Acquisition of English Grammatical Morphemes [1]({-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d}) by Iraqi EFL Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract

Acquiring grammatical morphemes is the main part in language acquisition, since it deals with the form of the acquired language. There is a common belief that free morphemes are acquired with a considerable degree of ease in comparing with bound morphemes. Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975) mentioned that there is a natural order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes in English. The relation between acquisition and learning is presented in the light of Larsen-Freeman's (1975) work in which she referred to her participants' learning of English language as SLA. The present study investigates the development of acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d} by Iraqi EFL learners whose native language is Arabic for four academic years and to find out if Iraqi EFL learners follow the same order of acquisition at the same age and same learning conditions. It is also to differentiate between Iraqi male and female EFL learners in the acquisition of the grammatical morphemes. The study was based on a grammaticality judgment test which was administered for 30 participants before the end of each academic year specifically in May 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively. The participants were learned English language as a foreign language in the University of Anbar/College of Education for Humanities/Department of English. The results of analysis present the average of the percentage of identification of grammatical morphemes concerned. The average displays that the acquisition of {-s 3d} more fulfilled, with an average (66.583%), than {-s pl.}, {-s ps} which are (58.083%) and (50.25%) respectively. Also the results show that Iraqi male and female EFL learners have the same order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes but there is a difference in the averages obtained which reveals that Iraqi female EFL learners acquire these grammatical morphemes better than male. The study suggests that Iraqi EFL learners should apply successive lessons in English grammar and the rearrangement of learners' knowledge by reviewing mistakes committed.

Keywords: acquisition, learning, grammatical morpheme, EFL, SLA

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[1] {-s pl.}: noun plural, {-s ps}: noun possessive, {-s 3d}: present third-person (Stageberg, 1981:92)

1.   Introduction

The term "acquisition" refers to the process of learning or acquiring a particular aspect of a language. In Generative linguistics the term is used to denote a model of language learning. It is also used in the conditions of learning a foreign language, so foreign language or SLA is distinguished from first language acquisition (Crystal, 2003:7).

It is necessary to identify how second languages are acquired which is the acquisition of a language beyond the native language. SLA is the study of how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language. Ellis (1986:60) stated that second language learners do not produce the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language. In addition, SLA is concerned with the nature of the hypotheses that learners come up with regarding the system of the second language. The study of SLA draws from and impacts many other areas of study, among them linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and education.

Acquisition of grammatical morphemes is the main part in language acquisition, since it deals with the form of the acquired language. There is a common belief that free morphemes are acquired with a considerable degree of ease in comparing with bound morphemes. Anderson (1978:64) clarified that copulas and auxiliaries are acquired before plural. Also Berko (198? as cited in Behjat and Sadighi, 2011:109) mentioned that the formation of third person singular and possessive is better learned and earlier than the formation of plural nouns.

The present study follows the hypotheses suggested by Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975) since they all emphasized on the obligatory contexts under which they collected their data, on the one hand. And they concerned with the sequence of specific grammatical morphemes which {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} are parts of, on the other hand. Their proposals reflected the quantifiable phase showing the natural sequence of grammatical morphemes produced by participants. Also the participants represented different patterns of acquisition. Brown (1973) and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) dealt with the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes solely from the perspective of first language acquisition, whereas Larsen-Freeman (1975) chose adult Arabic, Japanese, Persian, and Spanish learners of English to identify their performance of grammatical morphemes in English.

2.   Literature Review

Many researchers have been written about the relation between formal linguistics and SLA beside numerous approaches from which to examine second language data, each one of which brings to the study of SLA its own goals, its own data-collection methods, and its own analytic tools. Kaplan (2002:87) stated that SLA is an interdisciplinary field and the study of SLA has become intertwined with language pedagogy. SLA is not about pedagogy unless the pedagogy affects the course of acquisition.

In his longitudinal research on the development of first language acquisition, Brown (1973) focused on a careful test of three children which led to an establishment of empirical generalizations on how any language is acquired. He concluded that there is a natural order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes in English. Regarding {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d}, he suggested that the sequence is the acquisition of plural marker, to possessive form and finally third person singular. Brown's most important benchmark is the notion of suppliance in obligatory context in which the subjects would respond to specific stimuli

Another empirical study on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in first language was achieved by de Villiers and de Villiers (1973). They collected data from twenty one children in a cross-sectional study and compared the accuracy order they obtained with the acquisition order found by Brown. The grammatical morphemes: {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} were arranged in the same sequence proposed already by Brown (1973).

