



Estetisk-filosofiska fakulteten

Victoria Bergvall

Young Swedish students' knowledge of English grammatical
morphemes

Engelska
C-uppsats

Termin: Höstterminen 2006
Handledare: Thorsten Schröter

Karlstads universitet 651 88 Karlstad
Tfn 054-700 10 00 Fax 054-700 14 60
Information@kau.se www.kau.se

Abstract

Titel: Young Swedish students' knowledge of English grammatical morphemes

Författare: Victoria Bergvall
Engelska C, Ht -06

Antal sidor: 28

Abstract: Research has shown that children who have English as a first language acquire grammatical morphemes in a predictable order. Many researchers claim that second language learners also follow a predictable pattern when learning English grammatical morphemes regardless of their linguistic background, and that the same mechanisms are responsible for both first and second language acquisition.

The aim of this paper was to study Swedish students' knowledge of English grammatical morphemes, and to compare their knowledge with that of second language learners from other countries as well as with that of first language learners.

The results show that Swedish students seem to acquire morphemes in a similar way to that of second language learners in general and that they make errors similar to those made by first language learners. For example, the copula was almost fully acquired, while the third person regular and irregular constituted a problem for the students. The most notable exception was the possessive 's, which Swedish students seem to acquire at an early stage compared to other second language learners.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, grammatical morphemes, English as a second language, acquisition order

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS.....	1
2. BACKGROUND.....	1
2.1 THE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMATICAL MORPHEMES IN FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION....	1
2.2 THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.....	3
2.2.1 SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' ACQUISITION OF GRAMMATICAL MORPHEMES.....	3
2.2.2 FACTORS IN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING	5
2.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.....	7
2.4 SUMMARY.....	8
3. METHODS AND MATERIAL.....	8
3.1 DATA COLLECTION.....	9
3.2 ANALYSIS OF THE MATERIAL.....	10
3.3 DELIMITATIONS.....	10
4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	10
4.1 CONTRACTIBLE COPULA.....	10
4.2 PLURAL.....	11
4.3 ARTICLES.....	12
4.4 POSSESSIVE 'S.....	13
4.5 UNCONTRACTIBLE COPULA.....	14
4.6 REGULAR PAST	15
4.7 IRREGULAR PAST.....	16
4.8 UNCONTRACTIBLE AUXILIARY <i>BE</i>	17
4.9 CONTRACTIBLE AUXILIARY <i>BE</i>	18
4.10 PROGRESSIVE <i>-ING</i>	19
4.11 REGULAR THIRD PERSON <i>-S</i>	20
4.12 IRREGULAR THIRD PERSON	21
5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	22
6. LIST OF REFERENCES	
APPENDIX 1	
APPENDIX 2	
APPENDIX 3	

1. Introduction and aims

The acquisition of English as a native language is a process that is different from that of learning English as a second language. First language acquisition is a sub-conscious process while learning a second language seems to require hard work and motivation. Nevertheless, however the two processes also share some similarities. One way of examining the differences and similarities between them is to look at the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes.

In this paper, I hope to contribute to the study and understanding of second language acquisition. I will focus on a number of grammatical morphemes in English, and the order in which Swedish children learning English as a second language seem to acquire these morphemes.

My primary aim is thus to investigate in what order Swedish students in junior high school seem to acquire English morphemes. I will analyze free written texts as well as translation tests done by students in grade seven and try to determine which morphemes they, as a group, seem to have mastered and which not. Secondly, I will compare the Swedish children's knowledge of such morphemes to findings from past studies, to see if Swedish learners follow a pattern similar to that of other learners acquiring English as a second language, as well as to that of children acquiring English as their first language.

2. Background

In this section, I will focus on what different researchers have to say about the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes, starting with Roger Brown and his research on how children acquire their native language. I will then present several studies on the morphological acquisition order of children and adults learning English as a second language.

2.1 The acquisition of grammatical morphemes in first language acquisition

Roger Brown is perhaps best known for his research on the different stages of first language acquisition in children. In one of his studies, Brown and his colleagues focused on the spontaneous utterances of three children: Adam, Eve, and Sarah. He was able to conclude that children acquire grammatical features, in this case fourteen carefully chosen morphemes, in the same order (Brown 1973: 272). This order is commonly referred to as the accuracy or acquisition order of morphemes.

A morpheme is the smallest unit in a language that carries meaning. An example of a morpheme is the *-ed* suffix in the word *looked*, which carries the meaning of ‘past tense’. Another example is the *-ing* ending in verbs, which can be used to indicate progressive aspect and is also one of the first grammatical morphemes that native English-speaking children acquire. For more examples, cf. Table 1.

Brown argues that morphemes lend themselves well to research. The reason for this, he explains, is that grammatical morphemes are often obligatory in a sentence. Researchers can then focus not only on what a child is saying (which, in the study of spontaneous utterances, depends on what the child chooses to say), but also on what the child should be saying. As Brown puts it, “one can set an acquisition criterion not simply in terms of output but in terms of output-where-required” (Brown 1973: 255). In the study mentioned, Adam, Eve and Sarah gradually learned to apply grammatical morphemes correctly. In that study, a morpheme was considered acquired when used correctly 90% of the time in contexts that called for it (Brown 1973: 258).

Although the three children in the study acquired the morphemes in the same order, they did not do so at the same rate or at the same age. It is a well-known fact that children reach different developmental stages at different ages. Brown proposes five different stages in the acquisition of English as a first language, based on the so-called Mean Length of Utterance (MLU). When calculating the MLU, one calculates the total number of morphemes uttered by a child during a period of time and divides it by the total number of utterances. An utterance is here defined as “a sentence or a shorter unit of language that is separated from other utterances by a drop in the voice, a pause, and/or a breath that signals a new thought” (Owens 1994: 149). The longer a child’s utterances, the higher the MLU and vice versa. In stage one the mean length of a child’s utterances is no more than 2.00. In stage five, the highest, the MLU is 4.00 or higher.

