

## **Order of Acquisition of English Verbal Morphemes by a 5-year old Russian Child Studying in the International School**

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### **Abstract**

In foreign language teaching, grammatical morphemes in the target language should be taught in a specific order. A hypothesis established in the 1970s is based on studies aimed at revealing the natural sequence in second language acquisition (natural order hypothesis). It provides evidence to the claim that major grammatical morphemes are acquired in a common order by learners of different backgrounds, such as their L1, ages, or learning environments. The aim of my study is to determine the order of acquisition of English verbal morphemes in a Russian 5-year old girl and reveal the differences and similarities with the previous research based on the morpheme acquisition. The paper focuses on acquisition of verb morphemes and their order of appearance in her writing.

**Keywords:** Grammatical morphemes; natural order hypothesis; literacy; formulaic speech

### **Introduction**

Since the 1970s, many studies were conducted in attempts to reveal the second language learners' acquisition order of major grammatical morphemes in the target language, mainly English. The results of the research on the acquisition order in the 1970s were contradictory. Brown (1973) and de Veilliers and de Veilliers (1973) came to the conclusion that even though children may master the morphemes at different ages, the order of their acquisition in the first language acquisition is very similar. Hakuta (1974a, 1974b), Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1975) conducted a similar kind of research with Spanish L1 children and the results of it contrasted with the previous work on acquisition of certain English morphemes. The data they analyzed showed a different order of acquisition, characterized by a certain number of acquired morphemes.

There were more similar studies in the 1980s-1990s. Their major difference from the earlier research was that "the focus shifted to the reexamination of natural order studies rather than new empirical research" (Kwon, 2005). Dulay et al. in their largest experiment (1984), agreed that there existed a hierarchy of several groups of morphemes, but nevertheless, the acquisition order of morphemes in each group could change among individuals. The results of the research of the Japanese learners demonstrated that they acquire articles much later compared with other learner groups (Terauchi, 1994).

To sum up, in the 1970s the natural order hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) is already being questioned. The research in the 1980s-1990s has led to a contradictory hypothesis (Hypothesis 2) that the learners' background, age and learning environment can cause a number of changes in the morpheme order acquisition. Taking into account results of the earlier research on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, we can assume that the question of how verbs are acquired and what underlying mechanisms are requires further investigation.

### **Method**

In my study I focused on acquisition of verb morphemes and their order of appearance in Maria's writing. During the observational period Maria studied at school five days per week for seven hours and all the tuition was in English. Her teacher was British, thus the number of utterances she produced in her native language while Maria was at class was very limited. I analyzed five copy-books Maria used for writing in class: three literacy books, one geography book and one science book. The previous research based on the similar topic led to the following hypotheses:

1. The frequency and number of verbal morphemes would increase sufficiently, as she starts mastering the language.
2. There would be a large proportion of formulaic speech in Maria's L2 development.
3. Maria's order of appearance of verbal morphemes could be different from the research results on the natural acquisition order (Brown, 1973, de Veilliers and de Veilliers, 1973) as many other factors, such as L1 background, age and learning environment could influence it.
4. The order of acquisition of verbal morphemes would have little correlation with the frequency of their usage.

## Results

My hypothesis that the process of acquisition would be gradual is not supported by the data I analyzed. On the contrary, Maria started using them all practically at one and the same time - from the end of October to the mid December. Many similarities with the research carried out by the linguists supporting the natural order hypothesis are traced. However, the order of appearance of verbal morphemes in the data does not necessarily mean that the first acquired morphemes would be the most frequently used morphemes, as I have hypothesized.

In SL learning many morphemes first appear in formulaic speech as due to limited knowledge of rules learners tend to use a certain number of familiar structures in order to fill in the gap. It comes as no surprise for those familiar with the research on formulaic speech (Lyons, 1963; Hakuta, 1974a; Ellis, 1983). The results of my research support the previous data.

The data I've analyzed support the natural order hypothesis which is contradictory to what I have predicted. However, the order of appearance of verbal morphemes in the data does not necessarily mean that the first acquired morphemes would be the most frequently used morphemes, as I have hypothesized.

## Conclusion

Natural order studies remain relevant as they can lead us to a more complex understanding of language development, not simply restricted to a predefined order, but analyzed according to a whole range of important variables mentioned above. Moreover, they can contribute to determining the stages of verbal acquisition. They can also provide information on the most frequently used formulas, the first step in L2 acquisition.

It is clear that we need more data of this sort in order to learn more information on how L1 Russian learners acquire English. Further research on the similar topic is suggested. Taking into consideration the fact that only one student was the subject of my study, it would be interesting to examine more cases of L1 Russian speaking learners and see whether the results correlate.

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