The acquisition of grammatical morphemes in second language development was administrated by Dulay and Burt (1974). By the performance of the participants (Spanish and Chinese children), they concluded that some English grammatical morphemes are difficult to acquire than other but the grammatical morphemes; {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} were occurred respectively.

Larsen-Freeman (1975) performed a cross-sectional study of twenty four adults (Arabic, Japanese, Persian, and Spanish) using a mix of tasks. The orders of grammatical morphemes that her subjects displayed were very consistent across different first language backgrounds. So she proposed that the priority is to {-s pl.} and then {-s ps}, while {-s 3d} is not referred to in her study.

Collecting and analyzing data from written performance of Spanish ESL learners in terms of English grammatical morphemes, Andersen (1978) divided morphemes into noun and verb related morphemes. He concluded that the scale of difficulty of verb-related morphemes can be featured as copula, aspect, past tense and subject-verb agreement.

The acquisition of free and bound morphemes was concerned by Hatch (1983). He mentioned that the acquisition of bound morphemes is more difficult than free ones. Also he added that phonologically stable morphemes are easier to acquire than those which are pronounced differently.

Akande (2005) analyzed the data collected from Nigerian pupils at secondary school for morphological errors. He found out that Nigerian learners' production in English morphology was very low, and the errors were caused by factors such as the inconsistency in the morphological rules of English, overgeneralization and misapplication of rules and the interference of the subjects' mother tongue on English.

Behjat and Sadighi (2011) mentioned that Iranian EFL learners, 70 participants, at different ages and learning conditions follow the same order suggested by Andersen (1978) and Hawkin's (2001) proposal in their acquisition of English grammatical morphemes. The priority is to {-s pl.} then {-s 3d}, whereas {-s ps} was not existed in the list proposed.

Focusing on the acquisition of inflectional morphology by learners of English as a Foreign Language whose first language is Persian. Ali and Rahimy (2014) provided that {-s pl.} is prior among the same types of inflectional morphemes {-s ps} and {-s 3d}. Also they referred to a clear difference between the male and female learners in learning inflectional morphemes.

Considering grammatical morphemes as an object of study was motivated by the fact that their use is obligatory in certain contexts, and, the percentage of morphemes supplied in such contexts provides what many researchers considered to be not only a standard framework but a purposeful and quantifiable measure of acquisition.

3.   Objectives

Following Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975), the present study is an attempt to find out if Iraqi EFL learners whose native language is Arabic follow the same order of acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d} at the same age and under the same learning conditions. Also it is to find out if there is any significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL learners in the acquisition of the grammatical morphemes mentioned. On these purposes, the following research questions were raised:

1- Do Iraqi EFL learners follow the same order of acquisition of English grammatical morphemes suggested by Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975)?

2- Do Iraqi EFL learners develop their acquisition of these grammatical morphemes at the same age and under the same learning conditions?

3- Do Iraqi male EFL learners differ from Iraqi female EFL learners in their acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d}.

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H1- Iraqi EFL learners do not follow the same order in their development of acquisition of English grammatical morphemes; {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d}.

H2- Iraqi male EFL learners are different from Iraqi female EFL learners in the acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d}.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Data Collection

4.1.1 The Participants

The participants of the present study were 30 Iraqi EFL learners studying English language in University of Anbar/ College of Education for Humanities/Department of English. Their admission in the academic year 2012-2013 and they graduated in the academic year 2015-2016. They were at the age range of 20 to 27 years old. They were 15 male students and 15 female students.

4.1.2 The Instrumentation of the Test

The test sheet included what was required for the participants to do clearly. A number of 30 sentences were written for grammaticality judgment purpose. The test consisted of 21 grammatically correct sentences which were equal to 70% of the total test sentences. Others were ungrammatical regarding each of the following grammatical morphemes: {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d} which were equal to 30%. The participants were required to show the grammatically correct sentences using (T), and use (F) to show the ungrammatical sentences. They were required also to correct the incorrect ones to be sure that the learners identify the purposeful ones. Under an obligatory context suggested by Brown (1973:255), the test took about 10 minutes to be achieved and then reviewed by the participants as they were asked to do.