Brown found that the length of the utterances produced by the children, and thus the developmental stage they were in according to him, correlated with the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. He states that “[o]vert grammar or morpheme combining begins [...] as soon as the MLU rises above 1.00” (Brown 1973: 65). Cf. Table 1 for the complete list of Brown’s morphemes and the approximate age when children master them. Brown

concludes that the MLU, together with chronological age, is a good indicator of linguistic development (Brown 1973: 273).

Table 1. Brown's 14 morphemes.

Morpheme	Example	Age of mastery (in months)
Present progressive - <i>ing</i> (no auxiliary verb)	Mommy <i>driving</i>	19-28
<i>In</i>	Ball <i>in</i> cup	27-30
<i>On</i>	Doggie <i>on</i> sofa	27-30
Regular plural - <i>s</i>	Kitties eat my ice cream	24-33
Irregular Past	<i>Came, fell, broke, sat, went</i>	25-46
Possessive 's	Mommy's balloon broke	26-40
Uncontractible copula	He <i>is</i> (response to "Who's sick?")	27-39
Articles	I see <i>a</i> kitty	
	I throw <i>the</i> ball to daddy	28-46
Regular past - <i>ed</i>	Mommy pulled <i>the</i> wagon	26-48
Regular third person - <i>s</i>	Kathy hits	26-46
Irregular third person	<i>Does, has</i>	28-50
Uncontractible auxiliary	He <i>is</i> (response to "Who's wearing your hat?")	29-48
Contractible copula	Man's big	29-49
	Man <i>is</i> big	
Contractible auxiliary	Daddy's drinking juice.	30-50
	Daddy <i>is</i> drinking juice.	

(Adapted from: Owens 1998: 153)

2.2 The acquisition of English as a second language

It thus seems clear that children who acquire English as a first language follow a predictable pattern. Since Brown presented his morpheme study in 1973, researchers have tried to determine whether second language learners also follow a specific pattern.

2.2.1 The acquisition of grammatical morphemes in English as a second language

Two scholars who have studied the acquisition patterns of foreign language learners are Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt. In a cross-sectional study, they compared the speech of 115 Spanish- and Chinese-speaking children from New York, and the order in which these children seemed to acquire eleven morphemes of English. The results were striking, showing that the children learned the morphemes in mostly the same order (Dulay & Burt 1978: 359). Cf. Table 2 for a complete list of the morphemes and the order in which the students acquired them. For example, both groups acquired the copula at the same stage, even though this feature exists in Spanish but not in Chinese. Dulay and Burt also point to other studies, which have shown that children from for example Norway and Japan produce strikingly similar errors, despite their

different linguistic backgrounds (Dulay & Burt 1978: 348). They conclude that there seems to be a natural order in which students learn grammatical morphemes, and that the students' first language is not the only factor that affects this order.

Table 2. Acquisition order of morphemes according to Dulay and Burt (1978).

Group Score Method ¹	Group Means Method	SAI Method
1. [Pronoun] Case	1.[Pronoun] Case	1. [Pronoun] Case
2. Article	2. Article	2. Copula
3. Copula	3.5 Copula	3.5 Article
4. [Progressive] -ing	3.5 [Progressive] -ing	3.5 [Progressive]-ing
5. Plural	5. Plural	5. Auxiliary
6. Auxiliary	6. Auxiliary	6. Plural
7. Past regular	7. Past regular	7.5 Past irregular
8. Past irregular	8.5 Past irregular	7.5 Possessive
9. Long plural	8.5 Possessive	10. Past regular
10. Possessive	10. Long plural	10. Long plural
11. Third person	11. Third Person	10. Third person

(Adapted from Dulay & Burt 1978: 359.)

An earlier cross-sectional study conducted by Dulay and Burt (1973) had already suggested that children from various backgrounds, speaking different languages, develop their English skills in a similar way. In that study, Dulay and Burt analyzed the errors produced by children learning English. They classified the errors as either developmental, interference or unique errors. Developmental errors are errors that one can expect to find among both foreign and native learners and that are linked to the learners' stage of development. Interference errors are errors due to learners transferring structures from their native languages, which thus interfere with the learning of the new language. Unique errors cannot be explained by either of these factors. Dulay and Burt found the vast majority – 85 percent – of the errors to be developmental (Dulay & Burt 1973: 249). For example, a child learning English as a second language would produce statements such as “they hungry”, omitting the copula – an error that is also found in first language acquisition. These results lend support to the theory known as *creative construction*, (cf. section 2.2.2).

¹ To obtain as reliable a result as possible, Dulay and Burt (1978) used different scoring methods. See Dulay & Burt 1978: 354-58 for further information.

From Dulay and Burt's studies, we can conclude that there seems to be a more or less universal order in which children acquire morphemes when learning English as a second language. What is more, other researchers have determined that adults follow the same predictable patterns as children when learning a second language. Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1978) studied the order in which 73 adults acquired English morphemes. The group consisted of people whose mother tongues were Spanish, Greek, Thai and several other languages. The authors also compared the performance of the adult learners with the findings by Dulay and Burt (1978). They found strong similarities, both among the adults and between the adults and the children in the earlier studies, which suggests that there is a universal pattern in which learners whose native languages are different acquire certain English morphemes (Bailey, Madden & Krashen 1978: 366).

