



The Patterns of Acquisition of Syntactic Regularities in Pre-Secondary School Second Language Learners of English

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Abstract: The learning of complex syntactic structures of English by L2 learners have not been systematically dealt with in the available literature. This study investigated this problem, with the aim of replicating some works done in the L1, in order to determine their feasibility in the L2 perspective. Limited to a small sample, the study examined the developmental stages in the acquisition of English syntactic structures in 7 to 10-year-old children learning English as a second language. Six test constructs were used to examine linguistic competence over a wide range of surface structures, and statistical analysis provided the basis for interpretation of the general pattern of acquisition. The findings of the study show that the process of acquisition of syntactic structures continues actively during and after the primary school years among L2 learners, and they have implication not only for syntactic acquisition, but for language theory in general and L2 theory in particular.

Key words: second language, syntactic acquisition, linguistic competence, surface structures, PMD, pronominalisation

1. Introduction

In recent years, works in the field of psycholinguistics and second language teaching and learning have encouraged studies in language learning and acquisition, as well as provided the grammatical insights and data necessary for their development. Language acquisition by children can be regarded in the same way. If the terms of a linguistic theory are available to them, they might make a fundamental choice

of the grammar of the language they are exposed to. Although Chomsky (1965) and Katz (1966) argue that the specific content of a child's ability for language is shown in the nature of linguistic universals, these terms are features that define the human language in general and therefore appear in any natural language irrespective of the physical and natural settings (L1 or L2). The child always hopes to reconstruct the tacit competence possessed by the fluent

speakers of his T(arget) L(anguage). In other words, the child tries to formulate grammar of the language to which he is exposed in his attempt to become competent as an adult speaker. As he tests the formulations against his own intuition, he acquires various 'grammatical relations, such as subject-predicate, main verb- object and, possibly...main- subordinate-clause...' (McNeill, 1966: 101).

Until the results of Chomsky (1969, referring to Carol Chomsky's work), the general belief in psycholinguistics is that at the age of five, children have acquired most of their syntax. Her work was reinvestigated by many researchers (e.g. Morsback and Steel, 2008), with some disputing her findings such as Cromer (1970); Steel (1974) and Cambon and Sinclair (1974) and others supporting her claims e.g. Dale (1972). Data from L2 perspective are either unavailable or are too remote to dispute or conform Chomsky's thesis; hence the current study.

In view of this, and because it is assumed that competence can be determined to some degree, at least, through the comprehension of controlled syntactic structures; that is, comprehension is testable, this study reports an investigation of the syntactic acquisition of a group of 7 to 10-year-old learners of English as a second language. It deals on the one hand with several aspects of the acquisition of syntactic structures and, on the other, it is concerned with the general question of the extent to which children, in this age group, have mastered their L2. Areas of disparity between adult grammar and child grammar are

explored. Some grammatical structures with different levels of complexity were investigated. These structures were examined in the grammar of children of up to 10 years by which time it is believed that their mastery of the structures is near that of adult's.

The findings of the study are tentative though; they may have implications not only for syntactic acquisition, but for language theory in general and L2 theory in particular.

2. Structural complexity and the nuances of acquisition

Commenting on the systematicity of children's syntactic structure, Klima and Bellugi (1966) argue:

Not very much is known about how people understand a particular sentence or what goes on into systematicity of adult language. It has seemed to us that the language of children has its own systematicity, and that the sentences of children are not just an imperfect copy of those of an adult (p. 191).

This is subliminal acknowledgement of the fact that children, at an early age, are capable of producing and interpreting sentences based on a configured syntactic system within them. Crystal (1987), Klima and Bellugi (1966), Thorne (1997), and Yule (1996) agree that children, irrespective of their cultural background and psychological configuration pass through three developmental stages before they become syntactically competent. They, however, stress that the exact age in a particular stage is not fixed. In this view, children of various ages may be in the same syntactic age. This is a known psycholinguistic phenomenon.

