

Markedness Theory and Conditional Clauses: An Interlanguage Developmental Study of Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract:

This study investigates how the linguistic factor of markedness theory affects Iraqi EFL Learners' acquisition order of English conditional clauses. Three research questions are formulated to achieve the aim of this study, and these are; (i) How do Iraqi EFL learners acquire the syntactic structure of conditional clauses?, (ii) In what ways the developmental route followed by Iraqi EFL learners is similar to or different from that followed by English learners of other linguistic backgrounds?, and (iii) What is the role of markedness theory in the acquisition of conditional clauses by Iraqi EFL learners? To answer these questions, a random sample of 100 Iraqi EFL learners at four different developmental stages is tested on three written tasks. Results reveal that real conditionals are the easiest type to produce but the most difficult one to comprehend. This lends a partial support for the predictive power of markedness theory in explaining the acquisition order. Besides, linguistic form and function in L2 acquisition process are acquired at different developmental stages. Due to the limitations of the present study, future research is suggested.

Key Words: markedness theory, conditional clauses & interlanguage development.

نظرية الاتسام وجمل الشرط دراسة تطورية لمتعلمي العراقيين الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

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المخلص:

تتقصى الدراسة الحالية تأثير نظرية الاتسام في اكتساب الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية لجمل الشرط الانكليزية. تم صياغة ثلاثة اسئلة لتحقيق هدف الدراسة وهي: (1) كيف يكتسب الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية جمل الشرط؟ (2) ما هي اوجه التشابه والاختلاف في المسلك التطوري الذي يعتمده الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية ومتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية من خلفيات لغوية مختلفة لاكتساب جمل الشرط؟ (3) وما دور نظرية الاتسام في اكتساب الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لجمل الشرط؟. وللإجابة عن هذه الاسئلة تم اختبار مائة طالب من المرحلة الاولى والثانية والثالثة والرابعة لأداء ثلاثة اختبارات تحريرية. اظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن جمل الشرط الحقيقية هي الاسهل انتاجا والاصعب استيعابا وقادت هذه النتيجة الى دعم واسناد جزئي لنظرية الاتسام في قدرتها التفسيرية لمسلك الاكتساب او التعلم، فضلا عن ذلك اوضحت الدراسة أن اكتساب الشكل والوظيفة اللغوي يحدث في مراحل تطورية مختلفة اثناء اكتساب اللغة الثانية. ولمحدودية الدراسة تم اقتراح دراسات مستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية الاتسام، جمل الشرط، تطور لغة المتعلمين.

1. Introduction

The theory of markedness has its origins in the analysis of binary oppositions between abstract classificatory features. It is developed and conceived by the Prague School linguistic theories of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. Since its introduction in Prague School of linguistics in the first half of the 20th century, markedness has found application in linguistics, cultural, and literary studies. Markedness is a description of a relationship that is based on the least marked member of a set, being either more frequent cross-linguistically, simpler structurally, having a wider distribution within a particular language, being acquired earlier with fewer errors, or being easier to process. It presents a special sort of problem in linguistics theory. Part of this problematicity can be due the different perspectives on defining markedness and the various diagnostic criteria proposed by different scholars for assigning markedness values to a given linguistic structure (Battistella 1996, p.8). That is, this term is reflected in a multiplicity of technical notions within the field of linguistics and within different traditions in this field. The problem has not gone unnoticed, and many scholars have commented pessimistically on the diversity of definitions and approaches to markedness (cf. Battistella, 1990, 1996; Croft, 2003; Haspelmath, 2006).