2.2.2 Factors in first and second language learning

As indicated earlier, previous findings favour a theory called *creative construction*. Creative construction is thought to play a major role in first language acquisition. The concept is called *creative* because children acquiring a language actively test rules and hypotheses rather than just imitate the speech of others (Dulay & Burt 1978: 348). Among other things, this can result in overgeneralization: for example, learners of English may, at some point, hypothesise that the past tense form is always created by adding the suffix *-ed* to the base form of the verb, thus producing forms such as *falled* (Moskowitz 1998: 535). Creative construction can be described as

the process in which children gradually reconstruct rules for speech they hear, guided by universal innate mechanisms, which cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved. (Dulay & Burt 1978: 348)

Closely linked to the concept of creative construction is the idea of *parametric switches*. It may be the case that children are born with a set of "switches" in the brain that can be set in a limited number of positions, depending on what language the child is acquiring. In her article "Learning and Using a Second Language", Jeannine Heny (1994: 176) explains and discusses parametric switches. She begins by introducing the concept of *markedness*. Heny suggests that when a child is born, the different switches are in a specific setting – the *unmarked* setting. Acquiring a language will then almost certainly require a change of position for some of these switches, as every language, if compared to a large number of other languages, has

some features that are marked. The question is what happens once a child has acquired a first language, and the switches are set. Heny discusses whether the switches can be re-set and how this would affect second language learning. Although this area of research is relatively new, Heny speculates that the answer may be linked to markedness. If a grammatical feature in a child's native language is presumed to be marked, and the same feature is presumed to be unmarked in the new language, then "it might be relatively easy for a speaker to 'go back' to the initial state" (Heny 1994: 177). Conversely, if a child has to acquire a *marked* new grammatical feature, one that is presumably *unmarked* in his or her native language, that might be more difficult.

Some researchers have tried to offer explanations that are more specific than the creative construction theory. What it comes down to is why some morphemes seem to be easier to learn than others. In an article, Diane Larsen-Freeman discusses morpheme acquisition. She begins by dismissing a few other factors – structural complexity, phonological complexity, learner personality, and linguistic environment – as adequate explanations (Larsen-Freeman 1978: 376).

Yet another explanation that has been put forward is that of phonological saliency. According to this suggestion, the more perceptible a morpheme is the easier it is to acquire. For example, the suffix *-ing* can be said to be easily perceptible because it constitutes a syllable, as opposed to the *-s* in the word *Tom's*. However, Larsen-Freeman explains that salience alone cannot explain the similarities between learners' progress, since the copula, for example, is a morpheme that is *not* easily perceptible, yet does not seem too hard to acquire (Larsen-Freeman 1978: 376).

Larsen-Freeman finally proposes that the factor that best explains the similarities in foreign language learning is that of frequency. She bases this conclusion on the correlation that she can see between the frequency of occurrence of a morpheme and its rank in the acquisition order. She speculates that practice makes perfect – the more often a student attempts to use a morpheme the more fluent he or she will get (Larsen-Freeman 1978: 376).

J. M. Goldschneider and R. DeKeyser (2005) argue both for and against Larsen-Freeman. In their opinion, different factors contribute to the accuracy order. (Goldschneider & DeKeyser 2005: 35). Like Larsen-Freeman, they consider frequency a factor, but only as one among

many. The other factors are perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphophonological regularity, and syntactic category, all of which can, in some way, be linked to the concept of salience (Goldschneider & DeKeyser 2005: 35). Depending on what syntactic category a morpheme belongs to, for instance, it will be more or less salient, they argue. For example, free morphemes are more easily distinguishable than bound ones. Furthermore, the length of a morpheme, or whether it is stressed in spoken language, affects salience (Goldschneider & DeKeyser 2005: 36).

2.3 Differences between first and second language acquisition

As mentioned above, children and adults from radically different linguistic backgrounds seem to learn grammatical morphemes in virtually the same order. However, the universal order of morpheme acquisition in English as a second language is somewhat different from that of small children acquiring English as a native language. Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1978: 363-4) compared Dulay and Burt's (1978) stipulated accuracy order for second language learners with that of first language learners. They found similarities but also a few differences. For example, the contractible auxiliary morpheme is something that children acquiring English as a native language learn rather late. Children and adults learning English as a second language, however, learn this particular feature at a relatively early stage.

If creative construction is involved in both first and foreign language learning, then why do the orders differ? The explanations for this have to do with cognitive differences between adults and children as well as the biological and neurological functions of the brain.

Language development and use are largely the responsibility of the left side of the brain (Singleton & Ryan 2004: 130-1). We know this because injuries to the left side of the brain impair speech. However, children who have sustained some kind of injury to the left side of the brain recover faster and more fully than adults in the same situation. The brain of a child seems more capable to compensate. As the brain matures, it seems to lose some of its flexibility. Interestingly, brain maturation coincides with the so-called critical period – the period after which some researchers claim that learning a language becomes more difficult (Singleton & Ryan 2004: 134-6). Other researchers are sceptical of the critical period. It is correct that a person who has grown up deprived of *any* linguistic exposure will have trouble acquiring a language later in life, but it is unclear whether these results can be applied to second language learning (Heny 1994: 171).

As we grow up, the structure of the brain changes. So does our way of processing information, reasoning and analyzing problems. In other words, our cognitive skills develop (Heny 1994: 174). This may better explain the differences between children and adults when it comes to language acquisition. The cognitive skills of a toddler and a school-aged child differ in many ways, too. Naturally, they will therefore approach language learning in different ways. For example, small children generally find it harder to convey the abstract past than to speak of an on-going event. Therefore, they acquire the present tense before they acquire the past tense. School-aged children and adults possess more advanced cognitive skills and therefore do not find the past grammatical forms harder to learn than the present forms, or at least not for the same reason (Heny 1994: 170-2). The complex nature of the adult mind might also 'stand in the way of' effortless language acquisition. As Heny suggests, "the language faculty cannot function undisturbed, as it did in early childhood" (1994: 172).