In the first stage, children form their negatives by simply adding *no* or *not* at the beginning of any utterance. For example, it is normal to hear children scream out: *NO FALL, NO GO, NOT DADDY, NOT BOOK*. Questions are formed by simply adding a *wh*-form to the beginning of their utterances. For example, *where Mary? Who that? What doing?* It is also common at this stage to hear them speak with rise intonation at the end of expressions, especially for *yes* or *no* markers, as in: *Sit chair? See Mom? Have some?*

At stage two, children exhibit more maturity in forming negatives. The forms *don't* and *can't* are at this stage introduced, and they begin to place *no* and *not* in front of a verb rather than at the beginning of the expression. Examples: *He no bite you, I don't know, He no little, He big*. Similarly, the formation of questions becomes more complex in that more *wh*-forms are being used; examples: *Why you smiling? What book name?*

In stage three, on the other hand, a new set of syntax system is manifested by the child. The auxiliaries such as: *didn't* and *won't* begin to occur in his speech. Examples: *I didn't caught it, This is not ice cream*. The auxiliaries are no longer restricted to *can't* and *don't*. Similar maturity is observed in the question structure. The child can now invert subject and verb to form interrogatives. Examples: *can I have a piece? Did you caught it? Will you help me?* The child's grammar is considerably developed at this stage. This is an indication that, like in phonology and morphology, children pass through several stages in acquiring syntactic elements.

However, available studies in the acquisition or learning of the English pronouns suggest that, like any other language system, it takes time before a child masters the nuances of pronouns. For example, at age 1-2, the subjective group – I, he, she, etc. – is learned first before the objective set – me, him, them, etc. – is learned later around age 3; more complex pronouns like the reflexives are acquired not earlier than 3 years (Haas and Owens, 1985; Waterman and Schatz, 1982; Wells, 1985; Hendriks and Spenader, 2006; and Owens, 2008). Hendriks and Spenader (2006) argue that pronoun expression and comprehension are delayed in 4- to 7-year-olds. It is not clear whether they are referring to English or languages in general. Again, Childers and Tomasello (2001: 739) observe that English speaking children 'build many of their early linguistic constructions around ... particular pronoun configurations.' This means that any pronominal feature that is not in the configuration rarely occurs in their repertoire. And where such pronoun eventually occurs, the interpretation assigned to it is bound to be distorted.

As Cromer notes, children seem to employ strategies to interpret sentences they find complex. It matters little to them if these strategies violate certain rule(s). One such rule that is often either violated or overgeneralised is the P(rinciple) of M(inimal) D(istance). A term proposed by Rosenbaum (1967), PMD has been discussed extensively in the literature by Rosenbaum (1967); Chomsky (1969); Landau (2000); Davies and Dubinsky (2004); Fujii (2010) etc. It states that the real subject

of a verb in a complement clause is the closest NP preceding it. For example, the actors/doers in the sentences:

Eze wanted Ayo to dance

Audu told Tonmo what to say

are *Ayo* and *Tonmo* respectively.

According to the findings from Chomsky's (1969) study, learning to violate the PMD is a late acquisition; as such, her 5- to 10-year-old subjects tended to apply the PMD across sentences. This is because they had yet learnt to violate the PMD rule. Interestingly, Aller et al (1977, cited in Bowerman, 1979: 289) find in the study a similar over application of PMD by their Arabic-speaking children subjects.

An *NP is easy to inf vb* (where NP is noun phrase and inf vb is infinitival verb) construct is analogous to *NP is eager to inf vb* form. In the former, the implicit NP is the object of the inf vb, whereas in the latter, the NP is both the subject of the sentence and the subject of the complement inf vb. Available literature on children acquisition of complex structures indicates that the latter construct is acquired earlier by children than the former. Chomsky (1969) discovers that by age 5, children may not have learned to interpret the construct correctly, but by 9 they are able to do so. Other studies that replicated her work (such as Kessel, 1970; Cambon and Sinclair, 1974; Cromer, 1970; and Morsbach and Steel, 2008) arrive at similar a conclusion. On the other hand, Solan (1978 & 1981) argues that the form *NP is pretty to inf vb at* (e.g. Eze is pretty to look at) is yet a construct of later acquisition than its closely related *NP is easy to inf vb* (e.g. Eze is easy to see) form. Intriguingly,

what makes the latter easier to acquire is not apparent. Except for the particle *at*, the relations that hold between words in the two constructs are analogous. Another verb used to test the PMD in the literature is *promise*. Some scholars like Fujii (2010) are of the view that the NP2 elements in the following structures 3 and 4:

3. NP1 promise NP2 to inf vb reflexive (e.g. Paul promised Princess to wash himself)

4. NP1 tell NP2 to inf vb reflexive (e.g. *Paul told Princess to wash himself)

belong to different structures. It is for this reason that Boeckx and Hornstein (2003) introduce the *null P* analysis, which says that the NP object of the matrix does not block the local control chain. Yet importantly, when and how L2 children apply or violate the PMD is a critical question for which as yet has no coherent answers.

