The acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes by Filipino university freshman multilinguals

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Abstract

Anchored on the Natural Order Hypothesis (NOH) (Krashen, 1981), this paper examines the accuracy/ acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes by Filipino university freshman multilinguals and the influences of the ease (or difficulty) in acquisition. The participants were determined through purposive sampling, and their language samples, which were produced through prompts, were analyzed. Brown's (1973) 90% norm for accuracy and Suppliance in Obligatory Contexts (SOC) procedure, following Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005), were employed in analyzing 585 sentences. For the overuse of morphemes, the Target-like Use Analysis (Pica, 1984) was used. Based on the Group Method Score (GMS), the following acquisition order was drawn: (1) Auxiliary 'be' (is); (2) Article 'the'; (3) Progressive (-ing); (4) Plural (-s); (5) Copula 'be' (is); (6) Irregular past; (7) Possessive (-'s); and (8) Third Person Singular Present. The results counter the NOH for Auxiliary 'be' (is), Article 'the,' Progressive (-ing), and Copula 'be' (is) while affirming that the Irregular Past, Possessive (-'s) and Third Person Singular Present tend to be acquired late. Moreover, L1 transfer appears to be the chief determinant of accuracy/acquisition order while the frequency of language input and the use of cognitive strategies, such as overgeneralization, simplification, and incomplete application of rules may have affected the ease (or difficulty) in acquisition.

Keywords: Multilingual, grammatical morphemes, accuracy level, acquisition order, interlanguage

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1.   Introduction

The Philippines is a multilingual nation with more than 170 languages; 12 of which are major languages based on the number of native speakers. Because of this linguistic diversity, learning languages is ordinary to many Filipinos (Ramos, 1979). Consequently, it is neither surprising to hear Filipino children and adults speaking different Philippine languages nor improbable that the Philippines is fertile for studies on language/s acquisition. That is why describing multilingual university freshmen vis-a-vis their interlanguage (IL) or their language development from their mother tongue (MT) toward the target language (TL) (where they are at present and how far have they gone) is, on the whole, motivating. Mendiola (2005) points out: studies on Filipino second language learners have a long way to go. Furthermore, Barrot (2010) contends that there is a paucity of studies on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) generally on English morphemes and wholly on accuracy level and accuracy order of grammatical morphemes in the written English of adult Filipinos acquiring English as a second language (L2).

Much research in morpheme acquisition has shown that regardless of L1, number of languages acquired, and age, learners undergo the same acquisition pattern (Larsen-Freeman, 1975); that is, there is invariance in the acquisition of English grammatical morphemes across English language learners. In hindsight, however, it may not be possible to generalize the findings to adult multilingual language learners, for these studies investigated the sequence by children acquiring English as an L1 and adult learners acquiring English as an L2. Hence, the acquisition order found to be invariant in children and adult bilinguals with different native-language backgrounds may differ from multilingual learners. The present study assumes that Filipino adult multilingual English language learners do not follow the predictable acquisition patterns of English grammatical morphemes discovered by L1 and L2 researchers and that the language development of adult multilingual learners of English as an additional language must be examined exclusively from L2 development to understand language acquisition.

Morpheme-order studies began in the early 1970s to examine the independent grammar assumption advanced by Universal Grammar (UG) (Kwon, 2005) and to find evidence of the natural view of acquiring a language. The pioneering researchers (Brown, 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973) who investigated English grammatical morphemes in L1 acquisition by children found that 14 English grammatical morphemes are acquired in a predictable sequence. Prompted by this finding, some language acquisition researchers (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1975; Pica, 1984) examined the same morphemes in SLA and verified the results of the pioneering morpheme studies and found that "there appears to be general agreement in the field of SLA that L2 learners of English follow the pattern postulated by Krashen" (Luk & Shirai, 2009, p. 722).