The test was controlled and scored twice for reliability and the results, which were variable form one student to another, showed that the test was reliable. Then, it was given to [2]the jury to

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[2]Prof Dr. Muslih S. Ahmed, Prof Rafi M. Hussein and Prof Dr. Zeydan K. Omar

be reviewed for its content validity. It has been proved to be valid as well as its content was concerned, the test was used as the instrument for collecting data for the study. Table (1) represents item specifications in the grammaticality judgment test.

Type of Item	Number of Item
Incorrect {-s pl.}	15, 17, 19
Incorrect {-s ps}	3, 5, 8
Incorrect {-s 3d}	24, 27, 28
Correct items	1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30

Table (1): Item specifications for grammaticality judgment test

4.1.3 The Procedure of the Test

The purpose of this study is to find out the developmental degree of acquisition of grammatical morphemes concerning {-s pl.}, {-s ps}, and {-s 3d} by the Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language, on one hand. And to differentiate the acquisition of these specific morphemes between Iraqi male and female EFL learners, on the other. In order to achieve the same conditions of learning; the same level, the same syllabus and the same teacher, the participants were selected from University of Anbar/College of Education for Humanities/ Department of English. Their admission in the academic year 2012-2013 and they graduated from the department in the academic year 2015-2016. They learned English grammar using *English Grammar in Use/ Raymond Murphy (1985)* in the 1st year, *An Introductory English Grammar/ Norman C. Stageberg (1981)* in the 2nd year, *A University Grammar of English/ Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum (1973)* in the 3rd year, *An Introductory Transformational Grammar/ Bruce L. Liles (1971)* and *Communicative Grammar/ Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (1994)* in the 4th year.

Following Hawkings (2001) and Behjat & Sadighi (2011), a grammaticality judgment test was developed. The item specifications are viewed in the table (1) above. The participants were required to distinguish grammatical and ungrammatical sentences and correct the grammatically wrong sentences in order to be sure that they could identify the problematic area correctly and to get objective results. The test was scored twice for reliability. Then, it was given to the jury to be

reviewed for content validity. It has been proved to be valid as well as its content was concerned, the grammaticality judgment test was used to collect data.

The test was administered in each year before the end of each academic year specifically in May 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively. It was controlled and scored twice for reliability.

4.2 Data Analysis

In this part of the study, the data are statistically analyzed by the application of Microsoft Excel and discussed. It is clear that the acquisition of {-s 3d} morpheme is more developed than {-s pl.} and {-s ps} morphemes. The average of the identification of {-s 3d} is (66.583%), whereas {-s pl.} is (58.083%) and {-s ps} is (50.25%) as described in the table (2).

Grammatical morpheme	Average of identification
{-s pl.}	58.083%
{-s ps}	50.25%
{-s 3d}	66.583%

Table (2): The averages of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d}

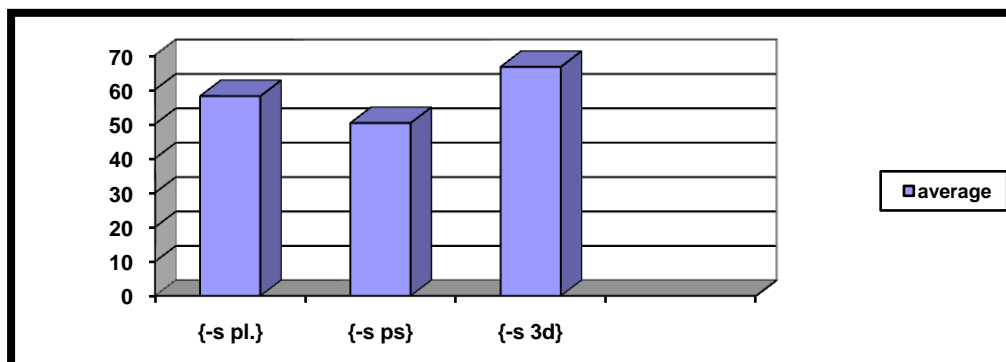Also they are well illustrated in the figure (1).

Figure (1): The averages of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d}

These averages are presented in the light of the percentage of each year which shows the development of acquisition achieved by Iraqi EFL learners. The table (3) and the figure (2) show the percentage of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} in each year well.