3. Review: Chomsky (1969)

Since this work is a replication of the study carried out by Chomsky (1969), it is vital that a review of that work is presented below. The review focuses on Chomsky's choice of test constructs, her selection of subjects and the main findings of her study. Her work investigates the acquisition of four syntactic structures with varied level of complexity. The four constructs are 'considered candidates for late acquisition' (p. 200). They are:

1. John is easy to see;
2. John promised Bill to go;
3. John asked Bill what to do; and
4. He knew that John was going to win the race.

All the constructs have different criterion of syntactic difficulty. For example, in 1, *John* is the subject of the sentence as well as subject of the verb *see*. Whereas in 2 *John*, and not *Bill*, is the subject of the verb *go*, in 3, *John*, and not *Bill*, is the subject of the verb *do*. At issue in 2 and 3 is the presence of two NPs before the verbs *go* and *do* respectively. The author wants to know which of the NPs her subjects would pick as the correct subjects of the verbs *go* and *do* respectively. The underlying structure of the two constructs is:

NP1 verb NP2 to inf

Specifically, the author is interested in the violation or retention of the PMD by the participants, in relation to verbs *promise* and *ask*. Sentence 4 above tests the subjects' knowledge of the English pronominalisation.

Her subjects comprised forty children with ages ranged from 5 to 10 years. There were 22 boys and 18 girls in the sample. All the subjects were English monolinguals from varying socio-economic backgrounds. They were taken from kindergarten through fourth grade from a predominantly middle-class Elementary School in Massachusetts, USA. The sample was made up of pupils with different academic intelligence: above average, average and below average.

Besides discovering considerable age differences of the children who knew the test constructs and those that did not know, she reports four important findings from the investigation. Thus: 1) the research design is fruitful to the extent of 'investigating questions of linguistic complexity' among 5-10 year old English L1 learners. 2) There is a

distinct pattern of acquisition in relation to each of the constructs investigated. 3) Active syntactic acquisition is possible at nine and beyond. 4) There is variation 'in rate of acquisition in different children together with a common shared order of' (Chomsky, 1969, p. 121) syntax learning.

4. Methods

4.1 Population and sample

From two pilot studies conducted with a small number of 5 to 6-year-olds, the result indicated that the tests would be more appropriate for slightly older children. Probably more because of the time constraint than the testing procedures, they showed considerable restlessness and confusion; answering correctly in what appeared to be more by chance than by actual comprehension. For this reason, 7 to 10-year-old children speaking English as a second language became the principal subjects in the study.

The sample comprised thirty children, ten each from primary three to five. The children's age ranged from 7 to 10 years. There were 12 boys and 18 girls, though sex was not a variable in the study. All the subjects came from Addy Nursery and Primary School (ANPS), Kano State, Nigeria. ANPS is located beside Bayero University, Kano; thus, the pupils were predominantly the children of faculty and non-academic members of the university. Fourteen of the subjects had Hausa as L1, 8 Igbo, 4 Yoruba, 2 Ijaw, 1 Tiv, and 1 Idoma. Some of the subjects began learning English before kindergarten. English was the medium of instruction in all their educational stages so far. Some of them spoke English at home alongside

their native language. English, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin were predominantly used for communication outside home and school. Thus, they all spoke English and any one or more Nigerian Languages. Their parents were not native-born English people. For the thirty subjects, the median age was 8-10 years, with the span ranging from 7;2 years (i.e. 7 years two months) to 10;4 years.

