



## The Acquisition Order of Past Tenses: an Interlanguage Analysis

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the hypothesis that there appears a systematic order of the acquisition of past tenses. It is claimed that irregular past tense verbs are acquired earlier than regular past tense verbs. In comparison to the acquisition of irregular and regular past verbs, the acquisition of the past copula be forms `was` and `were` is believed to take place much earlier. To test this hypothesis, the data were collected from forty-six students who were asked to write an essay with a minimum of 250 words to get data of the use of past tenses. The findings reveal partial support for the hypothesis, suggesting that the universal order of morpheme acquisition may not be a stable phenomenon.

**Keywords:** acquisition order, interlanguage analysis, natural order, past tenses

### Introduction

Lightbown and Spada (2013) and Ortega (2009) claim that the development of the learner language has been shown to be built up in predictable stages regardless of the learner language background, age, the learning or acquisition environment of the L2, or either the data are collected via writing or orally. One of the features that has been investigated within this development is the acquisition of morphemes. Citing Krashen's (1982) summary on the acquisition order of morphemes, Lightbown and Spada (2013) show that the learner could be predicted to acquire `-ing` for progressive tense, `-s` for plural nouns, and `be` copula prior to the acquisition of `be` auxiliary and articles. After this stage, the learner will then be expected to acquire irregular

past tense before the acquisition of regular past tense, '-s' for the third person singular, and '-s' for possession. Other features that have also been shown to have predictable stages include possessive determiners, relative clauses, question formation and negation.

Considering the very broad area of SLA research and the limitation of the word count, the scope of the current paper is limited to examining the interlanguage development of one language learner on the use of past tenses with the aim to investigate whether or not the so-called 'natural order of acquisition' is confirmed within this study.

### **Literature Review**

Conducting a 5-year longitudinal study on ten Mandarin-speaking children and adolescents arriving in the United States, Jia and Fuse (2007) examined the acquisition order of six grammatical morphemes, that is, '-ing' for progressive aspects, 'be' copula, 'do' auxiliary, irregular and regular past tenses, and third person -s. The authors found that overall all the participants mastered the progressive aspect -ing with the percentage of accuracy over 80%, while regular past -ed was not mastered by any participants, and the other morphemes fell in the middle between the acquisition of '-ing' as the easiest and '-ed' as the most difficult. With a similar research approach, focusing upon the acquisition order of past regular and irregular verbs, Salaberry (2000) reported that all the participants successfully applied irregular verbs for past events, yet most of them had difficulties with the production of regular past verbs. The author investigated fourteen adult learners with the use of resulting in a total of 562 verbs both from written and oral narratives. The results of these two research studies confirm the morphological acquisition order as shown in Lightbown and Spada (2013) and Ortega (2009).

With a meta-analysis on the acquisition order of morphological accuracy with the application of a multiple-regression analysis, Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) examined twelve research studies with the use of oral production, all of which established support over the natural order acquisition as proposed within many SLA books (e.g., Lightbown and Spada, 2013; Ortega, 2009). Goldschneider and DeKeyser also reported at least five factors that seemed to cause this acquisition order such as semantic complexity, syntactic category, frequency, perceptual salience, and morphophonological regularity, yet the authors speculated that some of these determinants could be part of a broad conceptualisation of salience. In relation to the factors of language acquisition and under the application of usage-based approach, Ellis and Ferreira-Junior (2009) also reported a wide range of potential determinants such as distinctiveness, frequency, prototypicality and generality, all of which appeared to have interrelated relationship among them. The authors within this study examined the acquisition of English verb–argument constructions such as

verb object locative, verb locative, and ditransitive. Kwon (2005) also reported that native language transfer, input frequency, and semantic complexity appeared to play a role in acquisition order.

In contrast to the above studies supporting the so-called 'natural acquisition order of morphemes', other studies seem to have yielded contradictive findings showing the phenomenon of the acquisition order may not be always stable. For example, Ellis (1987) examined the acquisition of three past tense morphemes (past copula including past 'be' auxiliary, regular past, and irregular past) of seventeen English learners from different L1 backgrounds with intermediate proficiency by employing three different tasks, that is, planned speech, unplanned speech, and planned writing. The result of planned writing revealed that the greatest accuracy was found with the use of regular past in comparison to the other morphemes, while past copula was evident in the unplanned and planned speech tasks, yet the accuracy of the use of irregular past verbs were less evident in all of the three tasks. Ellis then speculated that the acquisition order may be dependent upon a range of variables including learners' proficiency level, first language background, and familiarity with topics.