According to the IL notion, a learner already has a set of abstract language principles-a mental grammar or a natural language system that has linguistic rules and principles (White, 2003). Selinker (1972) proposed that the L2 learner's linguistic behavior is determined in part by this language system which differs from both the learner's L1 and L2. So, this IL–notion

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-that learners have their own interim grammars-supports a universal mechanism playing in language acquisition. Cook (1993) concluded that findings in morpheme studies lend support to the independent grammar assumption that an infant is born with an innate predisposition to acquire a language; that s/he must be exposed to a language for the acquisition process to start; that s/he possesses an internal mechanism of unknown nature which enables him/her to construct a grammar of a particular language from the limited data available (Corder, 1981). Hence, IL is regarded to have given credence to UG and has shifted the focus of researchers in the field of SLA to *performance* in order to recognize *competence*. Henceforth, IL becomes an important feature in describing the learner's L2 development and the language-learning process (Corder, 1981).

Furthermore, Kwon (2005) holds that grammatical morphemes are rich sources of measures in language acquisition. More importantly, investigating grammatical morphemes is helpful in understanding SLA by adults (Krashen, 1981) and in explaining nonnative language behavior and language acquisition (Tingstad, 1999.)

Grammatical morphemes are the basic building blocks for English words, thus, making morpheme acquisition an integral component of the English language (Minn & Hui, 2000). According to Paradis (2005)

> Grammatical morphemes in English include both bound and free morphemes. For example, verbal and nominal suffixes like past tense –ed in "*Brendan jump ed*" and the plural –s in "*dog s are running,*" are grammatical morphemes, as well as the verb BE in constructions like "*Brendan is running,*" "DO in "*do you want a cookie?*" and the articles in "*the dog*" and "*a dog.*" In traditional linguistic classification, grammatical morphemes are closed-class items that stand in opposition to open-class, content morphemes like the nouns "*dog*" and "*cookie*" and the verbs "*jump,*" "*run*" and "*want.*" (p. 173)

While there is much research on grammatical morphemes in SLA, most of them are conducted in North America (Brown, 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Bailey, Madden, & Krashen, 1974; Pica, 1984; Minn & Hui, 2000), leaving this area of research productive. Assuming that Filipino university freshman multilingual learners may show variability in the acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes established by previous morpheme investigations on children acquiring English as L1 and bilingual ESL learners, it is particularly motivating to examine the English grammatical morphemes by adult multilinguals to shed light on the issue of generalizability of morpheme-acquisition order across learners. It is against this context, besides insufficient information concerning the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in the written English of adult Filipino multilinguals, that this study was undertaken.

This study, therefore, investigated the acquisition of English grammatical morphemes in the written English of selected Filipino university freshman multilinguals. The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What is the accuracy level of grammatical morphemes in the student's composition?
2. What is the accuracy/acquisition order of grammatical morphemes in the student's composition?

2.   Method

The descriptive method and the qualitative research approach were employed in the analysis of the eight English grammatical morphemes in the written compositions of Filipino university freshman multilinguals. According to Stern (1980), the use of the qualitative approach gains novel understanding about existing phenomena. Since the goal of this investigation seeks to describe the acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes by adult Filipino multilinguals, the qualitative approach is enriching for its concern "is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources, but whether the data collected are sufficiently rich" to bring clarity to the understanding of phenomena (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). Additionally, qualitative research produces findings without using statistical procedures for the purpose of understanding ideas and relationships among raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

2.1   Participants

Ten Filipino university freshman multilinguals enrolled in a private university in Manila and from different regions in the Philippines were purposively drawn for this investigation based on the following criteria: (1) age (16 to 19 years old), (2) educational background (completed their elementary and high-school education in the Philippines), (3) fluency (conversational level) in at least three Philippine languages, and (4) length of stay in the Philippines (have neither lived nor stayed in any country where English is the L1 for the past six months before the data gathering).

   The participants' mother tongues include Ilokano, Cebuano, Kapampangan, Bicolano, Pangasinan, Ibanag, Pangalatok, and Waray. Other than their mother tongues, they also speak Filipino, English, Japanese, Mandarin, and Fukien as a second, third, or fourth L2. All the participants neither lived nor stayed in any English-speaking country for more than six months prior to the data collection. At that point, they were still taking English 2 (Reading and Thinking Skills for Academic Study) for three hours a week after enrolling in a prerequisite course–English 1 (Communication Skills). Likewise, at the time of data gathering, the participants have been exposed to formal ESL instruction for almost 11 years, from basic to tertiary education.

