

## The Acquisition of Dative Constructions by Iraqi University Learners of English: A Pilot Study

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### Abstract:

*The present study investigates the problem of the acquisition of the English dative constructions at the college level with the aim of answering the following two basic questions; firstly, whether a complete mastery of the dative structures is managed by the learners at the end of their four-year study of English at the university level, and secondly, how the learners' developmental sequence of the dative constructions evolves through time, and whether this route is subject to the constraints of the theory of markedness or not. To answer these questions, a random sample of two groups of Iraqi EFL students in the English Department at the College of Education of Baghdad University has been tested in (35) grammaticality judgment items, and (30) completion items. The first group consists of sixty subjects from the first year and the second group thirty-eight students from fourth year at the aforementioned department. Results have revealed that the acquisition route of Iraqi university learners of English precedes in the same way that L1 and L2 learning does. That is, Iraqi EFL learners acquire dative prepositional phrase complements before double-NP complements. This order of acquisition corresponds to the predictions of markedness theory. Results achieved have led to the validation of the study hypotheses postulated. Due to the limitations of the present study, further future studies are suggested within the same area.*

**Key words:** dative constructions, markedness, acquisition route.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Syntactically speaking, *dative* refers to a linguistic form taken by noun phrases expressing grammatical relationships by means of inflections. In English, the dative case typically expresses an indirect object relationship, or a range of meanings similar to that covered by “to” or “for” (Crystal, 2003, p. 123). Dative alternation poses a learnability problem for foreign and second learners of English in that English learners fail to master the choice of the adequate preposition when the dative is in the form of a prepositional phrase (Gropen, et al., 1989; Zeddari, 2015). This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why Transformational Generative Grammar, trying to be fully explicit, has opted to make the prepositional phrase (PP) form of the construction the deep structure of all dative constructions (Bakir, 1989:210). Thus, the following two sentences of (a) are the deep structure of which the two sentences of (b) are transformed:

- 1) a. William sent a memo to John.  
a. William bought a present for John.
- 2) b. William sent John a memo.  
b. William bought John a present.

Another problem associated with dative constructions is that some dative verbs do not permit the transformation (Hawkins, 1987). The following are two illustrative examples:

- 3) a. Sam described the film to Joan.  
b. Sam collated the article for Joan.
- 4) a\*. Sam described Joan the film.  
b\*. Sam collated Joan the article.

Within the framework of markedness theory, it is argued that the prepositional phrase complement (PP) represents the unmarked structure whereas the double noun phrase complement (double-NP) is the marked one (Mazurkewich

1984, 1985; Battistella, 1996). Some researchers working in L1 and L2 acquisition contexts have attributed the learnability problems and acquisition route to the markedness values associated with the dative constructions. Available research has reported that L1 and L2 learners of English acquire the unmarked dative prepositional phrase complements before the marked double-NP complements (Fischer, 1971, Stayton 1972; Mazurkewich, 1984; Zeddari, 2015).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no adequate empirical study in this area has been carried out to investigate the learning of this linguistic phenomenon with the attempt to find out how far Iraqi EFL learners advance in the learning of this structure, what type of problems they face and whether the route they follow in the learning of this structure is similar to or different from that to be followed by learners of English as a first language (L1) or a second language (L2). This research is hoped to bridge this gap in the literature.

## 2. RELATED L1 AND L2 RESEARCH

The following section is intended to review some related studies investigating the acquisition of dative constructions in L1 and L2 contexts. These studies are arranged chronologically.

One of the earliest studies is Fischer (1971) who examines the acquisition of dative structures by English native speakers. Fischer reports that the prepositional phrase complement is acquired before the double-NP complement. English children find "*for-dative*" more difficult to process than "*to-dative*". She attributes the difficulty with "*for-datives*" to the semantic notion of "*benefactiveness*" associated with them which may be acquired later than the notion of the "*goal*" that is associated with "*to-datives*". Roeper et al., (1981) conduct an L1 developmental study of the acquisition of dative constructions by English children. They report that the emergence of the structure PP complement precedes the

emergence of the structure double-NP. This finding goes in line with the previous L1 case studies like Fischer (1971) and Stayton (1972).

