase Subject Complement, Prepositional Phrase Subject Complement, *be* + present participle (Progressiveness), There + *be* (Null Subject) and *be* + past participle (passive form). This study shows that the ESL and EFL students exhibited similar ability levels with regard to morpheme *be*. The setting did not influence the overall difficulty of learning; what was easier for ESL learners was easier for their EFL counterparts and what was more difficult for ESL learners was more difficult for EFL students. This result supports the claim that there exists a natural sequence in the acquisition of the English morpheme *be*. In other words, different learning settings (ESL and EFL) did not lead to a different order of acquisition; the learners' language acquisition faculties do not change from environment to environment. Therefore, it would appear that, in terms of natural sequences in language acquisition, the distinction between ESL and EFL is irrelevant and is supported by a considerable amount of research in the field of SLA (Pica, 1983a; Eubank, 1990; Ellis, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Before the conclusion is drawn from the present study, it should be noted that any implications of its research findings must be regarded with some caution based on the limitations of the study that were pointed out. Firstly, this was a cross-sectional study focusing on the written language using limited samples drawn from only four schools in two different language contexts; the sample size was quite small compared to other research in social sciences. In addition, data were collected from groups of students according to language settings, thus excluding individual variation displayed by subjects in their acquisition of target morphemes. Furthermore, the study was restricted to early-adolescent native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia, thus limiting claims about second language acquisition as a whole but only to these particular language groups. Some of the subjects spoke a different variety of Bahasa Malaysia.

A detailed longitudinal analysis was necessary in order to draw conclusions here, especially those concerning the influence of first language background on the patterns found and some of the factors constraining morpheme use must be verified on a larger population.

In addition, claims can be made only about acquisitional sequences and processes. No conclusions can be drawn regarding rate of acquisition or ultimate attainment in different language contexts which requires a longitudinal analysis. For example, some of the urban students are bilinguals and have been using English at home, while others were exposed to the use of English in unnatural setting when they joined the secondary schools.

As stated, this was a cross-sectional study of the Malay students English morpheme acquisition, Ellis (1997) claims that the results of a cross-sectional methodology measure only accuracy scores for a particular point in the subjects' L2 development rather than on their acquisition over time. Piennemann (in Meisel *et al*, 1981) believes that cross-sectional results are not always supported by longitudinal findings as shown by his longitudinal study on two Italian girls in natural setting acquiring German as a second language which revealed different sequences and processes of acquisition which were not evident in cross-sectional analysis. Similarly, Rosansky (1976) reports the order of morpheme acquisition of her longitudinal subjects did not match her cross-sectional accuracy at different points in time. Hakuta (1976) reveals the morpheme order of his longitudinal study in the second language acquisition of a child who spoke Japanese correlated only weakly with the natural order of cross-sectional morpheme studies. However, arguments against the weaknesses of cross-sectional studies to supply acquisitional processes were forwarded by Krashen (1977).

The results and findings of this study on the Malay students' morpheme acquisition in different language settings are consistent as shown from other morpheme studies and there several conclusions that can be drawn for second language acquisition research. First, similarities and differences found among the subjects in the different age groups and in different language settings have contributed support to claims that learners are different individuals and are responsible for their L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1997). The different acquisitional order of some earlier acquisition of easy morphological forms among rural students shows that there is some deviation for all groups in acquiring their second language.

IMPLICATIONS

The differences found among subjects representing urban and rural settings implied that the effects of instruction on second language acquisition are important factors in triggering learning and generalization processes such as morpheme over-suppliance, and producing the primitive-like process of marking auxiliary verbs by target inflectional *be* morphology with L1 omission. The findings that the EMAO-MSS is similar to Makino's (1979) and the urban students tend to behave more like ESL subjects recorded by Dulay and Burt's (1974a) and shows that with quality of input, L2 learners will follow a natural order regardless of language background. The EMAO-MSS in the rural setting is similar to Makino (1979) for Japanese students in EFL setting but does not correlate with Dulay and Burt's (1974a) suggesting that the students in the rural setting did not get similar quality input which was received by the subjects in the urban setting and also by Makino's (1979) subjects. It is possible that teachers who were teaching the students were not qualified (Mohd Sallehudin, 2002) and had provided the students with faulty instruction which contributed to deficit or distorted input. Low quality teachers might also teach the students in the urban setting but the support from the natural environment especially interactive communication was more influential in providing the urban students with all the right input. Consequently, the factors that appear to influence the similarities and differences among individual learners are learning environment and input of correct language

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