2.2   Corpus

Thirty compositions with 10,874 lexis and 585 sentences were collected and analyzed based on two expository prompts and one narrative on the following topics: (1) explain how not

getting enough sleep affects your day; (2) some of our richest experiences take place when we travel; tell about a memorable experience you had when you were travelling; and (3) describe a person who is especially interesting. The range of words is between 3,117 to 3,930 while the range of sentences in all the compositions is between 160 to 217, all relatively close.

The compositions were utilized in establishing the accuracy/acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes by the participants based on Larsen-Freeman's (1975) argument that the use of composition is productive in investigating the acquisition of English grammatical morphemes by adult ESL learners. In fact, one way to find out how learners acquire an L2 is to study how they use it in production (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

2.3   Data Collection

The data collection lasted for a week at a one-day interval. Three consecutive sessions were allotted for collecting the data, each spanning for one hour. When there were concerns regarding grammatical rules, usage, vocabulary, and any other conventions in writing, the researcher hardly extended any form of assistance. The use of any equipment, such as electronic and pocket dictionaries, mobile phones, and grammar books, was strictly prohibited.

All the compositions were distributed to two college English instructors for coding. During the investigation, one of the raters was finishing his Ph.D. in English. The raters, who were oriented of their tasks, read all the compositions and corrected the erroneous sentences based on American Standard English by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). On occasions when discrepancies appeared in the coding, the raters, who have been teaching English courses for three years, and the researcher methodically conferred on the coding made and reached agreement.

2.5   Data Analysis and Procedure

The Suppliance in Obligatory Contexts (SOC) (Brown, 1973) was used in data analysis. Brown (1973) argued that grammatical morphemes are obligatory in certain contexts where one can set an acquisition criterion in terms of output-where-required. Each obligatory occasion is a kind of test item which the learner passes by either suppliance or nonsuppliance of the required morpheme.

Meanwhile, Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005) basic procedure for calculating accuracy level for individual morpheme scores based on SOC was followed to identify the accuracy in the individual learners' use of a range of grammatical morphemes:

1. Determine which morpheme is to be investigated.
2. Go through the data and identify obligatory occasions for use of the morpheme.
   Count the total number of occasions.
3. Establish whether the correct morpheme is supplied in each obligatory context.
   Count the number of times it is supplied.
4. Calculate the percentage of accurate use with this formula:

$$\frac{\text{n correct suppliance in contexts}}{\text{total obligatory contexts}} \text{ x 100 per cent accuracy}$$

5. Repeat the procedure for the other morphemes to be investigated.

On the other hand, to account for the overuse of a morpheme, the Target-like Use Analysis proposed by Pica (1984) was used with the following formula. According to Kwon (2005), this formula is for scoring and comparing data on morpheme-acquisition order.

$$\frac{\text{n correct suppliance in contexts}}{\text{n obligatory contexts} + \textbf{n} \text{ suppliance in non-obligatory contexts}} \text{ x 100} = \text{per cent accuracy}$$

In illustrating the accuracy/acquisition order based on SOC and Target-like Use Analysis percentages, the accuracy level score for each morpheme using the Group Method Score (GMS) (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982) was established. By the GMS, the suppliance scores for a particular morpheme were added and divided by the total number of obligatory occasions for all the learners in the sample. The answer expressed as a percentage was obtained by multiplying it by 100. In this method, even learners, who produced just one obligatory occasion for a morpheme, were included in the group score. Upon determining the group scores for individual morphemes, the morphemes were ranked in decreasing order of accuracy; that is, the morpheme with the highest accuracy was placed at the top and the morpheme with the lowest score, at the bottom (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Brown's (1973) 90% criterion (SOC), previously employed by Dulay and Burt (1974) and Ramos (1979), was utilized in establishing the accuracy level of each grammatical mor-pheme since it serves as a reputable criterion for identifying the accuracy level of English grammatical morpheme acquisition by the participants with different native-language backgrounds.

3.   Results and Discussion

3.1   Accuracy level of the eight English grammatical morphemes by Filipino university freshman multilinguals

Table 1 reveals the participants' acquired accuracy level of the following grammatical morphemes: Auxiliary 'be' (*is*) with 100 percent accuracy, Article 'the' with 98 percent accuracy, and Progressive (*–ing*) with 93.54 percent accuracy since the range of percentage is between 93.4 - 100 percent, all above the cut-off point. This means that the participants accurately produced the Auxiliary 'be' (*is*) in all obligatory contexts while performing exceptionally well in obligatory contexts where they needed to supply the Article 'the' and the Progressive (-*ing*).