4.2 Design of test constructs

The purpose of the study was to test the subjects' knowledge of some syntactic structures by investigating their ability to interpret sentences with such structures. Therefore, the sentences were such that if the children have not learned their structures, they would be unable to assign the correct interpretation. The sentences used were:

- (i) John is easy to see
- (ii) John promised Bill to go
- (iii) John asked Bill what to do
- (iv) John told Bill what to do
- (v) He found out that Musa won the race
- (vi) Eze thinks he knows everything

Sentences (i-vi) were the classic structures employed by Chomsky (1969) (see sub-section 3 above), Klima and Bellugi (1969) and Kessler (1971) in the varied attempts to study children syntactic ability. In the present study however each of the sentences was used to test the subjects' interpretation of a specific syntactic structure. Sentence (i), for example, was selected for its ambiguity. It can be either that *it is easy for John to see* or that *John can be easily seen by other people*. In essence, the surface structure of the sentence does not reveal the real grammatical

relations between the words in the sentence. That L2 child learner can interpret sentences like:

- 1. The cars are easy to drive
- 2. The wood is hard to cut

where it is obvious that cars are easy to be driven by someone, and the wood is hard to be cut, does not necessarily mean children use their knowledge of structure. Because cars do not drive and wood does not cut, there is then one obvious interpretation to each of the sentences. To find out whether L2 children can correctly interpret sentences that are semantically ambiguous, sentence (i) was chosen. The only basis for interpretation is the subject's knowledge of the structure.

Sentence (ii) was chosen in order to test a particular syntactic structure that is associated with the verb *promise*, which gives rise to a dative construction (Larson, 1991) because it can take three arguments. The issue is the extent to which L2 English learner speakers realise that the syntactic structure surrounding a particular word is at variance with a common pattern in English language. The complement verb *promise* relates to the matrix subject, not the matrix object. As such, John performs the action. Therefore, the PMD is violated.

In sentence (iii), unlike sentence (ii), what was tested was the subjects' extent of unravelling the inconsistencies between two or more possible semantic configurations associated with a particular verb. This verb is *ask*. For example, sentence (iii) is interpreted as

John asked Bill to tell John what John is to do; whereas a sentence such as:

3. Chichi asked Taye to go

Chichi is requesting *Taye* to go. The researchers were interested in investigating whether the PMD is observed or violated.

Sentence (vi) tested the subjects' ability to utilise the PMD. In the sentence, it is *Bill* who is supposed to do something, not *John* who is the agent/actor. It is usual that when a sentence is of the structure:

NP1 told NP2 wh- to inf vb

(Chomsky, 1969: 7)

(where NP1 is the first noun phrase, NP2 is the second noun phrase and inf vb is infinitival verb), to activate the PMD, the NP2 is assigned the subject of the inf vb. Therefore, *Bill* in the sentence is the implied subject of the inf vb, do, not *John* who is the matrix subject.

Sentences (v) and (vi), on the other hand, focused generally on pronominalisation; the aim of which was to test how the subjects, given no semantic clues, would decide the

reference of the pronouns therein. Of particular interest was investigating whether the L2 child learner realises that there are 'restrictions on a grammatical operation applied under certain limited conditions only' (Chomsky, 1969: 18). Like Ross (1967) in handling pronominalisation, the researcher understands the complexity of pronouns in syntactic environments and wondered how L2 children react to it (i.e. the complexity). In sentence v), for example, the pronoun *he* is not associated with the **sub(ordinate) cl(ause) NP, Musa**. Thus, *he* refers to an entity unidentified in the sentence. Contrastingly, *he* in sentence vi) may, in one situation, refer to the matrix NP, in another, to an entity outside the sentence. In view of this, the pronoun *he* in such syntactic environment is considered unrestricted. However, the researcher identifies *he* in the sentence with the matrix NP only. Therefore, a subject who associated *he* with an entity outside the sentence was scored wrong. Table 1 below summarises the test structures and the nature of their complexity.

