

Acquisition of Two Syntactic Structures of English by Kenyan School Pupils

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Abstract

There are two important issues that have captured the interest of researchers in the area of Second Language Acquisition. One is the desire to describe the nature of learner language using various approaches such as: the study of learner's errors, the study of developmental patterns, the study of variability, and the study of pragmatic features. The other one is the desire to explain the learner's language, i.e. to examine why the learners make errors, why their language exhibits marked regularities, and why it changes systematically over time. In the context of these principal concerns in the area of SLA, the objective of the present study is to describe the acquisition of two structures of English namely the noun phrase and the verb phrase by Kenyan school pupils.. The focus is to determine the sequences of the acquisition of the constituents within these phrases. Besides this, the study explains the learner language by way of investigating the contribution of the variables of time, sex and the learner's L1 in the acquisition of the two structures. A heterogeneous group of sixty - four pupils drawn from four different time levels across primary and secondary schools is used. Data is collected by two methods namely: free or spontaneous composition and picture description. This helps to ensure complete sentential productions with both the NP and the VP. Data analysis involves identification and computation of the syntactic categories. Frequency Analysis Model is used to determine the developmental sequences of the Noun Phrase and Verb Phrase rules. Two methods of analysis are used to determine group syntactic performance according to time, L1 and sex. This is done by, computing the frequency distribution of informants across the IL varieties and displaying the results in tables. Statistical significance of the three variables in relation to syntactic performance is also examined. This research is therefore quasi - longitudinal, and essentially qualitative. The analysis reveals that learners acquire the NPs and VPs in fairly defined developmental sequences. While the influence of the learner's sex and L1 is statistically insignificant in this study, the influence of time in acquisition is significant. Pedagogic programmes involving the teaching of these structures in our schools may be based on the acquisition sequences that this study identifies. Because levels of proficiency are commensurate with the amount of time spent in SL learning as this study reveals, teachers should maximize the use of the time availed in their timetables.

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