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Title:

THE STUDY OF PERSIAN SPEAKERS' ACQUISITION ORDER
Of ENGLISH CONDITIONALS AND L1 TRANSFER EFFECT

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***'In The Name Of He Who Taught
Man What He Knew Not'***

"خدایا،

به من توفیق تلاش در شکست، صبر در نومییدی، رفتن بی همراه، کار بی پاداش، فداکاری در سکوت، دین بی دنیا، عظمت بی نام، خدمت بی نان، ایمان بی ریا، خوبی بی نمود، عشق بی هوس، تنهایی در انبوه جمعیت، و دوست داشتن بدون آنکه دوست بداند، روزی کن."

معلم شهید دکتر علی شریعتی

"Oh God!

Bestow upon me the ability to make efforts in the face of failure, to exercise patience in the face of despair, to go without company, to work not expecting an award, to sacrifice in sheer silence, to obtain religion without worldly belongings, to have grandeur without a name, to serve others without expectations, to have faith without hypocrisy, to have non-realized goodness, to have a lustless love (a love devoid of lust), to have loneliness in multitude, and to love without the beloved knowing of it."

Dedicated sincerely to:

The martyred teacher, Dr. Ali Shariati

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Abstract

This study examines how the syntactic complexity of English conditionals and first language transfer affect Persian speakers' acquisition order of conditionals. Initially the differences in English and Persian conditional constructions are presented in the study. Brown's (1973) *Cumulative Complexity Principle* is employed to operationalize the syntactic complexity of the six conditionals in English. O'Grady's (1997) *Developmental Law* is used as the theoretical framework for predicting the acquisition orders of the *if*-clause and the main clause of English conditionals: present factual, future predictive, past factual, present counterfactual, past counterfactual, and mixed-time-reference counterfactual conditional. According to O'Grady (1997) the number of grammatical features encoded in the morphemes can operationalize the construct of relative difficulty. In this study, three grammatical features of the VP in English conditionals – [past], [perfect], and [modal] – were employed to present the syntactic complexity. Having used Oxford quick placement test, the researcher chose 60 Persian speakers at two levels of language proficiency—intermediate, and advanced—then a cloze test simulating oral conversation as a writing task as well as a translation task including 18 Persian sentences were used to elicit the production of English conditionals. The results of the study showed that there was a statistically significant main effect for both context and clause type. There was also a statistically significant main effect for proficiency. The findings of the study indicated that of present factual, future predictive, past factual, present counterfactual, past counterfactual, and mixed-time-reference counterfactual

conditional conditions, the past counterfactual is the easiest conditional context to be acquired, and the present factual conditions are the most difficult ones. Moreover, systematic variations in the speakers' production provide evidence of L1 transfer effects. The results revealed that the syntactic complexity factor alone could not predict or explain the acquisition order of conditional types. It is important to be aware of how L1 transfer effects interact with the syntactic complexity factor in Persian participants' production of English conditionals, so that better instruction of English conditionals can be achieved.

Key terms: Cumulative Complexity Principle, English Conditionals, Grammatical Features, Language Transfer, Markedness, Verb Phrase

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preliminaries

The study of language acquisition is the area to which a great bulk of research and studies has been directed. All children, given the appropriate sociolinguistic context and sufficient time, unfailingly learn their native language naturally and without conscious effort. First language acquisition is an extremely complex phenomenon. For a long time, linguists and psychologists have been studying linguistic, psychological, sociological and physiological aspects of language acquisition by children. They have also tried to draw analogies between first and second language acquisition processes. Furthermore, researchers have recently attempted, through systematic analysis of the structure of child language, to determine the nature of the psycholinguistic processes involved in first language acquisition. They have attempted to understand the nature of the innate capacity of children that enables them to control the complicated system of language with ease and comfort. What makes first language acquisition by children very fascinating to researchers is the fact that all children appear to go through almost the same mental processes to acquire their native language no matter what language or languages they are acquiring. (Farhady & Delshad, 2006).

Second language acquisition, on the other hand, can take place in two different contexts: out-of class and in-class situations. Obviously, the former can be the ideal situation, simply because language acquisition within the social context is clearly facilitated. Such language acquisition, in fact, partly meets the linguistic survival needs of the learner, and the depth of the acquisition will naturally depend on a

number of variables such as personality traits, social status, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, interaction with the native speakers, etc.

In-class SLA may occur if and only if the classroom linguistic activities are communicative. Learners need to be deeply involved in communicative classroom activities in order to engage in learning a language. Communicative activities consist of role-playing, being involved in games and physical activities. (Richards, 2002, Farhady & Delshad, 2006).