Table 1: The Six Test Constructs and their Levels of Complexity

Structures	Complexity
i. John is easy to see	The NP is object of <i>see</i>
ii. John promised Bill to go	The NP of the main clause is the subject of <i>go</i>
iii. John asked Bill what to do	The NP of the main clause is the subject of <i>do</i>
iv. John told Bill what to do	The NP of the subordinate clause is the subject of <i>do</i>
v. He found out that Bola won the race	The pronoun <i>he</i> has an unidentified reference
vi. Eze thinks he knows everything	The pronoun <i>he</i> is restricted to the NP of the main clause

4.4 The interview

The constructions, written boldly on a wallboard in a classroom, were administered to the subjects.

4.5 The preliminary procedure

Before the actual testing, a series of pre-interview sessions was held with each child. Since the selected

sentences were those that exhibited no contextual or semantic clues to influence subject's interpretation, and in order to establish relationship with him/her to facilitate optimum performance at the real interview, the examiner conducted several sessions of general conversation and directed dialogue in each meeting with each child. For example, in the preliminary sessions, the examiner ensured that each child understood and interpreted the following sentences correctly:

1. Bello is eager to see
2. Ayo promised me something
3. Chika asked Kate to leave
4. Chika told Kate to do something
5. He carried Musa in his car

The children were not however left to interpret the 1-5 above on their own. The researcher asked them some questions that aided them, such as:

6. Who is eager to see?
7. Who promised the other something, Ayo or me?
8. Who is supposed to leave, Chika or Kate?
9. Who is supposed to do something, Chika or Kate?
10. Is *he* referring to Musa or someone else?

It is worth noting that the preliminary sessions were not a subtle attempt to provide clues to the subjects. Chomsky (1969), in studying the acquisition of syntax in NS English children, made use of dolls and other role-play techniques to direct the attention of her subjects

before presenting the tests to them. Similarly, Kessler (1971) employed a series of preliminary sessions in which test constructions similar to those of the real interview were presented to the subjects, when he was investigating the acquisition of syntax among bilingual children. As a replication study, the researcher deemed it fit to provide similar preliminary session to the participants in the study.

5 Results and Discussion

John is easy to see (Si)

The real grammatical relations binding the words in the sentence are not directly expressed in its surface structure (Chomsky, 1969). As shown in Figure 1, more subjects interpreted the sentence as they would a sentence such as John is eager to see. Very few interpreted it as someone can easily see John. To the majority of the subjects, John is performing the action, not being acted upon. It appears the subjects had problem because the normal subject-verb-object order is not intact in the sentence. Another interesting aspect of the performance of the subjects was that the older the children were, the more they got the interpretation right (see Figure 2). Evidently, only about 14% of the children below 8 years got the interpretation right, while about 84% of the 10-year olds interpreted the sentence correctly.

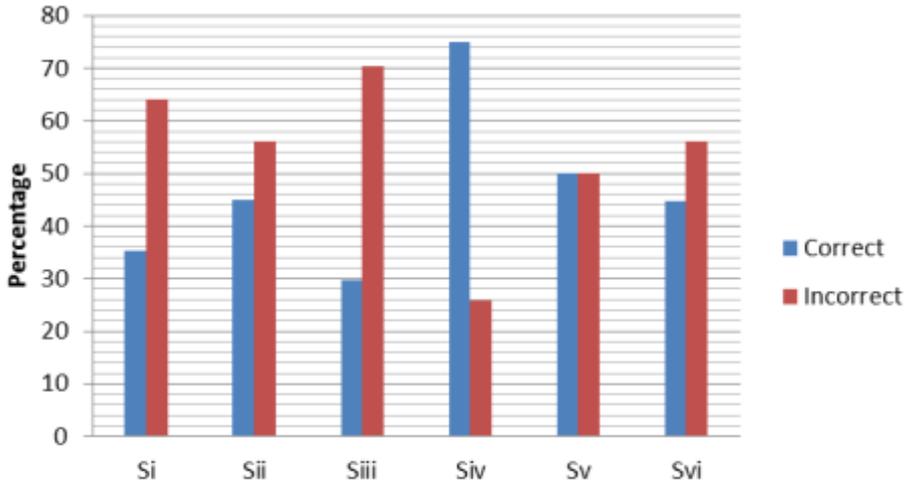


Figure 1: Percentage accuracy of the subjects in the six sentences

John promised Bill to go (Sii)

Specifically, the ability of the subjects to violate the PMD was tested in the sentence. The real subject of the complement verb is the matrix NP, *John* and not *Bill* which is the NP most closely preceding the infinitive verb. The results from the interview, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, are in many ways identical with those from Si. The salient difference is that whereas about 38% of the 9-year-olds got Si right, as much as 50% did so with Sii. The results therefore support the assumption that the older the children the more they understand syntactic nuances.

