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Grammatical Difficulties with English Morphemes Encountered by Undergraduate Students in the Context of Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates grammatical difficulties encountered by learners in the context of Myanmar, based on the theory of grammatical difficulty with reference to the concept of explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2008). This study used the modified questionnaire including the grammatical judgment tasks designed by Shiu (2011) targeting 17 grammatical items. 50 first-year students from Yadanabon University completed the questionnaire targeting four grammatical items: plural -s, third-person singular -s, past tense -ed and progressive aspect -ing. The results indicate that the participants find most difficulty in identifying the plural -s errors though they find it harder to correct the progressive aspect -ing errors and they find least difficulty in identifying and correcting the past tense -ed errors. The learners find difficulty with plural -s and this may be because plural suffixes are not used when the noun is preceded by a number or a quantifier in Myanmar. They find difficulty with third-person singular -s because there is no grammatical system of third-person singular -s in Myanmar. They find difficulty with progressive aspect -ing because they seem to confuse progressive aspect and simple present tense. They find least difficulty with past tense -ed and this may be due to the positive first language transfer because there is a past tense morpheme in Myanmar, just as in English. Although morpheme errors do not lead to communication problems, it is recommended that the teachers should help their students overcome grammatical difficulties by providing them reinforcement activities and letting them use in their own context.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar learning forms the crux of language acquisition particularly when accuracy is highlighted at the expense of fluency. With the need to have a balanced approach to language learning with a more or less equal emphasis on either of the above two aspects, the role of accuracy is no less important than that of fluency. With this view come the inevitable challenges of teaching/learning grammar and the concomitant difficulty for both teachers and learners. Extreme difficulties could result in the loss of motivation on the part of learners and frequent mistakes can possibly result in fossilisation of errors which may last into adulthood. Numerous studies have been done on the issue of difficulty in learning grammar.

For effective communication in all skills, and teaching English writing in particular, the use of correct grammar plays a significant role. To produce longer stretches of language at the syntactic level is naturally even more challenging. Not surprisingly, young Myanmar learners of English find it difficult to produce grammatically correct sentences.

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Challenges faced by young Myanmar learners in their use of English grammar were examined in this study based on the theory of grammatical difficulty with reference to the concept of explicit knowledge (Ellis 2008). The issue of difficulty in teaching/learning of second languages and foreign languages is a recurrent theme in EFL and ESL studies. Though extensive research in numerous countries has revealed the nature of language learning, studying the specific context of Myanmar students learning English, understanding the difficulties they encounter in the process and finding possible answers to the issues are expected to lend a useful insight into the nature of ELT in Myanmar and related aspects. Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulty encountered by Myanmar young learners in learning and using grammar and to discover the underlying causes of the problems these learners have with the target features.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Views on learning and teaching grammar

In this section, various perspectives by researchers and practitioners of language teaching on teaching/learning grammar are discussed.

Zhou, Busch and Cumming (2014) investigated the views of learners and teachers on learning grammar in writing tasks. The results show that there is limited correspondence between the intentions of learners and teachers for grammar teaching. Learners were found to hold the view that learning specific grammar rules would help in their writing tasks whereas the teachers focused on higher level writing skills. Therefore, a mismatch exists between students' and teachers' views on grammar teaching.

Grammatical Difficulty in Second Language Learning

Second language learning, which is done in the context where the target language is used, is presumably less challenging than EFL which is done removed from the context of authentic use. Even so, learners experience difficulty in acquiring the elements of grammar rules and use in the second language (L2). To explain grammar difficulty, Ellis (2008, p. 418) distinguishes two types of challenge: (1) the difficulty learners have in understanding and expanding a grammatical feature and (2) the difficulty learners have in internalising a grammatical feature so that they are able to use it fluently and automatically in communication. He argues that the first sense of grammatical difficulty relates to explicit knowledge, while the second sense relates to implicit knowledge.

Dekeyser (2009), on the other hand, makes a distinction between the objective and subjective difficulty in the acquisition of grammatical features. Objective difficulty concerns the difficulty of the grammatical rule itself whereas subjective difficulty refers to the actual difficulty that individual learners experience in L2 learning.