Table 1
Adult multilingual learners' accuracy level of the eight English grammatical morphemes

Grammatical Morphemes	Correct Usage	Incorrect Usage
Plural (*–s*)	88.61	11.39
Possessive *(- 's)*	69.69	30.31
The	98	2
Third Person Singular Present (*–s)*	69.47	30.53
Irregular Past	82.14	17.86
Auxiliary 'be' (*is*)	100	0
Copula 'be' (*is*)	86.66	13.34
Progressive (-*ing)*	93.54	6.45

It appears that the participants have nearly perfectly acquired the Auxiliary 'be' (*is*) and the Progressive (-*ing*).

3.2   Accuracy/Acquisition order of the eight English grammatical morphemes of Filipino university freshman multilinguals

Table 2 shows the accuracy/acquisition order of the eight English grammatical morphemes examined in the participants' compositions according to the Group Method Score (GMS) (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). For easy reference and comparison purposes, the morphemes based on the acquisition order were grouped into three: G-1, G-2, and G-3. Notably, the clusters tell the acquisition order of individual morphemes in this investigation.

Table 2

Acquisition order of the eight English grammatical morphemes of adult multilingual learners

Rank	Correct Usage	Incorrect Usage	
1	Auxilliary 'be' (*is*)	100	
2	The	98	G1
3	Progressive (-*ing*)	93.54	
4	Plural (*–s*)	88.61	
5	Copula 'be' (*is*)	86.66	G2
6	Irregular Past	82.14	
7	Possessive (- '*s*)	69.69	
8	Third Person Singular Present	69.47	G3

Based on the 90-percent accuracy level norm, Table 2 shows that the participants have already acquired three English grammatical morphemes (Group 1), namely, Auxiliary 'be' (*is*) with 100 percent accuracy, ranking first; Article 'the' with 98, second; and Progressive (-*ing*) with 93.54, third.

The English grammatical morphemes in Groups 2 and 3, namely, Plural (-*s*) with 88.61 percent accuracy level, the Copula 'be' (*is*) with 86.66, Irregular Past with 82.14, Possessive (- '*s*) with 69.69, and Third Person Singular Present with 69.47 show a rather lower SOC and Target-like Use Analysis percentages. These results suggest that the participants have yet to acquire these morphemes. Seemingly, these morphemes in Groups 2 and 3, respectively, may be acquired later in the participants' IL development.

The present study demonstrates the variability of English grammatical morpheme acquisition contrary to what was predicted by NOH (Krashen, 198; Larsen-Freeman, 1975; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Izumi & Isahara, 2004; Barrot, 2010; Brown, 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973; Hakuta, 1974; Chimombo, 1979). Clarifying the probable factors of this disagreement may lead to L1 transfer as the chief determinant. It must be recalled that the seminal morpheme studies and subsequent research in language acquisition were motivated by mapping out the trajectory of morpheme acquisition by monolingual children and adult learners of English as an L2, whereas this study attempted to describe the morpheme-acquisition order of adult multilinguals.

Schachter and Otanes (1972) observed that one tense-aspect formation in English for reporting events, such as the ongoing events represented by the nonpast progressive or past progressive: 'Mother is cooking some food,' corresponds to the Filipino imperfective aspect formation, as follows:

Nagluluto	*(na)*	*ng*	*pagkain*	*ang*	*nanay.*
IMPER	ENC PAR	MK	N/food	DEF-DET	N/ mother

Filipino and other Philippine languages have aspects; one of them is imperfective that indicates an action which has begun but not yet completed or is ongoing. The imperfective aspect corresponds to the Progressive (*-ing*) aspect in English, hence, the high accuracy level percentage of the Progressive (*-ing*) morpheme apparently reflecting the acquisition of Progressive (*-ing*) as a result of 'positive transfer' or the influence of the syntax of the participant's MT on producing the grammatical morphemes in obligatory contexts of the TL. Also, perhaps the excellent accuracy level of Auxiliary 'be' (*is*) may also be largely attributed to the fact that is-are usage is taught to Filipino students as early as Kindergarten or Grade 1. In the words of Wode (1981), all language learners benefit from language input. In fact, Goldschneider and Dekeyser (2001) posited that frequency of input is the second most commonly suggested determinant in the grammatical-morpheme-acquisition order.