John asked Bill what to do (Siii)

As indicated in Figures 1 and 2, Siii was the test construct that the subjects failed most. About 70% of the subjects (see Figure 1) interpreted it as *John asked Bill what he (Bill) should do*, instead of assigning the subject of the infinitival complement verb *to do* to John. It is evident therefore that the subjects were yet to understand that in a sentence with the form:

NP1 ask NP2 wh- to inf vb,

the PMD is violated and the NP1 is assigned as the subject of the infinitival verb. All the 7-year-olds got the interpretation wrong. This has a strong implication on second language teaching and learning.

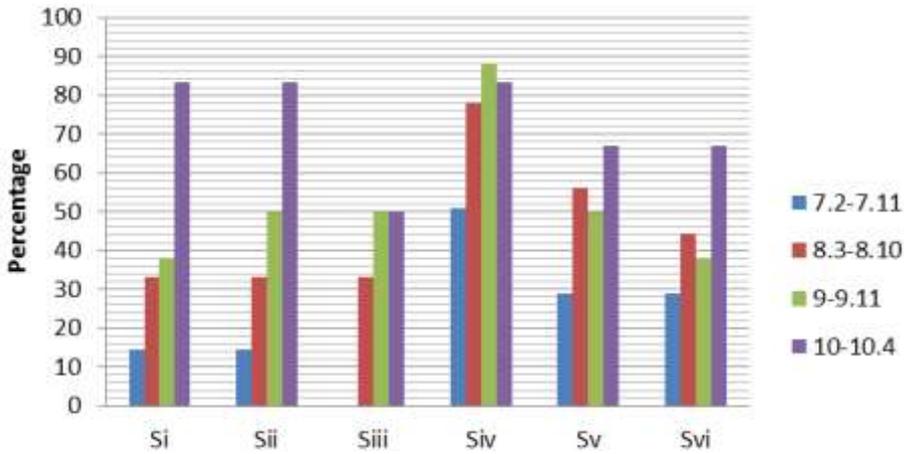


Figure 2: Percentage accuracy of the subjects according to age groups

John told Bill what to do (Siv)

The issue in this sentence is the subjects' ability to employ the PMD rule. The real subject of the infinitival complement verb is *Bill*; at the same time, it is the NP of the matrix verb. As is evident in Figures 1 and 2, most of the subjects got the interpretation right; that is they interpreted it as *John told Bill what he (Bill) should do*, where the subject of the infinitival verb is *Bill*, not *John* who is the implicit subject of the verb *told*. The remarkable thing about this sentence is that more 9-year-olds

got the interpretation right than the 10-year-olds. Interestingly, 88% of the 9-year-olds interpreted it correctly while about 83.3% of the 10-year-old subjects got it right, contrary to the expectation that the subjects would get the interpretation right with increase in age. The downward curve of the graph in Figure 3 shows that the percentage of the 10-year-olds, all of whom were supposed to interpret the sentence correctly, was slightly less than that of the 9-year-olds.

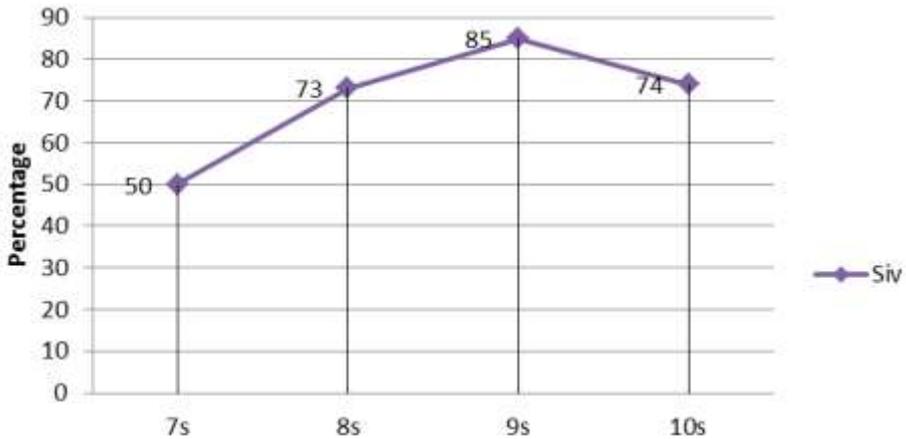


Figure 3: Subjects' performance in sentence iv

He found out that Musa won the race (Sv)