Testing Brown's (1973) hypothesis of the earlier acquisition of irregular past tense than its corresponding regular past tense with the acquisition accuracy of a minimum of 90%, Kuczaj II (1977) found that from fifteen children as the research participants only three children who accurately utilised irregular past verbs, yet all of them got 100% correct use of past regular forms, and two reached over 80% for irregular verbs, but again these two participants got 100% correct for the past regular forms. Kuczaj II then claimed that past irregular forms were in fact much more difficult for children acquisition in comparison to their counterparts (past regular forms). Luk and Shirai (2009) reviewed 25 research studies and found that the natural order hypothesis was found in Spanish learners, but it was mostly not reported for Japanese, Korean, and Chinese learners. The authors showed that these three native background languages mostly acquired possessive 's prior to the acquisition of plural -s. The authors then claimed that the natural order appeared to be predicted based on the learner's native language. The claim of L1 as a determinant of acquisition order was also confirmed in a corpus study conducted by Murakami & Alexopoulou (2016).

The above-mentioned literature review has shown that there has been debate upon the hypothesis of natural order of morphological acquisition. Some research confirms existence of the universal acquisition order of morphemes, whereas others appear to partially support the hypothesis. Hence, the current research is intended to shed light upon the debate of morphological acquisition. The following hypotheses are tested:

1. The participants within this study will show their interlanguage development in the use of past tenses to be consistent with what has been proposed within SLA studies, that is, past copula 'be' (was and were) will be

first acquired prior to the acquisition of irregular past verbs (e.g., ate, wrote, took).

2. The participants within this study will show their interlanguage development in the use of past tenses to be consistent with what has been proposed within SLA studies, that is, irregular past forms will be first acquired prior to the acquisition of regular past verbs (e.g., booked, studied, respected).

## **Research Method**

All of the participants were asked to produce an essay with a minimum of 250 words. To elicit data on the use of past tense verbs, the topic was on students' personal past experience. The instructions within the essays included: a. What was the experience? b. Where was the location? c. When did it happen? d. Whom did you go with? e. Why do you think it was the best experience? f. How did it happen? g. How was it?

The use of each of the past verbs (copula be, irregular and regular) were counted, including the contexts in which these verbs were required. When the students did not provide the required verbs based on the contexts, we considered them inappropriate or inaccurate uses.

### ***Participant***

A total of forty-six students with 30 females and 16 males participated within the study. The students were enrolled in three different classes at English Department of Institut Parahikma Indonesia. The first group with fourteen students was in their first semester, while the second group with 12 students was in their third semester, and the last group with 20 students was in their fifth semester.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Findings***

Table 1 below shows the percentage of correct forms for past copula be (was and were), irregular past and regular past verbs. In Semester 1, it can be seen that overall the highest accuracy was in the use of irregular past verbs reaching 83 percent accurate, followed by past copula with 70 percent. The lowest percentage with only 60 percent was with the use of regular past verbs. Similar to the students in Semester 1, students in Semester 3 also appeared to perform much better for irregular past tense forms with accuracy of 87 percent, in comparison to regular past verbs and past copula be, each reaching 72 percent and 61 percent respectively.

**Table 1.** Overview of the results (% correct)

Students` level	Past copula	Irregular past	Regular past
<b>Semester 1</b>	70%	83%	60%
<b>Semester 3</b>	61%	87%	72%
<b>Semester 5</b>	64%	88%	82%

Interestingly, while Semester 1 students had the lowest accuracy in regular past tense forms, Semester 3 students had the lowest accuracy level in past copula be. Like Semester 1 and 3, students in Semester 5 also showed their highest accuracy level in their use of irregular past verbs with an accuracy level reaching 88 percent. It was then followed by accuracy score in regular past verbs with 82 percent, while the lowest score was found for past copula be with only 64 percent.