The examples below (1-9) show correct suppliance in obligatory contexts of the three acquired English grammatical morphemes.

On correct suppliance of Auxiliary 'be' (*is*):

(1)   *Facebook has grew a lot and is continuing to improve.*
(2)   *Also, when the teacher is discussing, I can't really absorb the lesson that he/she is trying to teach because my mind is thinking none other than sleep.*
(3)   *Summer is coming and we are both excited to hang out again.*

The following are examples where the Progressive (-ing) was correctly supplied:

(4)   *...I am **carrying** my bed on my back.*
(5)   *When I'm **walking** my alertness is quite low....*
(6)   *...he is **living** every second of his life.*

Yet again, it seems easier for the participants to acquire the Article 'The' with 98 percent accuracy level possibly due to the equivalence of the definite determiner in Filipino ***'Ang'***. The Article 'the' in English also exists in Filipino as a free morpheme and is also congruent in terms of usage. Also, while a subject in a grammatical English sentence may or may not indicate indefiniteness, the topic of a Filipino sentence, which is the equivalent of a subject in a grammatical English sentence by no means, expresses a meaning of indefiniteness (Schachter & Otanes, 1972), thus, the ease of producing the Article 'The' in obligatory contexts by the participants, as shown in the following examples:

(7)   *Having them in my life is **the** best thing that ever happened to me.*
(8)   *During **the** whole drive we ate and chatted....*
(9)   ***The** media and **the** innovation it brought to us changed how we communicate and socialize with others.*

By contrast, the following grammatical morphemes were not acquired, namely, Plural (-*s*), Copula 'be' (*is*), Irregular Past, Possessive (- *'s*), and Third Person Singular Present in which the values were all below the cut-off point (90 percent). This seems to suggest that the participants have not yet acquired these morphemes.

Some examples of the Plural (-*s*) errors are:

(10) *...they are my number one **fan**.*
(11) *They are the **one** who make my life wonderful.*
(12) *We love to talk everything and laugh until our **stomach** hurts.*

The nonaccuracy of the Plural ('*s*) may be explained by the influence of the MT. For instance, in Filipino and many other Philippine languages, the notion of plurality is not shown through noun inflection, compared with the English expression of indicating 'more than one.' Instead, Filipino and some Philippine languages require determiners. To illustrate, the English sentence 'The books are new' may be translated as:

Bago	*ang*	*mga*	*aklat/libro.*	*'The books are new.'*
ADJ/new	DEF-DET	PL-MK	N/book	

In the preceding example, the noun ***aklat/libro*** cannot be inflected as ***aklats/libros*** to refer to the Filipino equivalent of the countable English noun 'books.' As a result, the definite article ***ang*** and the plural determiner ***mga*** are used obligatorily in Filipino syntax, as in the sentence '*Bago **ang mga** aklat/libro*.' Since nouns in Filipino do not have plural inflections, they can be explicitly pluralized by using semantically similar to Plural (-*s*) plural markers ***ang mga***, which precede what they pluralize (Schachter & Otanes, 1972).

Masaya	***ang***	***mga***	*bata.*	*'The children are happy.'*
ADJ/happy	DEF-DET	PL-M	N/PL children	

According to Ramos (1979), this finding suggests L2 influence or language transfer, showing that the participants have not yet incorporated into their IL the basic plural structure of nouns in English.

Moreover, this nonacquisition of Plural (-*s*) lends support to the findings of Japanese researchers (Hakuta, 1974; Izumi & Isahara, 2004; Onaha, 1992) probably because Japanese and Filipino share similar syntactic features, particularly the absence of the notion of plurality in Japanese grammar (Hakuta, 1974) as well as in Filipino, given that plurality in Filipino is not a result of inflection. Conversely, this result challenges Dulay and Burt's (1974) claim that the Plural (-*s*) is the first grammatical morpheme acquired by L2 learners.

The participants of this study scored 86.66 percent for the Copula 'be' (*is*), suggesting that they have not yet acquired such a morpheme, thus, corroborating Brown's (1973) sequence of acquisition when he revealed that the Copula 'be' (*is*) is relatively acquired late. Further, the same holds true to Singaporean multilingual learners who also showed low SOC

and Target-like Use Analysis percentages in the acquisition of the Copula 'be' (*is*) (Minn & Hui, 2000).