2.4 Summary

To sum up, children acquiring their first language follow a predictable pattern when it comes to the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, as shown by Roger Brown (Brown 1973). School-aged children and adults learning English as a second or foreign language also follow a specific order. For example, they will likely learn the regular plural forms before they learn the third person singular *-s*; whether they are from China, Norway or Spain does not seem to make a difference. There are many reasons for this. For instance, children and adults learning a second language seem to apply so-called creative construction. Their native language will interfere somewhat, but in many ways they start from scratch just as young children do and they apply partly the same mechanisms. However, school-aged children and adults do not process information in the same way as toddlers. That is why the accuracy orders of toddlers and school-aged children and adults differ, despite the many similarities.

3. Methods and material

There are two aims to this study. Firstly, I want to determine which grammatical morphemes Swedish students in grade seven seem to master and which they do not master. Secondly, I want to compare this order to that proposed in previous studies of morpheme acquisition in English as a first and as a second language.

3.1 Data collection

The data was collected in three groups in seventh grade at a school in southern Sweden. The total number of participants is approximately sixty. The school is a so-called independent school, and in addition to the amount of English teaching required by the curriculum the students have the option of working independently with the subject. The pedagogical material that they use during class hours is called *Good Stuff*. The school accepts students from a relatively large geographical area and students come from many different backgrounds. However, the majority of the students have Swedish as their native language.

One group was asked to write a short essay, in which the students were to describe themselves. They were allowed to write about anything they liked, but were also offered some specific questions in case they did not know what else to write about (cf. Appendix 1). Since my primary aim was to investigate grammatical knowledge, the students were allowed to consult a dictionary. I, too, answered questions about word choice, but not about grammatical constructions.

I asked the second group to write a story about last summer. As with the first group, I provided ideas for them, should they not know what to write about (cf. Appendix 2). My intention was for them to write in the past tense, and I hoped that they would produce both regular and irregular past tense forms, as well as the past tense forms of the copula.

Having read previous studies done by students at Karlstad University, I discovered that there are certain grammatical constructions that students either avoid or use sparsely when they write freely. Low frequency makes it impossible to draw any conclusions as to whether students master a morpheme or not. The irregular third person morpheme (*does, has*) is one example. Students might avoid these constructions because they find them difficult, or because free writing assignments do not call for these constructions. Yet I wanted to get at least some idea of the students' practical knowledge concerning the grammatical morphemes that I suspected would not be very frequent in their free assignments. Therefore, I prompted the third group of students to use certain constructions by having them translate Swedish sentences into English (cf. Appendix 3). As with the free writing tasks, I answered questions concerning word choice. For example, several students wanted to know what *skälla* was in English, and they were told that the word for *att skälla* was 'to bark'.

3.2 Analysis of the material

My aim was to study the students' use of morphemes. Thus, spelling was not important, and forms such as *gos* (*goes*) were counted as correct, if used in the right context. I studied the students' texts much as other researchers have done. I looked for instances where certain morphemes would be obligatory in correct language use. If the morpheme was correctly provided I counted it as correct. A missing or incorrect morpheme was counted as incorrect. Furthermore, a morpheme was counted as incorrect if it occurred where it should not. Finally, some sequences were very hard to analyze and were not counted at all.

3.3 Delimitations

Different groups did the three assignments. Therefore, when I make comparisons, variations can partly be the results of an uneven knowledge of English between the groups. Ideally, the same groups should have done both the free writing assignments and the translation test. However, I conducted my study during one day and I suspected that students in grade seven would not want to complete three separate tasks on the same day. Lack of motivation and concentration on the part of the students might have had a negative impact on my study.

Furthermore, I have investigated written language, whereas many past studies have investigated spontaneous speech. However, the students were allowed to write in a relaxed environment, and I made them aware of the fact that their essays would not be graded. My aim was to elicit as spontaneous a language production as possible.

4. Results and analysis

In this section, I will present the results of the study. The order in which I present the morphemes is based on the order in which the Swedish students seem to have acquired them.

4.1 Contractible copula

The verb *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were*) can be either a main verb – a copula – or a helping verb – an auxiliary. Examples of the copula include *I am a teacher* and *We were on holiday*. The first sentence illustrates the contractible copula. It is perfectly fine to say *I'm* instead of *I am*. In the second example, however, the copula – *were* – cannot be contracted. *We're* is the equivalent of *we are*, not *we were*.

When the copula can be contracted without changing the meaning of the statement, it is called *contractible*. According to Brown's list, the contractible copula ranks as number 13 of 14 morphemes. Second language learners, however, usually acquire the copula rather early. Cf. Table 2 for a complete list of the morphemes and the order in which second language learners in general acquire them.

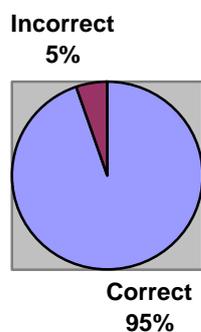


Figure 1. The students' use of the contractible copula.

In the students' essays, there were 138 occasions where the context required the contractible copula. The students did well, providing the correct form 131 times. As mentioned, exact spelling was not important and copulas such as in examples 1 and 2 were counted as correct.

(1) *I like them cause the re nice and kind.*

(2) *I am thirteen years old.*

The remaining seven occurrences consisted of incorrect copulas. For example the students occasionally wrote *are* instead of *is*. Moreover, there were a couple of occurrences of overuse of *it's*, such as in example 3. Brown noticed this as well and claims that young native speakers possibly use *it's* as *it*, not realizing that *it's* is in itself a construction (Brown 1973: 265).

(3) *It's was fun*

4.2 Plural

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of the plural in English: regular and irregular. Although they are mastered at different stages, they are here counted together. To simplify things, the regular plural is constructed by adding *-s* to a noun. It is one of the first grammatical morphemes that both native speakers and second language learners acquire.