Recently, language acquisition research has investigated the notion of markedness within L1 or L2 acquisition domains, and several studies have been done within this theoretical framework. Markedness is integrated into L1 acquisition theory before being adopted by researchers within the field of L2 acquisition. In L1 acquisition research, markedness is described by Chomsky within the *Principles and Parameters Theory*. He introduces the idea of an innate, language-specific cognitive faculty for first language acquisition, and relates the theory of markedness to his concept of core and periphery rules. According to him, children who acquire their native language, acquire core rules via universal grammar first, then peripheral rules. Chomsky supposes that core rules are unmarked and periphery rules are marked. So the child acquires unmarked rules first then marked rules (White, 2003: 55). In L2 acquisition, researchers have begun to consider the application of linguistic markedness theory to different structural aspects of L2 learning. Such research has examined L2 acquisition in the light of universal markedness hierarchies and has had success in predicting both the difficulties of L2 learning and the order in which they acquire certain structure (Moravcsik, 2013: 223).

The increasing interest in applying markedness theory in L2 domain has stimulated the present study to examine its predictive power in explaining

the developmental sequence of conditional constructions in an EFL context. More specifically, the study seeks to extend the application of markedness theory to an EFL context through the investigation of the acquisition of conditional clauses by Iraqi university learners of English. It has dedicated itself to address the following research questions:

1. How do Iraqi EFL learners acquire the syntactic structure of conditional clauses?
2. In what ways the developmental route followed by Iraqi EFL learners is similar to or different from that followed by English learners of other linguistic backgrounds?
3. What is the role of markedness theory in the acquisition of conditional clauses by Iraqi EFL learners?

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no adequate empirical study has tackled the developmental hierarchy of difficulty involved in the acquisition of the structure under investigation. Thus, this study aims at closing a gap in L2 acquisition research.

2. English Conditionals and Markedness

Conditional clauses are a type of adverbial clauses whose semantic role is the expression of hypotheses and conditions. They convey that the situation in the main clause is contingent on that of the conditional clauses. The prototypical structure of conditional clauses is a bi-clause structure consisting of a conditional-clause and a main clause, or more technically a "*protasis*" and an "*apodosis*". Conditional clauses can be realized either explicitly or implicitly. Explicit conditional clauses are normally marked by a conditional markers like "*if*", "*whether*", "*unless*", "*providing that*", etc. Implicit conditional clauses, on the other hand, are normally realized by a zero-conditional marker (Quirk, et al., 1985:1088). Generally, conditional clauses are classified into three main types; real (e.g., He will come if you invite him), unreal (e.g., He would come if you invited him) and past unreal (e.g., He would have come, if you had invited him) (cf. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). To avoid ambiguity, this piece of research is restricted only to the explicit conditional clauses with an "*if*" marker. Moreover, the three types of conditional clauses identified above will be only investigated.

As far as markedness values associated with English conditional clauses are concerned, in terms of the semantic category of mood, the verb forms used in real conditionals are generally considered to be indicative (will

come, invite) which is considered unmarked compared to the subjunctive mood, employed in unreal (would come, invited) and past unreal (would have come, had invited), which is considered marked (Battistella, 1990: 94). The verb forms of real conditional clauses reflect their normal time reference, and they are opposed to other verb forms used in unreal and past unreal conditionals which do not reflect their normal time reference. Morphologically speaking, the verb forms used in real and unreal (including past unreal) correspond to the English present and past opposition in which the present tense form is unmarked on the basis of zero expression of a tense marker whereas the past tense form is marked on the basis of “-ed” marker of the past tense. Consequently, verbs in real conditionals are unmarked morphologically as opposed to unreal and past unreal conditionals (Battistella, 1996: 44).

Comrie (1987:114) observes that more marked forms tend to have more morphological materials. In this respect, basic real conditionals are less marked than unreal conditionals, while past unreal conditionals are more marked than unreal conditionals. As for the semantic presuppositions of English conditional clauses, Khlebnikova (1982: 29) argues for the existence of a distinctive feature of unreality for which unreal and past unreal conditionals are marked but for which real conditionals are unmarked. Pragmatically, unreal and past unreal conditionals are marked as “+ *disbelief*”, while real conditionals are unmarked as “- *disbelief*”, since unreal conditionals (including past unreal) presuppose the speaker’s disbelief about the truth value of both clauses presuppositions (Wing and Scholnick, 1981:360).