Still other scholars look at grammar difficulty from the perspective of L2 teachers and learners. Scheffler (2009) determines grammatical difficulty in a study that explored rule difficulty in relation to the usefulness of L2 instruction. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) investigate the difficulties in teaching and learning grammar through the perceptions of L2 teachers and learners. According to Shiu (2011), some researchers have characterised grammatical difficulty in terms of students' correct use of grammatical features that are considered more difficult to learn based on the fact that many students have difficulty using the features correctly.

Common difficulties encountered in English grammar

To lend an insight into the kind of difficulty young Myanmar learners have in internalising grammar rules and putting them to use, a look at some common difficulties faced by learners from other language backgrounds would be in order.

Among perspectives on difficulties faced by Asian learners of English, distinction between singular and plural forms is one that has gained the attention of several researchers. Newbrook (2006) observes the lack of expected plural -s in nouns after '*one of*' to be common in Hong Kong English. Deterding and Salbrina (2013, p.54) also found the widespread omission of the plural suffix -s after *one of* and *another of* in the writings of learners in Brunei. Kirkpatrick (2010, p.108) notes a Laotian speaker saying *some of my friend* to mean *one of my friends*. Budge (1989) and Newbrook (2006) also notice the use of singular nouns after *one of* in the writings by Malaysian ESL learners. The occurrence of this common difficulty among Asian learners of English has led to the assumption that some non-standard grammatical features are shared in the language production of ESL/EFL learners ASEAN nations and that this may give rise to a regional variety (Kirkpatrick, 2010). It seems that the occurrence of singular nouns after *one of*, *another of* and *each of* is shared in the Southeast Asian region. It is possible that a regional variety of English might be emerging in which such usage is acceptable. In addition to Southeast Asian English, in Jamaica English, this feature, *one of + singular noun*, regularly occurs in newspaper reports, in speech by prominent members of the business community and in the conversation of university lecturers (Shields, 2006). Therefore, this feature seems to be common in varieties of World English.

Teachers of English to Myanmar young learners have observed the students' confusion of the two rules of English (third-person singular -s and plural -s) in their language use. This confusion is possibly due to the use of the same marker to signal noun plurality and verb singularity. Learning third-person singular is also found to be quite problematic for them because of the different linguistic representation in the Myanmar language. Furthermore, Myanmar learners have difficulty in the use of regular past tense marker '-ed' since it does not have its phonetic equivalent in Myanmar and omission of past tense markers in the colloquial Myanmar language is a common practice. Employment of the suffix indicating the progressive aspect '-ing' is difficult for them and the learners are frequently heard using the present progressive form inappropriately. In general, morpheme errors are basic but persistent and they can be found even in the EFL writing of PhD students (James, 1998, p. 155).

Level of difficulty

It is believed by some researchers that language elements are acquired in order, easier ones internalised before the more difficult ones. Krashen (1987), for instance, claimed that English as a second language learners, both children and adults, acquire the grammatical morphemes in the order *progressive aspect, plural -s, copula, auxiliary, article, irregular past tense, regular past tense, third person singular -s, and possessive -s*. According to this theory, regular past tense are presumably acquired later than progressive aspect and plural -s. Whether this assumption can prove to be true for Myanmar learners need to be verified by an analysis of the collected data.

Chunk learning

To understand the order of acquisition for elements in English grammar, it is prudent to consider the concept of chunk learning in which well-formed grammatical units are learned and

produced wholly without any knowledge about their intrinsic grammatical rules (Ellis, 2003). In the formation of regular past tense, the two elements, namely the verb stem and the *-ed* suffix are simply put together but irregular past forms are taken as a whole as an element of vocabulary, in other words, chunk learning.

For native English-speaking children and those exposed to natural spoken English, the irregular past forms are noticed and produced first with regular past verb inflections following much later. Taatgen and Anderson (2002) posit three distinct stages for learning past tense forms for young learners: (1) Learners either acquired irregular past tense firstly in chunks (e.g. broke, went, woke) or no past form at all, (2) Learners start to notice and use regular past tense form and sometimes even add *-ed* suffixes to the irregular verbs (e.g. break-ed, go-ed, wak-ed), (3) All verbs are inflected correctly. By contrast, Myanmar learners of English are exposed mostly to the printed text and written form in which the regular past tense inflections are demonstrated clearly on paper. This can possibly lead to an order of acquisition by Myanmar learners different from other young learners with more extensive exposure to listening and speaking skills.