In a series of research, Mazurkewich (1984, 1985) investigates the acquisition of dative alternation by L2 learners. The L2 group is made up of native French and native Inuktitut (Eskimo) speaking learners. The French group is made up of 45 students at the high school and collegial levels whose average age is 18 years. The Inuit group is made up of 38 students at the high school level whose average age is 17 years. Two control groups of native English speakers are used. The results obtained show that the unmarked structures are acquired first as predicted and the marked structures followed. L2 learners of English acquire dative prepositional phrase complements before double-NP complements. This order of difficulty, it is argued, reflects an aspect of Universal Grammar (UG): PP constructions are part of core grammar and are therefore unmarked in UG, while double-NP constructions are peripheral and are therefore marked in UG. According to Mazurkewich, "markedness" as defined by UG directly explains order of difficulty: constructions that are deemed marked in UG are more difficult for L2 speakers to acquire than unmarked constructions.

Hawkins (1987) examines the acquisition of the English dative alternations across a wider range of dative verbs. A group of French L1 subjects are given two different tasks: a grammaticality judgment task and a sentence construction task. It has been found that although the results confirm an order of difficulty: [PP] → [double-NP], this developmental sequence conceals a more complex set of stages in the acquisition of the dative alternation involving features like the syntactic distributional subclass of the verb in question, whether the dative object involved is a lexical NP or a pronoun, and the syllabic structure of the base form of the verb. These features, it turns out, interact to produce a multistaged

developmental sequence. This finding calls into question the usefulness of a UG definition of markedness in explaining the L2 acquisition of the English dative alternations. Hawkins has proposed an alternative account in terms of the familiar psycholinguistic notion of *'learning complexity'* which seems to offer a better account of the acquisition process.

Kang (2008) examines the acquisition of two English dative constructions, prepositional dative (PD) and double object dative (DOD), by Korean EFL children. It has been found that Korean EFL learners acquire prepositional datives before double object datives. The results show that there is evidence of L1 transfer. Korean is an agglutinative language where a case is assigned by adding a morpheme. Therefore, a word order is less important in Korean. English, on the other hand, is close to an isolating language where a word order assigns a case, and DOD is shorter than PD. For these reasons, Korean EFL learners acquire PD earlier than DOD.

Woods (2015) examines the acquisition and use of dative alternation by German-English bilingual children and adults compared with English monolingual children and German and English monolingual adults. The study shows that bilingual children interpret and comprehend dative constructions in English like their monolingual peers but their production of dative constructions in German is influenced by English. This suggests that syntax–semantics interface phenomena relating to the representation of verbs' objects are vulnerable to influence. However, bilingual adults perform like monolinguals in both languages. These results suggest that any indeterminacy in the use of dative alternation in the adult state is due to L1 attrition rather than incomplete L1 acquisition.

### **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study has dedicated itself to address the following research objectives:

1. Finding out the route of the acquisition of the English dative constructions by advanced Iraqi EFL learners.
2. Identifying the areas of difficulty that Iraqi learners face in the learning of this structure.
3. Investigating the role that markedness plays in determining the acquisition of this structure.

On the basis of the research objectives stated above, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. The acquisition of a foreign language precedes in the same way that L1 and L2 learning does, as far as the structure under investigation is concerned. In other words, the route of acquisition of dative constructions is similar for foreign language, L1, and L2 learners. This entails that:
  - i. The acquisitional sequence of the dative constructions in L2 follows a theory of markedness. Hence, this study predicts that the unmarked structures are acquired before their marked counterparts, which is similar to the acquisition route of the same constructions followed by L1 and L2 learners.
  - ii. The hierarchy of acquisition corresponds to the hierarchy of difficulty.
2. A complete mastery of all the structures of dative construction is not managed by Iraqi EFL learners during their four-year study of English at the university level.

## **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Participants**

The total population of this study constitutes of two groups. Group One (G1) is comprised of (200) Iraqi EFL students of the first year in the English Department at the College of Education, Baghdad University, plus Group Two (G2) with

(124) students of the fourth year at the same Department. Both of these two groups are studying English as a foreign language. Two samples (S1 & S2) of sixty and thirty-eight students respectively are randomly selected from G1 and G2 above, respectively, at a selection rate of 30% from each group, which is quite a representative one. This has been decided upon in order to determine any developmental differences in the L2 acquisition of dative constructions at their joining the university and at approximately the end of their study, i.e., to get learners at different stages of development as far as the structure under investigation is concerned. Relative sample homogeneity is taken care of through the selection of only those subjects who share the same mother tongue, age, and the number of years of studying English as a foreign language.