The following examples show that the participants made errors in the use of Copula 'be' (*is*) in two ways: first is overuse, i.e., the participants supplied the morpheme in unobligatory occasions; and second is verb-number agreement where the participants supplied the Copula 'be' (*is*) when not required.

(13) *I have an average of seven to eight hours sleep per day which I believe **is** appropriate for my age.*

(14) *For me the persons who **is** (are) especially interesting is (are) my parents....*

(15) *Smaller streets **is** (are) also there....*

This result, on the other hand, seems to contradict previous morpheme-acquisition order investigations (Barrot, 2010; Behjat & Sadighi, 2011; Widiatmoko, 2008; Izumi & Isahara, 2004; Krashen, 1981; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Onaha, 1992; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). Once more, this finding may be accounted by cross-linguistic influence since Copula 'be' (*is*) has no equivalent form in Filipino and in other Philippine languages in the normal order in equational sentences:

Masaya	*ang*	*bata.*	*'The child is happy.'*
ADJ/happy	*DEF-DET*	*N/child*	

However, Copula 'be' (is) manifests itself in an inverted word order:

Ang	*bata*	*ay*	*masaya.*	*'The child is happy.'*
DEF/DET	N/child	PAR	ADJ/happy	

Yet, L2 learners of English language have been observed to commit errors in the suppliance of the Coupla 'be' (*is*) in obligatory contexts regardless of whether or not their language has an equivalent form (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008).

Regarding the use of Irregular Past morpheme, the participants showed low percentage of suppliance in obligatory contexts, suggesting that the acquisition is delayed. The example sentences appear to exemplify overgeneralization–a cognitive strategy in L1 acquisition in which a learner uses one grammatical rule, such as past form or regular verb in all cases, instead of irregular verbs required by the contexts as a result of his/her experience of other structure/s of English previously learned.

(16) *Before even creating facebook he made sites which **catched** the attention of the students body.*

As the foregoing example illustrates, the participant may have tried to assimilate a grammar rule s/he had internalized–in this case the Verb plus -*ed* formation for the regular past–instead of using a morphologically conditioned irregular past form. A probable reason may lie in the fact that the participant may have hypothesized that all the past tense forms in English are formed by adding the suffix -*ed* to the base form of the verb. In all, this nonsuppliance of Irregular Past forms in obligatory contexts is possibly due to the learners' attempt to reduce their linguistic burden (Richards, 1975) of using different past forms with irregular verbs.

Frequent errors in the use of Irregular past were noted:

(17) *When we got there our tourist guide was waiting for us and we immediately **ride** on the bus....*

(18) *But in that very the same event, we almost all together **say** farewell to this world.*

(19) *As my friend **overtakes** one car at a very high speed, there was this big truck along our way.*

Possessive (-*'s*) morpheme appears to be the second most difficult morpheme to acquire by the participants, as shown by the SOC and Target-like Use Analysis which is rather far removed from previous findings (Barrot, 2010; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Krashen, 1981; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). There are three plausible reasons for such occurrence. First, the difference might have resulted from scoring the accuracy level. Barrot's measure for accuracy level relied on SOC whereas the present study employed the SOC and Target-like Use Analysis, the latter for accounting the overuse of morphemes. Second, Barrot gave his participants the opportunity to edit, reread, and make any necessary corrections in their compositions. The third cause is L1 transfer. According to Schachter and Otanes (1972), in Filipino, the semantic notion of ownership is not inflected to the noun; hence, one does not need Possessive (*'s*) to express ownership. To illustrate, Filipino has certain constructions, such as:

Bago   ang   relos   ng   nanay   ko.   *'My mother's watch is new.'*
ADJ/new   DEF-DET   watch   MK   TOP/1SG/mother I

in expressing possession of some specific, already identified object or objects. For example, the object possessed is expressed by the topic of the sentence (Schachter & Otanes, 1972):

Sa   nanay   ang   relos.   *'The watch is Mother's.'*
POSS-PRED/TOP/1SG   DEF-DET   N/watch

The following are the errors observed in the production of Possessive ('-s):