Grammatical morpheme	Percentage of identification			
	First Year	**Second Year**	**Third Year**	**Fourth Year**
{-s pl.}	54.33	54.33	59	64.67
{-s ps}	47	53.67	51.67	48.67
{-s 3d}	58.33	70.67	67	70.33

Table (3): The percentage of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} in each year
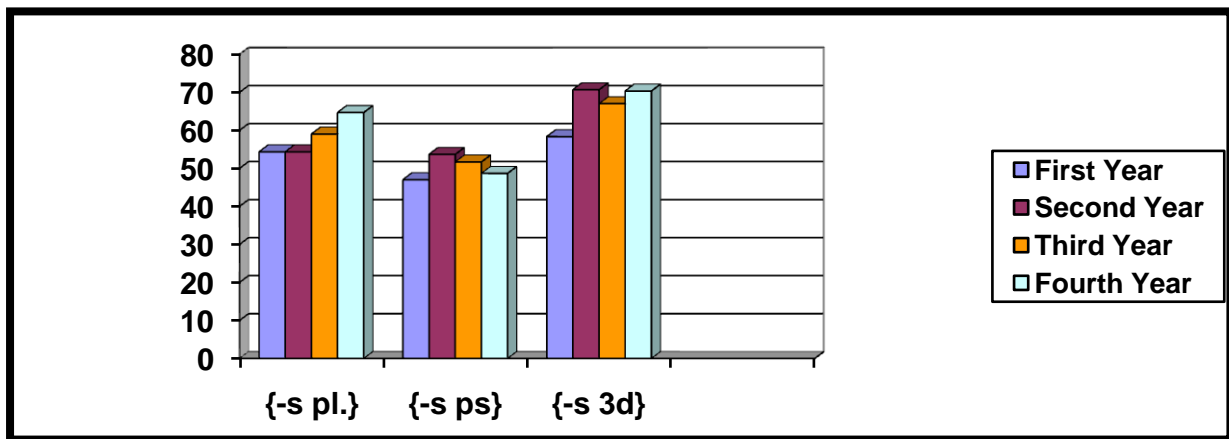

Figure (2): The percentage of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} in each year

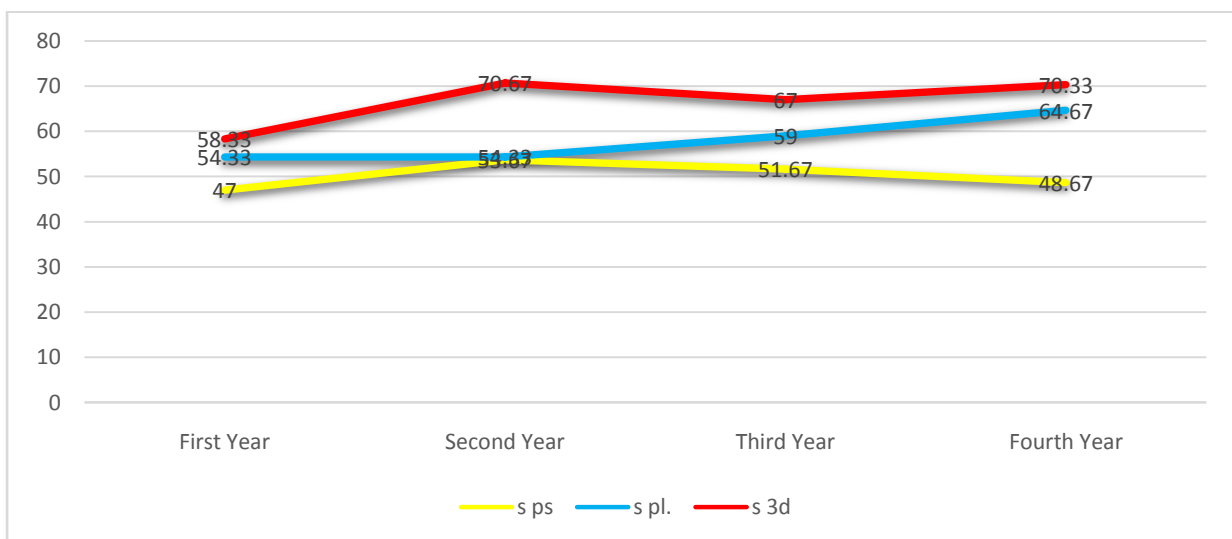The following figure shows the development of acquisition

Figure (3) The development of acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d}

The average of the percentages of identification mentioned above displays that the acquisition of {-s 3d} by the participants is more fulfilled and developed than others which is an opposed evidence to the ideas of Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975). And an affirmative and acceptable evidence regarding {-s ps} and {-s pl.} to the idea of Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975) since {-s ps} is preceded by {-s pl.}.