#### 4.2 Instruments

The instrument of the present study comprises (65) items that fall into two parts. Part one is designed to test recognition in (35) grammaticality judgment items, while part two tests production in (30) completion items. Each item in both parts tests the dative construction used as a complement to a separate verb. Taken as a whole, the test covers the use of dative structures with a total of forty English ditransitive verbs (e.g., *offer, owe, pick, play, pour, promise, read, save, etc.*) All selected verbs allow the alternative use of either double NP, or PP complements. In addition, they are more widely used than other verbs that do not admit alternative dative constructions, and that is why *give* has been chosen rather than *donate, buy* but not *purchase, find* but not *discover, tell* but not *report, show* but not *demonstrate, etc.* (Mazurkewich, 1984, p. 107). The two categories of dative complements above have been divided into four subcategories: *to-NP NP, for-NP NP, with-NP NP, NP NP*. Test items selection is based on those sentences showing the use of the ditransitive verbs above that are offered in some grammar reference books. The idea behind such selection is to

offer authentic examples rather than invented ones. Then the test format is presented to a jury of (6) professional university specialists, together with a letter specifying the test's type and aims. The jury members were asked to offer their remarks and suggested modification in writing to the researcher. After collecting these evaluations, all the valuable comments and amendments submitted by the members of the jury were incorporated into the final format of the test sheet.

Since the estimated time required for answering all the test items is more than the 45-minute-long period allocated for each one lesson, it is decided to administer the test in two separate sittings, one dedicated to the recognition part, the other to the production one. To save time and effort, the subjects are asked to put down their responses on the same test paper in both parts.

#### **4.3 Scoring Scheme**

The test is made up of three sections, the first two test recognition, and the third one tests production. These are scored out of a total of (150) marks. Question One has twenty-five individual grammaticality judgment items, each allocated two marks. Question Two comprises 40 grammaticality judgment items with one mark each. Question Three has sixty partial completion items, with a single mark for each correct response. Obviously, all the questions above are of the objective type that allows no personal preferences.

Marking was carried out by the researcher herself first, and then the papers were remarked by a colleague. The two scores were (100%) identical. In order to minimize the guessing factor, an additional option of (I don't know) [IDK] was added to each of the grammaticality judgment items. Each response was allocated either a full mark if completely correct or no mark if incorrect or blank. Scoring of the production subtest was conducted along the same procedure above, with partially correct responses given half a mark each. Minor spelling



mistakes, and errors not related to the production and recognition of dative construction were all ignored.

## 5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As to the acquisition rate, the mean of test scores for the total subjects of S1 stands at (46.21) out of (150), which is quite a low performance rate, being only (30%). Only (36) of the total subjects is managed to score the pass mark of (75) out of 150, with a pass-rate of (60%). As for S2, their mean score is (100) out of (150), i.e., at a performance rate of (66.6%), which reflects a humble acquisition rate. Out of thirty-eight subjects, (36) managed to get the pass-score of (75) out of (150), with a pass rate of (94%). Despite this high pass rate, the acquisition percentages show a differential acquisition rate of (122%) over a four-year period of studying English as a second language at the college level. This rate is obtained by dividing the differential between the acquisition rates of S1 and S2, which is (36.6%), by the initial acquisition rate of (30%) for S1. This rate of acquisition – (122%) – is certainly a considerable one. However, the acquisition rate achieved by S2 – i.e., 66.6% - shows that the subjects at their final semester before graduation are still far away from attaining a complete mastery of the dative construction. This proves the validity of the second hypothesis which reads.