(20) *Before even creating facebook...of the **student** blogs about what was happening in his life....*

(21) *Sleeping is a **body** way to restore its energy.*

(22) *...the place where **Marcos** body is displayed....*

The lowest SOC and Target-like Use percentage in this study is the use of Third Person Singular Present which may be ascribed to the low mastery of the rule on subject-verb agreement between a third person singular subject and present form of the verb. Looking at simplification as a source of the low accuracy level, the participants may have made the acquisition of the TL easier by dropping the inflection, as in '*Mario read the papers every morning.*' As a consequence, possibly to ease the burden of learning the rules of the target language, the participants may not have paid much attention to inflections, such as those expressing tense.

(23) *He **give** us problems to be a better person.*

In addition, overgeneralization of the rule using Third Person Singular Present was also observed, as exemplified in the following sentences (24-26). Furthermore, the overgeneralization of the rule occurred also in sentences where modals precede the verb as shown in example 26.

(24) *I, myself, **loves** shoes and dancing.*

(25) *And most of them **thinks** I am interesting too.*

(26) *On the other hand, during sleepless nights, as I get up from my bed it would often **feels** like I am carrying my bed on my back.*

Adverbs that come or 'intervene' between the grammatical subject and the verb seem to have caused a difficulty as well. In this particular condition, however, the low accuracy level may point to the internalization of the participants of the morpheme (-*s*) as a plural marker of the verb to agree with plural subjects (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008) as a likely source.

(27) *They never **leaves** my side.*

(28) *They also **guides** me to be a better person.*

Barrot (2010) suggested that the low accuracy level on the Third Person Singular Present was perhaps due to the proximity or the distance of the subject to the verb, thus, affecting the observance of the subject-verb agreement rule. In brief, the farther the predicate is from the subject, the higher the tendency of learners to commit errors. For example, in (29), even if the first verb form *releases* is correctly used, the second one *take* in this compound

predicate is erroneously applied perhaps due to the distance between *take* and *it*, which is too wide for the participant to observe the subject-verb agreement rule.

(29)   *It releases stress and **take** away all the worries that I have here in Manila.*

However, in cases where proximity cannot be held as a cause, the nonmastery of the rule, such as the verb-number error in plural subject with singular verb, may affect the correct use of the Third Person Singular Present morpheme, as in:

(30)   *I think when I get enough sleep, my cells **regenerates** normally....*

Raising one more probable explanation, Logmao (1989) underscored the incomplete application of rules as a likely cause of the error; in the case of example (29), the learner might have also thought that s/he can achieve effective communication without implementing correctly the rules of the target language.

Furthermore, the Third Person Singular Present is the most difficult to acquire by multilingual Filipino English language learners since tense does not characterize Filipino and any other Philippine languages. In fact, Schachter and Otanes (1972) argued that the Filipino verb system includes no true tense distinctions unlike the English distinction between past and nonpast: past as in '*He **lived** in Manila,*'... nonpast (present, habitual, or anticipated) as in '*He **lives** in Manila.*' In addition, in the English verb paradigm, the Third Person Singular Present is the only person where a verb gets inflected with –*s/-es* while the other forms do not require the verbs to be inflected, such as '*I **live** in Manila*' for the first person singular; for the second person singular and plural, '*You **live** in Manila*'; for the first person plural, '*We **live** in Manila*'; and for the third person plural, '*They **live** in Manila*'. I, You, We, and They do not pose a problem in the present tense since all these pronouns require the base/uninflected form of the verb. In effect, when multilingual Filipino English language learners assimilate the uninflected form of the verb with third person singular, '*She/He **live**' in Manila,*' they seem to overgeneralize the rule with third person singular pronouns she and he.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (2008) contend that research on L2 morpheme acquisition has shown that the Third Person Singular Present Tense inflection causes persistent problems for learners even at more advanced stages of proficiency; hence, it is not surprising that the participants of this investigation, despite years of formal English language learning, have not yet fully internalized the use of the Third Person Singular Present morpheme.