SLA takes place subconsciously. However, there is an interesting question whether in-class language acquisition can always occur subconsciously. A positive answer will probably be wishful thinking. The most realistic view of an in-class language acquisition situation is probably the one consisting of a fair combination of both conscious and subconscious learning. Of course, the quality of such a class will depend on whether conscious or subconscious learning is predominant. In an unconscious language learning situation, the learning is boosted by the possibility that the right hemisphere of the brain may also be activated. In conscious learning, the burden of learning falls only on the left hemisphere of the brain. It is also evident that learning is highly enhanced when the two hemispheres complement each other. (Farhady & Delshad, 2006).

Acquiring a new language requires the development of new concepts, which do not exist in the first language's conceptual networks. For instance, the native speaker of Persian will need to learn a concept that an owl is considered a wise bird in English language. Not only that but also the fact that to call a person owl-like in English is complimentary meaning that the person is serious and wise. An owl, on

the contrary, is considered a bird of ill omen in Persian and to call a person owlsh will be a downright. Once one acquires the new concepts in the second language, s/he will need the lexical and the syntactic rules of the new language to express the acquired concepts. In fact, the learner will need to master the conceptual differences between her/his native and second language in order to be a relatively fluent speaker of the second language. (Farhady & Delshad, 2006).

Indeed, the acquisition of a second language is considered the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill. It is a skill, because various aspects of the task require practice so that they can be integrated into fluent performance. This requires the automatization of component sub-skill of the language. Once this occurs, the selection of appropriate vocabulary, grammatical rules and pragmatic conventions governing language use will be facilitated. As performance of the learner improves, the learner gets constantly involved in restructuring the second language by simplifying, unifying, and gaining increasing control over the sub-components of the language such as the vocabulary, grammatical rules and pragmatic rules. (Farhady & Delshad, 2006)

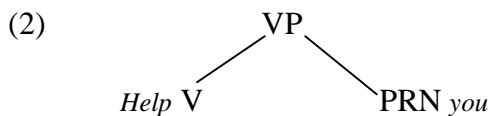
Having presented a brief introduction about acquisition, the researcher finds the time ripe to have a look at syntactic structure in brief. Due to the importance of the syntactic structure of the conditional sentences in this study, the researcher finds it useful to have a look at the construction of the syntactic structures in general. To put our discussion on a concrete footing, it is worth considering how an elementary two-word phrase such as that produced by the speaker B in the following mini-dialogue is formed:

(1) Speaker A: What are you trying to do?

Speaker B: Help you.

As speaker B's utterance illustrates, the simplest way of forming a phrase is by merging two words together: for example, by merging the word *Help* with the word *you* in (1), we form the phrase *Help you*. It seems clear that the grammatical properties of a phrase like *Help you* are determined by the verb *help*, and not by the pronoun *you*. Using the appropriate technical terminology, we can say that the verb *help* is the head of the phrase *help you*, and hence that *help you* is a verb phrase.

An alternative way of representing the structure of phrases like *help you* is via a labeled tree diagram such as (2) below:



What the tree diagram in (2) tells us is that the overall phrase *help you* is a verb phrase (VP), and that its two constituents are the verb (V) *help* and the pronoun (PRN) *you*. The verb *help* is the head of the overall phrase, and has some grammatical feature such as [+present] that shows the tense of the verb and so is the key word which determines the grammatical and semantic properties of the phrase *help you*. (Radford, 2006).

Having had a look at the nature of second language acquisition, and the syntactic structure in general, the researcher is to study the acquisition order of the conditional sentences taking into account the syntactic structure of them. That is, this is the syntactic structure complexity of the conditional structures in the current study that determines the acquisitional order of these sentences. To follow a principle

named "Cumulative Complexity principle", (O'Grady, 1997) in this domain, the researcher limits his probe of conditional syntactic complexity to the complexity of verb phrases, the number of grammatical features of VPs, of these structures.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The description of learners' interlanguage is of prime importance to the researchers in the field. Second language learners in general and EFL learners in particular undergo certain changes in their interlanguage development in terms of syntactic development. Such a syntactic description can shed light on the intricate processes L2 learners go through. Among the syntactic structures are the conditional constructions which can pose learning challenges for Iranian EFL learners.

This study explores the acquisition orders of English conditional sentences by the Persian speakers and their L1 transfer effect on acquiring such constructions. Some studies such as Sadighi and Mokhtari (1998), Chou (2000) have investigated the acquisition order of the conditionals, and this could be a piece of evidence that this area of research has some paramount importance in the acquisition studies. Given the fact that conditional constructions reflect the human capacity to contemplate various situations and to infer consequences on the basis of known or imaginary conditions, some linguists doing descriptive studies have assumed that every human language has a method of forming conditional sentences. Also given the fact that, they have found that conditionals do exist in many languages, such as Classic Greek, English, German, Latin, Chinese, and others (Traugott, Meulen, Reilly, & Ferguson, 1986), it could be said that a need is felt that such a study of the