*2. A complete mastery of all the structures of dative constructions is not achieved by Iraqi EFL learners during their four-year study of English as a second language.*

In the order to investigate the acquisition rate at the individual level, it is first necessary to assign a level at which the structure under investigation can be said to have been mastered. Such a level is usually determined by the nature of the data, i.e., the number of tokens in the test and the structure

itself, i.e., its frequency in use. Doughty (1991), for instance, adopts a criterion of 70%, whereas Hamilton (1994) decides on the level of 80% for the subjects of his study. For the purpose of this study, an acquisition criterion of 75% is assigned. This means that any score of 75% plus is judged to have acquired the dative construction in English. Any score below is judged to have failed to acquire this construction. A look at the subjects' scores in tables (1) and (2) below show that only subject No. 1 in S1 and 13 subjects in S2 only manage to pass the cutting point of 75% which means that only 14 subject out of the total number of the sample, 98, i.e., about 14%, manage to acquire the dative construction, it is interesting to note that the stage of learning is not the only factor that determines the level of acquirers, since one of the acquirers is a member of S1 who are students of the first year at the university level.

**Table 1: S1 Subjects' Scores (out of 150) and Test's Mean.**

Subject No	Score	%	Subject No	Score	%	Subject No	Score	%
1	125	83	21	83	55	41	73	48
2	108	72	22	83	55	42	73	48
3	104	69	23	83	55	43	72	48
4	103	68	24	82	54	44	72	48
5	101	67	25	80	53	45	70	46
6	101	67	26	80	53	46	68	45
7	101	37	27	80	53	47	68	45
8	96	64	28	80	53	48	68	45
9	96	64	29	79	52	49	68	45
10	95	63	30	79	52	50	65	43
11	95	63	31	78	52	51	64	42
12	93	62	32	78	52	52	62	41
13	92	61	33	76	50	53	62	41
14	90	60	34	75	50	54	61	40
15	90	60	35	75	50	55	61	40
16	89	59	36	75	50	56	60	40
17	89	59	37	74	49	57	60	40
18	88	58	38	74	49	58	59	39
19	87	55	39	74	49	59	59	39
20	84	56	40	73	48	60	58	38
<b>Total</b>	2773		<b>Mean</b>				46.21%	

**Table 2: S2 Subjects' Scores (out of 150) and Test's Mean.**

Subject No	Score	%	Subject No	Score	%
1	125	83	21	98	65
2	122	81	22	97	64
3	120	80	23	96	64
4	120	80	24	96	64
5	118	79	25	96	64
6	118	79	26	94	62
7	115	77	27	94	62
8	115	77	28	93	62
9	113	75	29	92	61
10	113	75	30	92	61
11	111	74	31	91	60
12	110	73	32	85	56
13	110	73	33	84	54
14	108	72	34	82	54
15	107	71	35	81	54
16	105	70	36	75	50
17	105	70	37	66	44
18	101	67	38	65	43
19	98	65	<b>Total</b>	<b>3809</b>	
20	98	65	<b>Mean</b>	<b>100</b>	

To investigate the acquisition route of dative constructions followed by Iraqi EFL learners, a one-way ANOVA test is carried out. The first step is used to find out whether the variables (i.e., the four sub-categories of dative constructions identified in section 4.2 above) have a significant effect on learners' performance. If it does, the second step is implemented which represents Duncan's multiple range test procedure. This procedure arranges the four categories in a hierarchy according to the learners' performance. The results of ANOVA and Duncan test are displayed in Table 3 below. The hierarchies are arranged in an ascending order).

**Table 3: Results of ANOVA and Duncan Tests.**

ANOVA Test					Duncan Test	
Question	Degree of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F. Value	Mean	Hierarchy of Dative
<b>Question One</b>						
S.S.W	2	511.1	255.55	32.75	5.856	<i>to</i> -Dative
S.S.B.	309	2410.97			4.337	<i>for</i> -Dative
Total	311	2922.07			7.8	2.721
					1.234	<i>with</i> -Dative
<b>Question Two</b>						
S.S.W	2	719.39	359.7	85.29	4.587	<i>to</i> -Dative
S.S.B.	309	1303.22			2.423	<i>for</i> -Dative
Total	311	2022.61			4.22	1.883
					0.785	<i>with</i> -Dative
<b>Question Three</b>						
S.S.W	2	1310.7	622.35	223.39	5.202	<i>to</i> -Dative
S.S.B.	309	906.52			1.078	<i>for</i> -Dative
Total	311	2217.22			2.93	0.970
					0.655	<i>with</i> -Dative