Based on the markedness values associated with the three types of English conditionals, Berent (1985) has proposed a developmental hierarchy of acquisition for the different conditional types, which corresponds to the degree of markedness. The proposed hierarchy predicts that L2 learners will acquire least marked structures earlier with less difficulty than most marked ones. And the order of difficulty corresponds to the order of acquisition. Accordingly, the predicted order of acquisition for the three types of English conditionals can be read as follows:

Real >Unreal > Past Unreal

> means acquired earlier than

It is believed that Iraqi EFL learners are no exception in their developmental behavior, and they will follow the same predicted order of acquisition of the three types of English conditional clauses presented above. Table 1 below illustrates the hierarchical order of the

difficulty/acquisition of English conditionals in terms of their markedness values.

Table 1: Markedness values and acquisition hierarchy of conditional clauses.

Types of Conditional Clauses	Markedness Designation	Difficulty Hierarchy- Predicted Order of Acquisition
Real conditionals	Unmarked	Easy
Unreal conditionals/ hypothetical	Marked- Less marked	Slightly difficult
Past unreal conditionals/ counterfactual	Marked- More Marked	Difficult

3. Related L2 Research

This section reviews related investigative research on the acquisition of English conditionals by L2 learners. Such a theoretical review will be useful to the present study in one way or another. That is, the results of present study will be interpreted in terms of these studies' findings. Also, the research review constitutes the theoretical foundation for the present study.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) confirm that L2 learners of English are liable to have difficulty in the acquisition of English conditional clauses due to the syntactic and semantic complexities embedded in these constructions. The complexity of English conditionals can be attributed to the integration between tense, verb form, mood, semantics and pragmatics. The integration of all these aspects makes them difficult for non-native speakers of English. Conditional clauses have been widely reported as an interesting research area in L2 acquisition domain; however, there is a dearth of research addressing the question of why conditional constructions cause a serious learning problem for L2 learners (Al-Khawalda, 2013: 194).

Berent (1985) investigates the acquisition of English conditional clauses by 55 speakers of 20 different linguistic backgrounds. He examines the production and comprehension of real, unreal and past unreal conditionals. Two proficiency levels of L2 learners are examined on a completion task and a multiple-choice task. Results show an inconsistent pattern that the difficulty sequence in the production task is opposite to that in the comprehension task. More precisely, real conditionals are the easiest one to

produce but the most difficult one to comprehend. Lai-chun (2005) studies the developmental sequence of English conditionals by Chinese learners of English. Specifically, the study investigates the syntactic differences between English and Chinese and how Chinese, the mother tongue of the L2 learners, affects their acquisition of English conditionals. A written Chinese-English translation task and a written blank-filling task are given to 41 fourth year secondary students and 57 sixth year secondary students. The results show that the acquisition order responds to the syntactic complexity of conditionals. It has been found that evidence of L1 transfer interacts with the syntactic complexity affecting L2 production of English conditionals. Moreover, zero and real conditionals are found easily accessed and acquired than unreal and past unreal conditionals among Chinese L2 learners of English.

Gahrouei (2010) examines the influence of syntactic complexity of English conditionals and first language on Persian learners' acquisition order. He tests 60 Persian learners of English at two levels of language proficiency on an oral conversation task and a translation task to elicit the production of English conditionals. The results show that there is a statistically significant main effect for proficiency level. Of real, unreal and past unreal conditionals, the real is the easiest conditional type to be acquired, and the past real type is the most difficult one. Moreover, systematic variations in the learners' production provide evidence of L1 transfer effects. And the syntactic complexity factor alone could not explain the acquisition order of conditional types. L1 transfer interacts with the syntactic complexity factor affecting Persian participants' production of English conditionals.