The result from this test shows that only 29% of the 7-year-olds could interpret the sentence correctly, whereas an average of 58% of the 8s, 9s and 10s got the interpretation correct (see Figure 2). It is evident from the results that most 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds were aware that the matrix pronoun *He* needs 'unidentified requirement' (Chomsky, 1969: 104). The basic principle of pronominalisation may be required more uniformly across children, perhaps at a certain age of maturation; whereas the more specialised constructions such as those concerned with unidentified reference vary more with individuals.

Musa thinks he knows everything (Svi)

Unlike Sv that has unidentified reference, the pronoun in Svi has unrestricted reference. On the average, about 37% of the 7s, 8s, and 9s got the interpretation right. This further shows that children in these age levels in the

sample did not know that a pronoun in a subordinate clause which follows the matrix NP has a restrictive reference. In fact, it is in anaphoric relationship with the matrix NP (Halliday, 1985). On the other hand, that only 33% of the 10-year-olds got the interpretation wrong is indicative that the more advanced children are, the more likely are they to know that a pronoun used restrictively can only refer to an NP (if it precedes the pronoun). Finally, the order of acquisition salient in the results is that more 8- than 9-year-olds interpreted the sentence correctly. This phenomenon is not however surprising given that some of the older subjects in the sample (all of whom were English native speakers) used by Chomsky (1969) wrongly interpreted such pronominal case.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The comprehension of the sentences was tested among 30 children who came from varied socio-economic backgrounds between the ages of 7 and 10. Important variation was found

between the oldest children and the youngest ones. This variation leads to the conclusion that the older the second language learners are the more correctly they interpret structures. Structure 3 for example was correctly interpreted mostly by children aged 10, on the other hand, structure 4 was interpreted correctly by most of the children in the sample. In order of acquisition, this clearly indicates that the rule in structure 3 is acquired rather later than the one in structure 4.

The nature of the children's linguistic processes examined in the study is generally significant in many ways: 1) it reveals that even after the age of 10, L2 learners of English continue to acquire the syntax of the language. This is contrary to the belief that children, by the age of 6 to 7, engage in active syntactic acquisition of their immediate language (Kessler, 1971); 2) it further indicates that as early as 7 years, L2 learners can apply the PMD, but not linguistically mature enough to violate it even at age 10; 3) the results are in agreement with the findings of other researchers who have studied children's syntactic acquisition in L1 and L2; 4) the varied patterns of the order and rate of the acquisition of the structures tested are each a characteristic of the construction itself.

If the similarities and differences between the grammars of L1 and L2 are considered in terms of linguistic competence (Kessler, 1971), then in language theory, L2 theory in particular,

the findings of this study are important for the application of child language acquisition to the theory of L2 teaching and learning given that structures shared by any two languages follow approximately a similar order and rate of acquisition. Green (1969: 198) argues however that 'the variations are modes of comprehending and uttering the one central linguistic pattern we are biologically destined to develop.'

The understanding of linguistic complexity in general may be facilitated by studying children's underlying linguistic competence and analysing the differences between their grammar and adults', where the latter forms the centre from which the former is viewed.

Most often, the findings of a research pave the way for further research. Therefore, based on the limitations of the investigation pointed out in the study, and the implication of the study on language theory, we suggest (for further research) that a replication of the investigation could be made with a larger sample to test reliability of the findings; older children may be studied in order to detect the limit of the acquisition of the six structures investigated; other syntactic structures with different levels of complexity may still be investigated with children; and possibly children whose L2 is considerably more developed than their L1 could be studied to determine the sequential order and rate in which children acquire an L2 without formal instruction.

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