Some nouns, however, have an irregular plural form, which takes longer to learn. Typically, children produce overgeneralizations such as *foots* and *fishes* for *feet* and *fish*.

The Swedish students in my study seem to master the plural. There were 172 occasions that required the plural – regular or irregular – and the correct form was provided 159 times.

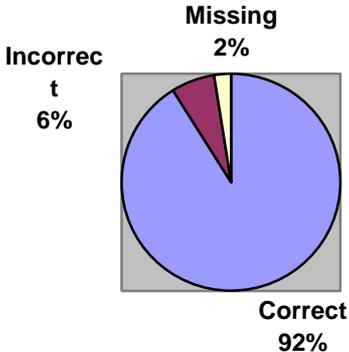


Figure 2. The students' use of the plural.

On three occasions, the students failed to provide the plural. The other ten errors consisted in plurals that should have had an irregular form, but were constructed by adding the regular *-s*, thus creating the same type of overgeneralizations that native speakers do when they acquire English.

4.3 Articles

The articles, *a*, *an* and *the*, are used for non-specific and specific reference, respectively. According to Brown's list, native speakers master this morpheme as number eight out of 14 (Owens 1994: 153). Overuse of the definite article *the* is very common and it takes some time before children fully master the articles.

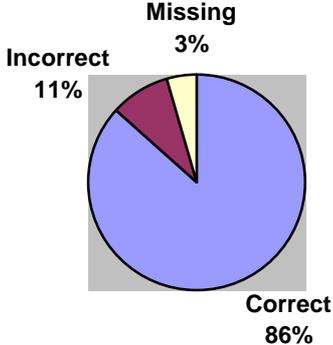


Figure 3. The students' use of articles.

In the free writing samples and the translation test there were 234 instances of this grammatical morpheme, including contexts where an article was required and occasions where a student provided an article even if it was not necessary. The students used the correct article 202 times. Seven times an article was not provided in an obligatory context, whereas the remaining 25 occasions consisted of misused articles. Overuse of *the* was common, especially in cases when Swedish requires specific reference, as in example 4. Especially in the translation test, students tended to include *the* whenever the Swedish word was written in its specific form. Students also provided specific reference when neither Swedish nor English called for it, as in example 5.

(4) *Daddy drive(s) to the work for Pappa kör till jobbet.*

(5) *Does Sara like the ice cream? for Tycker Sara om glass?*

In both cases, the article was counted as incorrect. Although it is fine to say *the ice cream*, out of context, I counted it as incorrect, as the task was to translate the word *glass*. In addition, the students had some problems with the use of *an*. A few times, they either failed to provide it or used it where they should have used *a*. The former was much more common than the latter. The few students who wrote *an* instead of *a*, seemed to do so for no particular reason. The Swedish counterparts, *en* and *ett*, offer no explanation. One student, however, seemed to have misunderstood the use of *an* a little, and wrote: *An unique boat*. The student probably opted for *an* since the word *unique* starts with a vowel, even though it is pronunciation and not spelling that matters.

4.4 Possessive ´s

Children acquire the possessive by stage three, when their MLU is approximately 2.75 (Brown 1973: 271). Out of Brown's 14 morphemes, it ranks as number six. Second language learners in general acquire the possessive rather late (Dulay & Burt 1978: 359). The Swedish students, however, did very well. Of the morphemes investigated, the possessive marker was the one with the least correlation between second language learners in general and the Swedish students in this study. There may be several reasons for this.

In the translation test, the Swedish words might have given the student clues, as the Swedish possessive is also constructed by adding an ´s. Another explanation might be native language interference. It is worth noticing that of the fifty occurrences only a handful included an

apostrophe, which is the symbol that distinguishes the English possessive from its Swedish counterpart. However, it has not been my aim to check the spelling, and therefore forms such as *Tom's dog* were counted as correct.

In the free writing assignments, the possessive marker was only required 13 times; eleven times the students provided the marker, two times it was missing. 13 occasions are, however, too few to draw any conclusions. In the translation test and the essays combined, the possessive was used 53 times – 44 times the possessive marker was used correctly and nine times, it was missing.

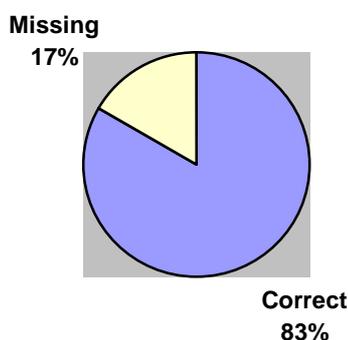


Figure 4. The students' use of the possessive 's marker.

4.5 Uncontractible copula

As stated earlier, a copula is the verb *to be* as the main verb, and this can sometimes be contracted. In certain situations, however, the copula cannot be contracted. For example, the past forms *was* and *were* can never be contracted. Neither can the copula be contracted when its position is first or last in a sentence, as in *Is he happy* or *Yes, he is*. Out of the different forms and functions of *be*, the uncontractible copula is the first that English-speaking children acquire. In the studies of second language learners presented earlier, the uncontractible and contractible forms are listed together and the copula is one of the first morphemes that second language learners acquire.

In the students' texts, there were 171 obligatory contexts for the uncontractible copula. 132 times the correct morpheme was given and 39 instances featured incorrect copulas.

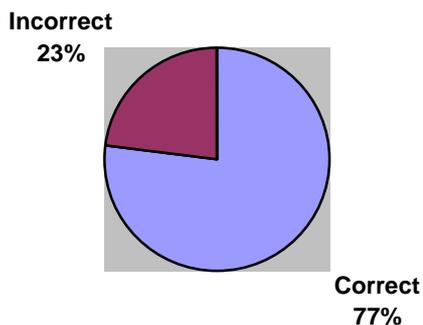


Figure 5. The students' use of the uncontractible copula.