Emphasis on accuracy

On the opposite end of the grammar spectrum, there are researchers who criticise the excessive emphasis on the role of accuracy. Seidlhofer (2004) states that dropping third person singular *-s* does not lead to any misunderstanding or communication problem. In fact, there are proposals to legitimise English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) with its associated regional features. Widdowson (2004, p. 361) states that, with the lingua franca proposals, '[...] the modified forms of the language which are actually in use should be recognised as a legitimate development of English as an international means of communication'. Jenkins (2007) also criticises the labelling of non-standard forms, the outcomes of contact between ELF speakers' L1 and their L2 English, as *L1 transfer errors* irrespective of how systematically and frequently they are produced and how easily they are understood by ELF listeners and readers. In terms of ELF, English proficiency should not be judged in relation to NS English because the number of the native speakers is statistically in a minority compared to non-native speakers of the language (Crystal, 2003).

Jenkins (2009) states that many features of shared linguistic common ground can be found among ELF speakers, such as zero article and zero marking of third person singular *-s* in present tense verbs. Breiteneder (2005) and Dewey (2006) report that the use of present simple verbs in the third person with the omission of *'s'* morpheme occurs frequently in their ELF corpora. Furthermore, this feature of third person singular zero can also be found in the analysis of spoken data in L1 English varieties such as Reading English (Cheshire, 1978), Norwich dialects (Trudgill, 1983, p. 204) and African American Vernacular English (Wolfram, 2006). ELF is an especially characteristic phenomenon in contemporary English so the findings in different EFL contexts should be shared in order to debate the emergence of ELF as a distinctly new type of language use and as a distinctly new field of language research (Dewey, 2006).

With the emergence of English as a global language, teaching a single standard English without taking into account of different varieties of English is questionable. Jenkins (2006) states that English language teachers should help their learners to prepare for future encounters with different speakers across the world by raising their awareness of the diversity of English. Matsuda (2003) also suggests that learners should be exposed to different varieties of English. Farrell and Martin (2009) state that teachers should encourage learners to value their English usage even though it may be different from standard English. Moreover, teachers should help them to understand that the chosen variety is just one type of English and a number of different

speakers of World Englishes use English in their unique way as an expression of their identity and their cultural values. In Myanmar, the Ministry of Education has decided to teach standard British English in schools, colleges and universities. However, it is suggested that teachers should not only follow standard English but also consider different varieties of English in order to assist their learners to mutually seek ways to accommodate diversity (McKay, 2002, p. 128).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a modified questionnaire based on the grammatical judgment tasks designed by Shiu (2011), using the theory of grammatical difficulty: grammatical difficulty related to explicit knowledge proposed by Ellis (2008). The study deals entirely with subjective difficulty and investigates the grammatical difficulty experienced by Myanmar young learners. Grammatical judgment tasks focusing on third-person singular -s, plural -s, past tense -ed and progressive aspect -ing are used to identify the areas of difficulty.

Materials

The questionnaire used in this study includes two main sections: Section 1 asks about sex, age, first language, the difficult areas of English grammar, the importance of grammar teaching and comments on learning of English grammar and Section 2 consists of grammatical judgment or error correction test. Scheffler (2011) states that these tests are normally used to investigate the ability of learners to employ explicit grammatical knowledge. The test consists of 19 sentences which are designed to find out grammatical difficulty experienced by learners focusing on four areas: third person singular -s; plural -s; past tense -ed; and progressive aspect -ing.

Four sentences are used to examine the difficulty of each grammatical item. In addition to the 16 sentences used for four grammatical features, three correct sentences are included as fillers. These 19 sentences are in random order.

Participants

Fifty participants (25 male and 25 female learners) completed the questionnaire in this study. Female learners and male learners will be referred to respectively as F and M followed by a number, 1 to 25. The learners are relatively homogeneous in terms of their age and first language. The first language of all learners except for F3 is Myanmar. F3 is a bilingual who has two first languages, Myanmar and Shan. The age range of respondents is 16 to 19, with the average age of 17 years. They are first-year students majoring in Biochemistry at Yadanabon University.