Ko (2013) investigates the acquisition of if-conditionals by L2 learners of English with two different native tongues, Spanish and Korean. 30 L2 learners of different proficiency levels (low and high) are tested on production and comprehension tasks to explore which factor among input frequencies, grammatical complexities and L1 influence best explains the acquisition of if-conditionals by L2 learners. The results suggest that if-conditionals with lower hypotheticality (unreal) are acquired before than those with higher hypotheticality (past unreal) by L2 learners. It has been concluded that L2 acquisition seems to be influenced by the universality of language acquisition. Influence of instruction, on the other hand, is also found, especially in the production data. Even though there are no differences in the acquisition order of if-conditionals between the two groups of learners with different L1 backgrounds, the influence of L1 is also diagnosed in the analysis of non-target forms produced by the participants.

Pengpanich (2014) investigates the impact of markedness features on the acquisition of English conditionals by Thai learners of English. The participants are 30 Thai undergraduate students of different levels of proficiency. The instruments used for collecting the data are 12 multiple choice items and 18 sentence construction items. Findings reveal that formal instructions positively impact the students' performance, and the degree of markedness of conditionals is not statistically significant. Yet markedness definitely has an impact on the learners. Real conditionals are the easiest to produce and comprehend, while other types are proved to be more difficult at both the productive and receptive levels. Finally, he concludes that markedness and the differences between the two languages are not the sole causes of difficulty but other factors are in play such as task types, skills tested (comprehension or production), learners' levels, and the amount of formal instructions.

So far, one can observe that there is a relative variation in the findings of previous research reviewed above. In addition, different research methodologies and English learners of different linguistic backgrounds are examined. Thus, the need for the present study arises out of the fact that the acquisition order of English conditional clauses in an EFL context, namely, an Iraqi EFL learning context, has not yet been researched.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Subjects

The subjects are a random sample of 100 Iraqi learners of English at the university level. Specifically, they are a cross-sectional sample of Iraqi EFL university undergraduates (both males and females). They are majoring in English language and literature at the Department of English of the College of Arts in the University of Baghdad. Those undergraduates are divided into 25 subjects equally drawn from 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students of the aforementioned department. The choice of four academic stages has been decided upon in order to find out the nature of any developmental differences in the L2 acquisition of English conditional constructions, i.e., to get learners at different stages of development as far as the structure is concerned. Following Hedy's (1992) recommended guidelines, Iraqi EFL learners are chosen according to a number of established selection criteria including age, sex, linguistic background and education (p. 53). The purpose of selection criteria is to limit the number of extra-linguistic variables that might affect L2 acquisition of the structure under investigation. The subjects share some basic demographic characteristics such as L1, age, major and education.

4 .2 Instruments

To obtain a representative data of the syntactic structure under investigation, the present research quantifies both productive and receptive written data. That is, two production tasks and one comprehension task are employed to elicit the syntactic structure of English conditional clauses. A meaning inference task is used for taping the comprehension data. This task consists of 25 items in the form of multiple-choice items. On the other hand, a structural completion task and a contextual production task are used for taping the production data. The structural completion task consists of 13 items in the form of fill- in- the blank, whereas the contextual production task consists of 12 items in the form of guided discourse-production. In this way, the distribution of task items are equally distributed among the comprehension and production tasks. This means that 25 items are evenly allocated for both the production and comprehension tasks. Examples 1, 2 and 3 below are illustrative task items extracted from the meaning inference, the structural completion and the contextual production tasks respectively;

- 1) She would enjoy the trip if she went with them.
 - a. She enjoyed it.
 - b. Maybe she enjoys it.
 - c. She doesn't enjoy it.
 - d. She enjoys it.
- 2) If you (go) to the movie theatre, you (not meet) our new neighbor in the evening.
- 3) There is a possibility that you will fail your exam. You will take a second chance to take it. If you.....