The students commonly used *was* where *were* was required, as in example 6. The vast majority of the contexts that required a copula required *was*. It is worth noting that although the students provided the correct uncontractible copula 77% of the time, they often failed to provide *were* when required.

(6) *We was in Denmark*

4.6 Regular past

Loosely speaking, the regular past tense is formed by adding the *-ed* marker to a verb. However, the suffix is pronounced differently depending on the verb. In addition, the spelling varies from verb to verb. For our purposes, however, neither pronunciation nor spelling matters. Thus, the morpheme was counted as correct in cases such as example 7.

(7) *The Alien cryed.*

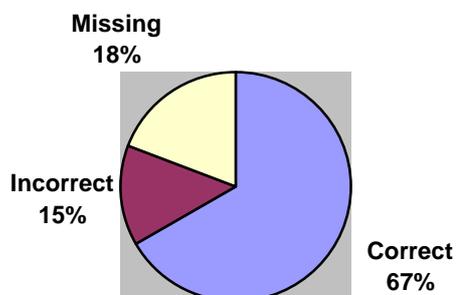


Figure 6. The students' use of the regular past marker.

There were 111 instances involving the regular past tense marker. These comprised 74 correct forms and three incorrect ones, such as in example 8. Twenty times a past tense marker was missing altogether. In addition, there were fourteen cases of overuse, where irregular verbs were given the regular marker. In such cases, the morpheme was counted as incorrect. Native speakers acquire the regular past after the irregular past, while the reverse is true of second language learners, according to a list by Dulay and Burt (1978: 359). They counted regular forms of irregular verbs, as in example 9, as *correct*, while I have chosen to consistently count a morpheme as *incorrect* when it appears where it should not be. Still, the students in my study seem to master the regular past better than the irregular.

(8) *It was not so funny to started school again.*

(9) *My dog...throwed sticks.*

4.7 Irregular Past

There are a small number of verbs that do not take the regular *-ed* ending to form past tense. The acquisition of irregular verbs illustrates language development well. Children often begin by using the correct form, based on what they pick up from their environment. Thus, common verbs such as *went* and *came* are acquired rather early. At a later stage, however, many children start testing hypotheses. They generalize that past tense is formed by adding *-ed* to any verb and produce forms such as *goed* even if they have previously used *went* consistently. (Owens 1994: 156). One may assume that adults do not say *goed*, and that it is a form that can be attributed to *creative construction*.

There were 128 obligatory contexts for irregular past in the students' texts. The correct form was provided 78 times. In this study, morpheme ranks as number seven out of twelve, which corresponds quite well with the order in which second language learners in general acquire grammatical morphemes. Cf. Table 2 for a complete list of the morphemes and the order in which the students acquired them.

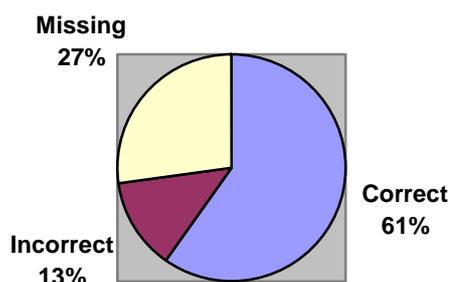


Figure 7. The students' use of the irregular past.

When the students got it wrong, they either added the *-ed* suffix or provided the infinitive form such as *run* instead of *ran*. In fact, infinitive forms were provided more often for irregular past forms than for regular past forms. This might indicate that the students are aware of the fact that the past forms of irregular verbs are not constructed by adding *-ed*, but that they do not know the exact past irregular form. The students seem to master some verbs, such as *went* and *came*, though. As stated above, those are among the verbs that native speakers acquire early due to their frequency in spoken language. Perhaps frequency also explains why the Swedish students have acquired them, or perhaps the explanation is that the weekly homework assignment dealt with irregular verbs during the time of my visit.

4.8 Uncontractible auxiliary *be*

When the verb *to be* functions as a helping verb it is called an auxiliary. Other verbs can be auxiliaries too, but both Brown (1973) and Dulay & Burt (1978) focused on *be*. The auxiliary *to be* can be contracted in some sentences, e.g. *I am singing* or *I'm singing*. However, the past tense forms of *to be* – *was* and *were* – cannot be contracted. Contracting the auxiliary in *She was singing* to *She's singing* would change the meaning of the utterance. Likewise, the present tense forms cannot be contracted, either, if they appear first or last in a sentence, as in *Is she singing* (cf. section 4.5).

Children acquiring English as their native language learn the uncontractible auxiliary rather late. Second language learners acquire this morpheme earlier; Dulay and Burt list the auxiliary as number six out of eleven (1978: 359).

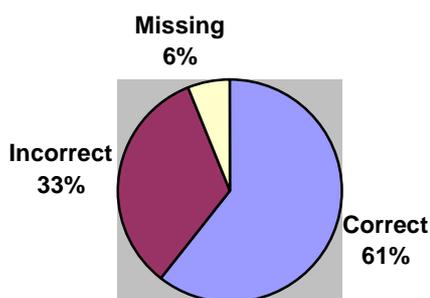


Figure 8. The students' use of the uncontractible auxiliary.

In the free writing assignments, there were seventeen contexts where the uncontractible auxiliary *be* was required. The correct form was provided eleven times. Since the progressive *-ing* and the auxiliary are counted separately, an auxiliary was counted as correct even if a student used the progressive where it should not be. An incorrect form was provided six times. One student also failed to provide the auxiliary, as seen in example 10.

(10) *I saw a little thing. He just standing there...*

4.9 Contractible auxiliary

As seen in section 4.8, *be* is an auxiliary. If *be* is in the present tense, is followed by a main verb in the *-ing* form or a past participle, and if the subject can take a contractible form, it functions as a contractible auxiliary. For this classification, it does not matter whether the auxiliary is actually contracted or not. As stated earlier, the *-ing* form and the auxiliary are counted separately. Therefore, sentences that featured an overuse of the progressive, such as in example 11 where a student used the progressive to describe a recurring event, were counted as correct.