The data collected are also statistically analyzed by the application of Microsoft Excel in the terms of male and female. The participants are 15 males and 15 females. The results show that Iraqi male and female EFL learners have the same order but different averages in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes concerning {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} as shown in the table (4) and figure (4) below.

Grammatical morpheme	Average of identification	
	Male	Female
{-s pl.}	58%	58.15%
{-s ps}	49.499%	51.018%
{-s 3d}	66.168%	67.025%

Table (4): The averages of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} by male and female
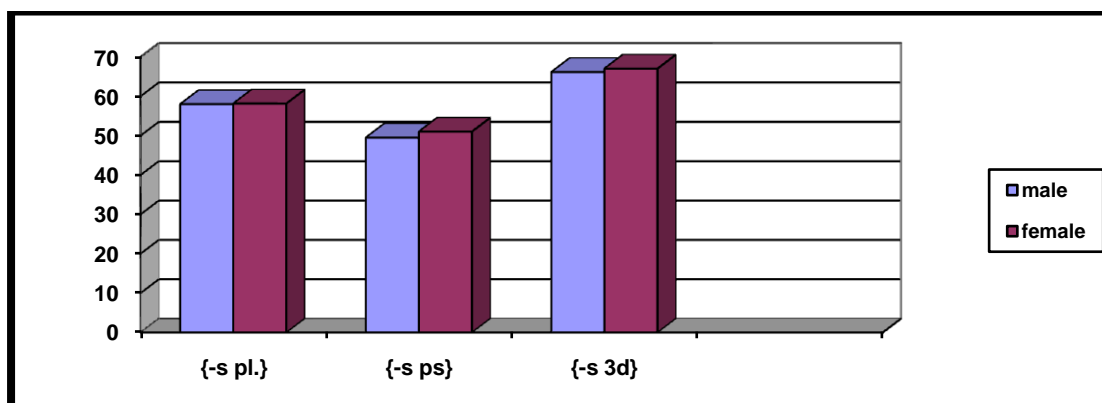

Figure (4): The averages of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} by males and females

The averages presented are calculated according to the percentages of acquisition achieved by males and females severally in each year. By these results, it is clear that Iraqi female EFL

learners are better than the male in their acquisition. The following table shows these percentages.

Grammatical morpheme	Percentage of identification							
	First Year		Second Year		Third Year		Fourth Year	
	Male	female	Male	Female	Male	female	male	Female
{-s pl.}	52	56.7	55.33	53.3	60.67	57.3	64	65.3
{-s ps}	45.33	48.7	48.667	58.67	53.33	50	50.67	46.7
{-s 3d}	56	60.7	66.67	74.7	70	64	72	68.7

Table (5): the percentages of identifying {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} by males & females

4.   Conclusions

This study is prepared to investigate the development of acquisition of grammatical morphemes concerning {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} by Iraqi EFL learners, on one hand. Also it is to differentiate between Iraqi male and female EFL learners in the acquisition of these morphemes, on the other hand. For these purposes, Administrating a grammaticality judgment test and analyzing the results by the application of Microsoft Excel show that the acquisition of {-s 3d} by the Iraqi EFL learners is more developed than others which is an opposed evidence to the ideas of Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975). Beside an affirmative and acceptable evidence regarding {-s ps} and {-s pl.} to the suggestions of Brown (1973), de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) and Larsen-Freeman (1975) since {-s pl.} is followed by {-s ps}.

The Iraqi male and female EFL learners have the same order of acquisition of {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d}. However, the Iraqi female EFL learners acquire grammatical morphemes regarding {-s pl.}, {-s ps} and {-s 3d} better than males though they all learn grammar under the same conditions of learning; the same level, the same syllabus and the same teacher. The influence of sex on learning is proved in this study.

Comparing with Dulay and Burt (1984) who stated that when a learner achieves 90% of accurate supplies of exact grammatical morphemes, he/she perfectly acquired those morphemes, the results present the low level of performance by Iraqi EFL learners in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. This poor level involves some pedagogical procedures:

1. The reinforcement of successive lessons in English grammar.

2. Practice different exercises concerning grammatical morphemes.

3. The emphasis of the advantage of grammar self-study.

4. Review the mistakes committed by learners in their performance and ask them to rewrite the correct form in order to rearrange their knowledge correctly.

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