It is noteworthy that only if-conditional clauses are examined here, and other conditionals are beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, the three types of conditional clauses, namely, real, unreal and past unreal conditionals are only examined, and they are equally distributed across the three tasks. The task items are selected and taken from some reference grammar books and previous related research with slight, mostly vocabulary-related modifications. The idea behind this selection is to offer authentic examples rather than invented ones.

4.3 Procedures

The study design is experimental in its nature. To answer the research questions, a quantitative based-research methodology is designed to quantify elicited written data from the research subjects. The study test has been administered in two separate phases; a pilot study is shortly followed by a main study. As to the validity of the present study tests, the items of three tasks have been inspected and checked thoroughly by a number of university professors of English applied linguistics. To identify the reliability of the study test, Kuder-Richardson formula is adopted. The reliability coefficient value of the study tests is 0.88 which is considered acceptable. After obtaining data, the subjects' responses are corrected and scored by the researcher. Items are analyzed across individual sentences and individual subjects. The usual procedure for the evaluation of subjects' responses is scored on the basis of whether or not the subjects produce or recognize the correct sentences. In this way, sentences are corrected as either correct or incorrect. It is believed that no personal judgments should determine the correction procedures of the study results, rather an objective scheme should be developed. As a result, the responses of the comprehension and production tasks have been classified and coded according to a definite and systematic taxonomy. Each task has been corrected separately. The scoring scheme developed covers every single item in the test in the same fashion. The whole test contains 50 items, and is scored out of 100 scores. Accordingly, each correct item is given two scores while the wrong one takes zero score all through the research tasks. Half- correct answers are impermissible, and are given zero scores.

5. Results and Analysis

After transferring the written data into numerical values, both qualitative and quantitative analyses are carried out. The mixed approach of analysis can enable the researcher to investigate the study questions and to explore relationships among variables as much objective as possible. For the quantitative analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical tools are utilized in this study to achieve a higher degree of accuracy and precision. To identify the developmental sequence of conditional clauses followed by Iraqi EFL learners at the four different academic stages, *ANOVA*, *Kruskal-*

Wallis and *Chi-Square* techniques are employed. A one-way ANOVA test is carried out to find out the acquisition route of English conditionals among the four academic stages of Iraqi learners of English. The first step is used to find out whether the conditional types have a significant effect on learners' performance. If it does, the second step of Kruskal-Wallis test is employed. This procedure arranges the conditional types in a hierarchy according to the learners' performance. Table 2 below displays the results of ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests. The developmental hierarchies identified by means of ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests are arranged in an ascending order.

Table 2: Results of ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis statistical tools.

One-Way ANOVA Test					Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Task No.	Degree of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F. Value	Mean	Hierarchy of Conditional Clauses
Task One: Structural Completion Task						
S.S.W	2	718.1	25.44 6.5	40.55	6.800	Real
S.S.B.	322	2810.97			4.030	Unreal
Total	324	3222.07			1.665	Past Unreal
Task Two: Contextual Production Task						
S.S.W	2	867.39	359.7 5.34	80.11	4.533	Real
S.S.B.	322	1200.25			3.021	Unreal
Total	324	2000.99			1.581	Past Real
Task Three : Meaning Inference Task						
S.S.W	2	1300.50	622.35 2.93	3.56	5.001	Past Unreal
S.S.B.	322	1006.52			3.088	Unreal
Total	324	2217.22			2.573	Real

The results as displayed in Table Two above show the following:

First, as far as Task One is concerned, the calculated F-value is statistically significant at 0.5 level. Kruskal-Wallis procedures for comparing the means of real, unreal and past unreal conditionals are carried out. This statistical procedure confirms a significant difference between all these three types. Thus, learners produce real conditionals the most successfully, unreal conditionals less successfully, and past unreal conditionals least successfully. Accordingly, the following hierarchy is obtained:

Real >Unreal > Past Unreal

Second, as for Task Two, the calculated F-value is statistically significant at 0.5 level. Kruskal-Wallis procedures reveal a significant difference between all three types of conditionals. Real conditionals are the easiest to produce, past unreal conditionals are the most difficult to

produce, and unreal conditionals fall between the two. Therefore, the following hierarchy is obtained:

Real >Unreal > Past Unreal

Third, as to Task Three, the statistical results indicate that the calculated F-value is statistically significant at 0.5 level. Kruskal-Wallis procedures reveal a significant difference between all three types of conditionals in favor of real conditionals. Unlike the statistical results of two production tasks, this task shows the opposite hierarchy. It reveals that real conditionals are the most difficult to comprehend, past unreal conditionals are the most easiest to comprehend, and unreal conditionals fall between these two types. Therefore, the following reverse hierarchy is obtained:

Past Unreal >Unreal > Real

The statistical results of ANOVA test are further supported by the results of Chi-Square test. It is used to be relied upon in the investigation of the notion of developmental continuum since learning takes place in the form of stages a long a continuum of increasing complexity gradually approximating the structure of target language. In other words, to find out if there is a developmental difference among the four academic stages of Iraqi EFL university learners (i.e., 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th year students) due to the amount of formal instructions in English as far as English conditional clauses are concerned, *Chi-Square* procedures are calculated. Table 3 below summarizes the statistical means differences among the four academic stages;

Table 3: Results of *Chi-Square* statistical tool.

Academic Stage	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Level of Significance (α)
1 st Stage	18.35	7.920	0.67
2 nd Stage	23.50		
3 rd Stage	26.10		
4 th Stage	29.66		

Chi-Square results reveal that there is a developmental route among the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th stages as far as the three types of English conditional clauses are concerned. The statistical results support the argument that more formal instructions in the target language can lead to a better performance and attainment as far as the structure under investigation is concerned.

6. Discussion

The statistical results presented above reveal that the developmental hierarchy obtained in Task One and Task Two of the production level provides strong evidence of the developmental order of English conditional clauses followed by Iraqi EFL learners with real conditionals, the most easiest, past unreal conditionals the most difficult, and unreal conditionals between the two. In other words, Iraqi learners produce real conditionals most successfully, unreal conditionals less successfully, and past unreal conditionals least successfully. The reverse order of acquisition on the comprehension task is obtained. That is, real conditionals are the most difficult type to comprehend, past unreal conditionals are the easiest type to comprehend, and unreal conditionals fall between the two types. Briefly stated, of real, unreal and past unreal conditionals, real conditionals are easiest to produce but the most difficult to comprehend.

The different relative order of difficulty or acquisition emerged in the production and comprehension of English conditional clauses by Iraqi EFL learners provides significant evidence that form and function can be acquired at different times in L2 acquisition process. In the context of the present study, Iraqi EFL learners accurately produce the form of real conditionals but do not assign the appropriate meaning to this structure. They are not acquiring a related form and function simultaneously. Such functions cannot be assumed to be acquired as an automatic consequence of the structural acquisition. The same finding has been reported in previous research on L2 acquisition of English conditionals (cf. Berent, 1985; Gahrouei, 2010; Ko, 2013).

Great similarity is found between the hierarchy identified in this study with those identified in previous L2 acquisition research. Several researchers report the same acquisitional route of English conditionals followed by their L2 learners of different linguistic backgrounds (cf. Berent, 1985; Lai-chun, 2005; Gahrouei, 2010; Ko, 2013). The similarity in the order of the structure under investigations between Iraqi EFL learners and that of L2 learners asserts a major fact that Universal Grammar determines the acquisition of language by all human beings. It is not unreasonable to state that the route of acquisition is not universal in the sense that all learners acquire every structure in exactly the same order, since there are relative differences in the route of acquisition (cf. Pengpanich, 2014). However, L2 learners can vary in their ability to produce different grammatical structures in their interlanguage, the learners follow a standard sequence but vary in the order in which specific structures are acquired. Iraqi EFL learners, then, do follow a universal route in their acquisition of English conditionals.