The statistical results displayed in Table 3 above reveal that the calculated F. values for the three questions are statistically significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels. Duncan procedure confirms a significant difference between all four means of dative categories across the three questions and the two groups of learners. This means that Iraqi EFL learners have produced and recognized the dative constructions as follows, from most to least successfully; *to*-dative, *for*-dative, double-NP, and *with*-dative. In other words, the following hierarchy can be drawn for the acquisition route followed by Iraqi EFL learners at the college level:

*to*-Dative>*for*-Dative > Double NP >*with*-Dative

where> can be interpreted "has acquisition priority over" (Dik, 1997, p. 30).

The hierarchy above reveals essentially the same route of acquisition for both native speakers of English and L2 learners of English (cf. Section 2 above), with the exception that the subcategory of *with*-dative has not been tested before. This is one contribution of this study. According to the statistical

results of this study, the structure of *with*-Dative is a marked one for Iraqi EFL learners. This result is in line with the general principles of markedness since the *with*-Dative is only permissible with a very limited subset of ditransitive verbs, notably *supply* and *provide*, and, consequently, has a higher marked value than both *to*-Dative and *for*-Dative. In view of this fact, it is in keeping with the general principles of markedness to consider *with*-Dative a separate subtype of the dative construction.

Another important observation is that the hierarchy above, based upon statistical evidence of markedness expressed by means of frequency, seems to reflect a universal tendency in the acquisition of the dative construction. More studies are required to verify this universal tendency in L2 acquisition context. The results above have been found to provide empirical evidence confirming the validity of the first hypothesis which reads:

*1. The acquisition of a foreign language proceeds in the same way that L1 and L2 learning does, as far as the structure under investigation is concerned, In other words, the route of acquisition of dative constructions is similar for FL, L1, and L2 learners. This entails that:*

- i. The acquisitional sequence of the dative constructions in L2 follows a theory of markedness. Hence, this study predicts that the unmarked structures are acquired before their marked counterparts, which is similar to the acquisition route of the same constructions followed by second Language learners.*
- ii. The hierarchy of acquisition corresponds to the hierarchy of difficulty.*

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

So far, it has been evident that the acquisition route of Iraqi university learners of English precedes in the same way that L1 and L2 learning does. In other words, the route of acquisition of dative constructions is similar for foreign language, L1, and L2 learners of English. The developmental sequence of the dative constructions in an Iraqi EFL context follows a theory of markedness. That is, the unmarked PP complements are acquired before the marked double-PP complements. This finding is in line with the acquisition route of the same constructions followed by L1 and L2 learners. A complete mastery of all structures of dative constructions is not achieved by Iraqi EFL learners during their four-year study of English at the university level. Acquisition, however, is achieved at the individual level, albeit it is scanty as composed to non-acquisition. The stage of learning is not the only decisive factor in the acquisition of this construction which means that the construction introduced to the subject frequently enough for them to acquire it. However, factors of the absence of focus, recycling and adequate exercise may have been responsible for the drastically low level of acquisition. In addition, when acquiring dative constructions, Iraqi EFL learners follow the following developmental hierarchy:

*To-Dative* > *for-Dative* > Double Dative > *with-Dative*

This acquisition hierarchy above seems to reflect a universal tendency in the acquisition of the dative constructions. Such a tendency has been formulated on the basis of the markedness value of each structure above as reflected by the frequencies of correct responses to each. Further future studies are required to confirm the universal range of this acquisition hierarchy.

The very low rate of acquisition of such an important and frequent construction in English at the topmost level of

learning English in Iraq makes it imperative for the applied linguists, educationists and teachers to review the teaching of this construction all through the education system.

At the university level, teachers of grammar are advised to provide remedial exercises especially during the first and second years.

A longitudinal study is suggested to be carried out to draw the order of acquisition for Iraqi EFL learners at the intermediate and preparatory stages. The main aim of such a study could be to test the predictability value of the hierarchy of acquisition presented above. A second useful future study can be conducted with the aim of calculating the effect of focus on the better acquisition of the dative constructions at any level of ESL teaching. In this case, the researcher is required to work with two separate groups, one is subjected to extra instructional lessons, and the other is left without such extra work.

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