The current study is contradictory to Barrot's (2010), particularly the last five morphemes in their order of acquisition that appeared to have not been acquired yet by the participants of this study who scored high in his suppliance in obligatory occasions. For example, he reported that the Copula 'be' (*is*) is acquired first by adult bilingual subjects. But in the present investigation, it yields low SOC and Target-like Use Analysis percentage, thereby, upholding the previous findings (Widiatmoko, 2008; Brown, 1973). This means that the morpheme has not been acquired yet. Thus, Barrot's (2010) sequence hardly conforms

to this current investigation and any other previous morpheme-acquisition studies. Also, the Possessive (-*s*) ranked at the top of Barrot's, with the highest suppliance in obligatory occasions percentage. In other words, of the 12 morphemes that he studied, it has the highest accuracy level quite contrary to the findings of this investigation where it lies at the bottom, preceding the Third Person Singular Present. The present finding indicates that this genitive morpheme may be acquired later by adult multilingual learners contrary to adult bilingual learners. Hence, the present study confirms previous morpheme research (Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974; Bailey, Madden, & Krashen 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1975) to the effect that the Possessive (-*s*) is acquired later in the language development of L1 and L2 learners across ages. In light of this finding, language background did not seem to heavily affect the acquisition process of the said morpheme as supported by Larsen-Freeman (1975), suggesting that there may be universality in the order of acquisition of some English grammatical morphemes.

In sum, the present study barely upholds the agreement among language acquisition researchers that there is a natural sequence of morpheme acquisition regardless of L1, age, learning environment, and proficiency level/s. This result is consistent with that of Luk and Shirai (2009, p. 742) when they discovered that "L2 learning occurs through the filter of the L1 network, it is only natural that there are very different acquisition orders for different L1 groups, rather than a universal order."

4.   Conclusion

The acquisition order of the following morphemes, namely, Auxiliary 'be' (is), Article 'the,' and Progressive (-*ing*) appear to have deviated from NOH, thus, negating the conventional wisdom in SLA that grammatical morphemes are predictable in the acquisition process. Interestingly, the relative ease (or difficulty) of acquiring some of the morphemes may be a function of positive transfer or negative interference of L1. To Luk and Shirai (2009, p. 721), the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes "depend[s] on the presence or absence of the equivalent category in the L1 therefore, apparently emphasizing L1 transfer as a strong source than what has been previously reported by morpheme investigations." Here again, Mendiola (2005) claims that Filipino English language learners' difficulty in the acquisition of some language forms are brought about by dissimilarities between L1 and L2.

Further, the difficulty of the acquisition of Plural (-*s*), Possessive (-*'s*), Third Person Singular Present (-*s*), Irregular Past, and Copula 'be' (*is*) resulting in erroneous sentences may be, for the most part, attributed to transfer hypothesis. This means that learners are heavily influenced by the previous knowledge of their native languages (Luk & Shirai, 2009). Meanwhile, frequency of language input and the use of learning strategies, such as overgeneralization, simplification, and incomplete application of rules, are also putative sources for the nonaccuracy of the preceding morphemes. This means that the participants need more input and practice in using them when cross-linguistic influence cannot be a possible source.

Considering the results revealed in the present examination, one notes that the sequence of teaching the English grammatical morphemes must be based on the acquisition order, i.e., presenting the grammatical morphemes that are acquired early before introducing the difficult ones or the ones that are predicted to be acquired later. As regards the difficult ones, teachers should provide sufficient oral and writing tasks that call for the use of these morphemes to help learners internalize those forms, i.e., Plural (-*s*) and Third Person Singular Present. In this way, the teachers become more strategic on how to help and when to provide form-focused instruction, thereby, allowing the learners master the appropriate use or function of each form. Corder (1974) posited that the value of the inventory of difficult areas, which the learners encounter, is to direct the teacher's attention to the teaching of these areas in order to overcome such predicted difficulties.

Finally, the researcher recommends the following: (1) replicate the study using large language samples to validate or negate the acquisition order of the eight grammatical morphemes by adult multilingual learners established by the present study; (2) undertake a similar study among multilingual learners using multiple data-elicitation techniques; (3) conduct a longitudinal study or case study on the acquisition order of morphemes by adult multilingual learners for comparison with cross-sectional studies; (4) establish the Philippine norm on the criterion for accuracy level of English grammatical morphemes; (5) present/teach the grammatical morphemes that are acquired first; and lastly, (6) emphasize the teaching of the grammatical morphemes found to be acquired late in the sequence.

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