The different order of acquisition at the production and comprehension levels cannot totally support the developmental predictions of markedness theory in explaining the developmental sequence of conditional clauses followed by Iraqi EFL learners. That is, one can argue that markedness theory predicts and explains the developmental sequence of conditionals at the production level but not at the comprehension level. The result obtained seems to contradict the markedness predictions set forth in Section 2 above which suggests that markedness theory should predict the order of acquisition on both levels of production and comprehension in the same fashion. There should be another possible explanation for this contradicted result. One can argue that other factors might be at work that lead to such an exceptional case, such as the kind of formal instructions, student's proficiency level, and L1 transfer. Future research is suggested to examine this issue in some detail.

Three types of errors are identified in the present study data among the four academic stages. They include errors of verb form, errors of verb tense and errors of verb mood. First, errors of verb forms are those of verb morphology. Such kind of errors gives the indication that Iraqi EFL learners are not fully aware of the English verb morphology, i.e., verb form and inflection errors. Errors of this kind are committed by learners from the different four academic stages. Consider the following erroneous examples from the study data;

1. If I had *hear* the doorbell, I would have opened the door.
2. If I see her today, I will *told* her the truth.

Second, errors of verb tense involve mainly errors of tense substitution. Such errors give the impression that Iraqi EFL learners have not yet mastered the English verb tense system. Tense substitution errors are produced by learners from the four academic stages. In this respect, there is a high tendency among Iraqi EFL learners to substitute one tense for another as in the following illustrative examples;

3. If you *steal* that bank, the police would arrest you.
4. If they *found* her at home, they will give her the money.

Finally, errors of verb mood involve errors of meaning interpretation of English conditional types as provided by the comprehension data. Such errors indicate that Iraqi EFL learners are not fully aware of the various meanings associated with the various conditional types. That is, learners are uncertain that the forms s/he is using are syntactically and semantically

appropriate to the statement s/he is making. Consider the following example from the study data;

5. If it snows this afternoon, the kids will play inside the house.

a. Maybe it will snow this afternoon.

b. It will snow this afternoon.

c. It will not snow this afternoon.

d. It snowed this afternoon.

7. Conclusions

The present study has examined the acquisition of English conditional clauses by Iraqi EFL university learners at the production and comprehension levels. It has been found that there is a developmental hierarchy in acquiring the syntactic construction of English conditional clauses by Iraqi learners of English. At the production level, Iraqi EFL learners produce real conditionals most successfully, unreal conditionals less successfully, and past unreal conditionals least successfully. The reverse order of difficulty or acquisition on the comprehension task is obtained in that real conditionals are the most difficult to comprehend, past unreal conditionals are the easiest to comprehend, and unreal conditionals fall between the two types. Of real, unreal and past unreal conditionals, real conditionals are the easiest to produce but the most difficult to comprehend.

The acquisition order identified here confirms that linguistic form and function can be acquired at different times in L2 acquisition process. In the context of the present study, Iraqi EFL learners accurately produce the form of real conditionals but do not assign the appropriate meaning to this structure. They are not acquiring a related form and function simultaneously. Furthermore, the different order of acquisition at the production and comprehension levels cannot totally support the developmental predictions of markedness theory in explaining the developmental sequence of conditional clauses followed by Iraqi EFL learners. In addition, great similarity is found between the hierarchy identified in this study with those identified in previous L2 acquisition research. This asserts the relative universality of acquisitional route, and that Universal Grammar constrains the L2 acquisition process of conditional clauses by L2 learners from different linguistic backgrounds.

The present study can be replicated using different research methodology in terms of data collection instruments and research modality.

That is, natural spoken or written data instead of elicited data can provide more insights into L2 acquisition process of the structure under investigation. Future research on Iraqi EFL learners can include longitudinal studies, the most suitable means of monitoring and exploring the acquisition process of English conditional clauses.

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