(11) *I am playing soccer.*

Children who acquire English as their native language typically do not master this form until *after* stage five. It is thus the last of Brown's morphemes to be acquired. Students learning English as a second language master the auxiliary rather early, by comparison. Dulay and Burt list it as number five to six out of eleven morphemes (1978: 359).

One sentence in the translation test – *Var tyst! Jag lyssnar på musik* – required the contractible auxiliary in English. However, a number of students did not translate this sentence into the progressive at all, as in example 12, making an auxiliary ‘unnecessary’. To clarify, the sentence has been translated in an incorrect way, but is grammatically correct, with no obligatory context for an auxiliary. Therefore, it was not counted at all in this section. In total, nineteen occasions required the contractible auxiliary *be*.

(12) *Be quiet! I lissen to music.*

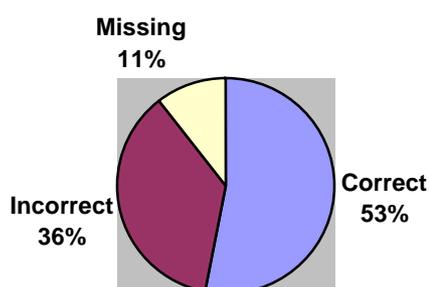


Figure 9. The students’ use of the contractible auxiliary.

Ten times the correct form was given. Seven times, the students did not provide an auxiliary, creating sentences such as the one in example 13, just as young native speakers do.

(13) *Be quiet! I ___ lissing to music.*

4.10 Progressive *-ing*

The progressive, which consist of an auxiliary (*am, is, are, was, were*) and the verb plus *-ing*, indicates an on-going process. The *-ing* suffix is the first grammatical morpheme that children acquiring English as their first language master. The auxiliary, however, is not acquired until later on and thus the two forms are counted separately. Therefore, forms such as the one in example 14 were counted as correct, with respect to the *-ing* form.

(14) *Birds was singing.*

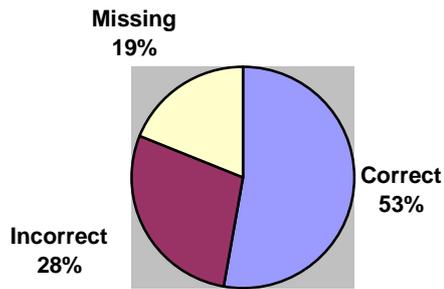


Figure 10. The students' use of the progressive *-ing*.

In the translation test, the English version of the sentence *Var tyst! Jag lyssnar på musik* required the progressive. Out of 15 students, only six provided the *-ing* form. The other nine provided either a simple present form, or a different form, such as *I'm lisen*. The results from the free writing tasks were slightly better, but relatively few occurrences makes it hard to draw any conclusions. Although the *-ing* form is not the first morpheme that second language learners acquire, they acquire it at an earlier stage than the students in my study.

4.11 Regular third person -s

When a noun or pronoun denoting a single entity constitutes the subject in a clause, the following main verb is marked with an *-s* in the present tense if there is no auxiliary. Examples include *Sara runs fast* or *it looks cute*. Like all of Brown's grammatical morphemes, the third person singular marker first appears in stage two, when the mean length of an utterance is between 2.00 and 2.50. However, it takes a long time before children use it consistently. It is one of the very last morphemes that second language learners master (Owens 1994: 158).

In the free writing assignments, there were only twelve obligatory contexts for this morpheme, making it impossible to draw any conclusions. The *-s* was added correctly in nine cases. Moreover, the *-s* appeared twice where it should not be and where it was thus counted as incorrect:

(15) *We looks like this*

(16) *I likes*

The translation test included four sentences where the third person -s was required. Sixteen students completed the translation test, resulting in 55 obligatory occasions for the morpheme, as students produced nine sequences that could not be analyzed for the third person regular marker as the students produced a different form altogether. For example, a student translated *John went to school everyday* into *John går till skolan varje dag*. These were not counted at all.

In the 64 obligatory occasions, the correct morpheme was given 33 times. 25 times the students clearly failed to provide the -s. In addition, the students created ungrammatical sentences, such as the one in example 17. Those were counted as incorrect, as the morpheme occurred where it should not.

(17) *Does Sara likes ice cream?*

The correct form was provided 52 % of the time.

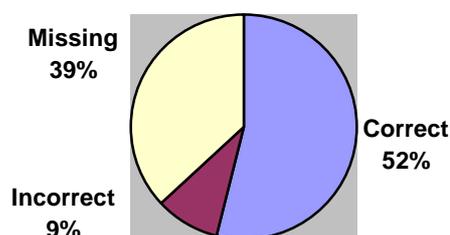


Figure 11. The students' use of the third person singular present tense regular morpheme.

It is worth noticing that Swedish students, just like children acquiring English as a first language, use the morpheme quite inconsistently. Out of the 16 students who did the translation test, eight were either wrong or right in all sentences. The other half used both forms.

4.12 Irregular third person

Some English verbs, such as *do* and *have*, are irregular. The third person singular present tense forms are *does* and *has*. Just like the regular morpheme, these first appear in stage two but are not fully mastered until stage five. In the studies of second language learners that have been presented in this paper, the regular and irregular third person morphemes are counted

together. Of the morphemes investigated there, they are the last morphemes that second language learners acquire.

The irregular third person occurred only a few times in the writing assignments, and therefore I decided to use data from the translation test as well. There were 54 obligatory occasions for the morpheme. The correct form was only provided in 24% of the cases, suggesting that the Swedish students find this morpheme to be the most difficult to learn.