Overall, the three group students appeared to show consistency in terms of having the highest accuracy level for irregular past verbs. Different from Semester 1 with the lowest accuracy score in regular past verbs, Semester 3 and 5 had the lowest score for the use of past copula.

### **Discussion**

The first hypothesis claims that the current research participants` interlanguage development in the use of past tenses will be consistent with what has been proposed within SLA studies, that is, past copula be will be first acquired prior to the acquisition of irregular past forms and regular past forms respectively. While it may be true to some degree, the current research also shows that the claim of the existence of natural order of morpheme acquisition may not always be a stable phenomenon.

### **Hypothesis 1: Past copula `be` (was and were) will be first acquired prior to the acquisition of irregular past verbs (e.g., ate, wrote, took).**

Within this study, the hypothesis of the universal order of morpheme acquisition, that is, past copula be will be acquired earlier than irregular past verbs appeared to be refuted, that is, in all three groups the accuracy level of irregular past tense forms was found much higher than that of the past copula. All students reached a score of above 80 percent for their irregular past acquisition, whereas the score of the past copula be was generally below 70 percent. This finding indicates that the students tended to acquire irregular past tense forms earlier than the past copula.

Therefore, the current research finding did not confirm the first hypothesis that past copula `be` (was and were) will be first acquired prior to the acquisition of irregular past verbs (e.g., ate, wrote, took). This finding can then be considered to have refuted previous findings (e.g., Jia & Fuse, 2007; Salaberry,

2000); Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001), all of which establish support over the existence of universal acquisition order of morphemes regardless of the learner's language background, culture, age, and learning environment.

Interestingly, however, the fact that the current research did not support the so-called 'natural' order acquisition appeared to confirm Ellis's (2009) study who also reported inconsistency in the students' acquisition of past tense forms. Similar to the current study, Ellis also found that students' accuracy level of irregular past verbs was less significantly different from that of past copula, with 60 percent and 55 percent accuracy respectively. However, this data was only found in the instrument of unplanned speech, whereas for the tasks of planned speech and planned writing students seemed to acquire past copula more easily than regular past, that is, the past copula accuracy ranged from 75 to 76 and irregular past ranged from 57 to 60 percent. Similar findings that did not fully support the hypothesis of natural order acquisition were also found by Kuczaj II (1977) who investigated past irregular verbs and past regular verbs, and Luk and Shirai (2009) who studied possessive 's and plural -s.

**Hypothesis 2: Irregular past forms will be first acquired prior to the acquisition of regular past verbs (e.g., booked, studied, respected).**

While the current study refuted the first hypothesis, it appeared to confirm the second hypothesis that the students appeared to acquire irregular past forms prior to the acquisition of regular past verbs. This then suggest support for the earlier studies (e.g., Jia & Fuse, 2007; Salaberry (2000); Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001), all of which establish support over the existence of universal acquisition order of morphemes regardless of the learner's language background, culture, age, and learning environment.

In conclusion, the current study partially supported the previous studies (e.g., Jia & Fuse, 2007; Salaberry, 2000); Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001) that suggested the existence of natural order acquisition, that is, past copula be will be first acquired prior to irregular past verbs, while regular past forms will be learnt after irregular past verbs. However, this study confirmed the study conducted by Ellis (2009) who reported that the acquisition order might not apply in all contexts.

Regarding the contradictory results, Luk and Shirai (2009) speculate that the language background of the learners may influence the research results. It might be true because the current participants' native language is different from the participants of all the earlier studies. However, we acknowledge the limitations of our study that we only have forty-six participants with only one task as the research instrument. This then showed the limited data that we can elicit from the participants.

## Conclusion and Limitations

In conclusion, our findings appear to partially support the belief over the universal order of morpheme acquisition. In other words, the results for the second hypothesis confirm the universal order, yet the data for the second hypothesis show contradictory findings. However, we acknowledge the limited number of our research participants and the limited data elicited from the essay task. This then indicates that our findings are not to be generalised in all contexts. Despite this, the current research findings could become evidence for English teachers and curriculum makers in the structure of their syllabus or curriculum materials, particularly in relation to past copula `be`, irregular and past verbs.

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