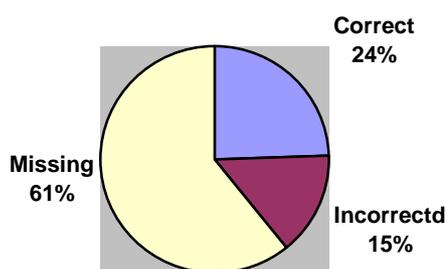


Figure 12. The students' use of the irregular third person marker.

The irregular form of *do* proved to be especially difficult, and the majority of the students wrote as in the example below.

(18) *But Erik don't like Maths.*

5. Summary and conclusion

Research has shown that students learning English as a second language acquire grammatical morphemes in a predictable order, just as young native speakers do. The aim of this paper has been to investigate which morphemes Swedish students master and which they do not master, and then to compare the students' knowledge of grammatical morphemes with that of first and second language learners. Approximately sixty students in grade seven, divided into three groups, participated in the study. The groups were given one assignment each, including two free writing tasks and one translation test.

Of the twelve morphemes that I investigated, there were only two – the contractible copula and the plural – which the students mastered, that is, used correctly 90% of the time or more. This correlates well with previous studies of morpheme acquisition among second language

learners. As stated earlier, second language learners master the copula at an earlier stage than native speakers, and this was also true of the students in my study. The plural marker is one of the first morphemes that both first and second language learners acquire. Furthermore, the third person irregular morpheme ranked as the last in my study, which also correlates well with other findings. The students were better at using the third person *regular* marker, although they clearly do not master it. The findings concerning the third person regular marker illustrates the inconsistent use that is typical of young native speakers. It seems as if several students randomly included or omitted the marker *-s* within the same text.

Inconsistent use of a morpheme is, as stated above, typical of children who are acquiring English as their native language. So are overgeneralizations and other constructions that are not used in correct English, such as *it's* for *it*. Quite a few of these developmental mistakes could also be found in the texts and tests that the students in this study did. This might suggest that the students in my study do not only imitate their teacher or memorize rules, but also creatively test their own hypotheses about language construction.

Two morphemes, the possessive *'s* and the *-ing* ending, indicate that the Swedish students in my study do not acquire morphemes in *exactly* the same order as the second language learners presented in the background section. When it comes to the possessive marker one can speculate that this is due to native language interference. Interestingly, the possessive *'s* was missing seven times. This would indicate that although the Swedish students in my study did well, one cannot expect 100 % accuracy just because the feature exists in Swedish, and that students in some respects might have to start from scratch when learning a new language.

The other seven morphemes ranked in an order quite similar to that of other second language learners. However, the difference in accuracy between some morphemes was not big. For example, the progressive was given correctly in 53 % of the obligatory contexts, while the score for the third person regular *-s* was 52%. With fewer than 100 occurrences for each morpheme, a difference of 1% is insignificant, and one cannot draw any exact conclusions. Moreover, different counting methods might result in some differences. Some researchers only count a morpheme in obligatory contexts and do not consider it as wrong if it occurs where it should not. As mentioned earlier, Dulay and Burt (1978) considered forms such as *fallen* as correct regular forms, while I did not. In order to determine more exactly in what order Swedish students acquire English morphemes, one would have to analyze more samples

of both written and spoken language. Furthermore, it might be a good idea for researchers to agree on a common counting method, to simplify an area of research that is interesting but very complex.

List of references

- Bailey, N, Madden, C. & Krashen, S. 1978. Is There a “Natural Sequence” in Adult Second Language Learners? In Marcussen Hatch, E. (ed.), 362-370.
- Brown, R. 1973. *A First Language: The Early Stages*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, V.P, Eschholtz, P.A & Rosa, A.F. (eds.) 1994. *Language: Introductory Readings*. 5th edition. New York: St Martin’s.
- Dulay, H. & Burt, M. 1973. Should we teach children syntax? *Language Learning*, Vol. 23, 245-58.
- Dulay, H & Burt, M. 1978. Natural Sequences in Child Second Language Acquisition. In E. Marcussen Hatch (ed.), 347-361.
- Goldschneider, J. M & DeKeyser, R. M. 2005. Explaining the “Natural Order of L2 Morpheme Acquisition” in English: A Meta-Analysis of Multiple Determinants. *Language Learning*, 55: 27-77.
- Heny, J. 1994. Learning and Using a Second Language. In Clark, V.P, Eschholtz, P.A & Rosa A.F. (eds.), 160 -187.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. E. 1978. An Explanation for the Morpheme Acquisition Order of Second Language Learners. In Marcussen Hatch, E. (ed.), 371-379.
- Marcussen Hatch, E. (ed.) 1978. *Second Language Acquisition: A Book of Readings*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Moskowitz, B.A. 1998. The Acquisition of Language. In Clark, V.P, Eschholtz, P.A & Rosa A.F. (eds.), *Language: Introductory Readings*. 6th edition. New York: St Martin’s. 529 – 555.
- Owens, Robert E. 1994. Preschool Language Development: Brown’s Stages of Development. In Clark V.P, Eschholtz, P.A & Rosa, A.F. (eds.), 148-59.
- Singelton, D. & Ryan, L. 2004. *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor*. Second Edition. Buffalo: Clevedon Multilingual Matters.

APPENDIX 3

Translation = Översättning

Översätt meningarna till engelska

1. Emma gillar matte.

2. Men Erik gillar inte matte.

3. Detta är min kompis bok.

4. Min kompis har flera böcker.

5. Vi skulle gå ut när det började regna.

6. Toms hund heter Fido. Fido skäller hela tiden.

7. John går till skolan varje dag.

8. Min pappa kör till jobbet varje dag. Det är pappas bil.

9. Var tyst! Jag lyssnar på musik.

10. Tycker Sara om glass?