Data Collection

The participants completed the questionnaires during class hours at Yadanabon University. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, it was pointed out that all their answers would remain anonymous. No time limit was set, but all participants completed and returned the sheets within 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

In the questionnaire, respondents are required to both identify the incorrect part of the sentence and provide the correct version.

A sample analysis is as follows:

Someone knocks door. Can you answer it? knock

In the above example, F1 could identify the incorrect part of the sentence but could not correct the error. Therefore, both the percentage of the students who could identify each error and the percentage of those who could give the correct answers were calculated. In some cases,

no answer was given and the data was placed under the heading ‘no response’ which was not included in calculation for grammatical difficulty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Areas of difficulty

The following figure shows the areas of difficulty in English grammar for the learners under investigation.

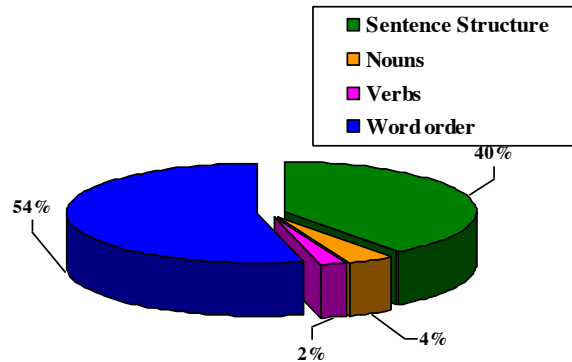


Figure 1. Area(s) of difficulty in English grammar

According to Figure 1, most of the participants (54%) reported that word order is a difficult area for them, and 40% of the respondents stated that they find it difficult to use sentence structure. Nouns are considered difficult by 3% of the learners, and verbs by just 2%. This possibly indicates that learners find the learning of individual grammar elements less challenging than longer stretches of language such as phrases and sentences in which using the correct word order and sentence structure can be daunting.

Written comments

Among 50 respondents, two females and four males did not give any comments. Out of 44 respondents who gave comments, only four female participants expressed negative attitudes towards grammar teaching, e.g. F19 who remarked, ‘I don’t like learning English grammar’.

Twelve students (24%), 6 females and 6 males, requested English language teachers to give explanation on grammatical rules more slowly and clearly. E.g. M9 stated, ‘I want the teachers to teach clearly and give more grammar exercises to practise’. It seems that the learners want more grammar teaching than what they are currently receiving. This corresponds with the findings of Zhou, Busch and Cumming (2014) who investigated learners’ and teachers’ views on learning grammar in writing.

Sentence correction

This section presents the results of students’ responses to items with incorrect sentences in the four grammatical areas: third person singular -s; plural -s; past tense -ed; and progressive aspect -ing.

The following chart shows the overall results of students’ responses on the four categories in relation to gender.

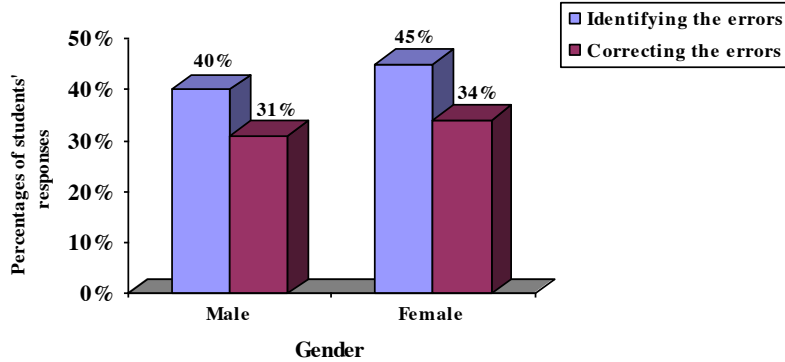


Figure 2. Overall results of students' responses on the four categories

According to Figure 2, 45% of the female learners can identify and 40% can correct the errors whereas only 34% of the male learners can identify the errors and 31% can correct them. In general, female learners seem to be able to identify and correct the errors better than male learners, but a t-test shows that there is actually no significant difference between them in identifying the errors ($t = 0.37$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.72$) or in correcting the errors ($t = 0.15$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.89$). As there is no significant difference in the responses between the two sexes, the results will be combined for the following analysis.

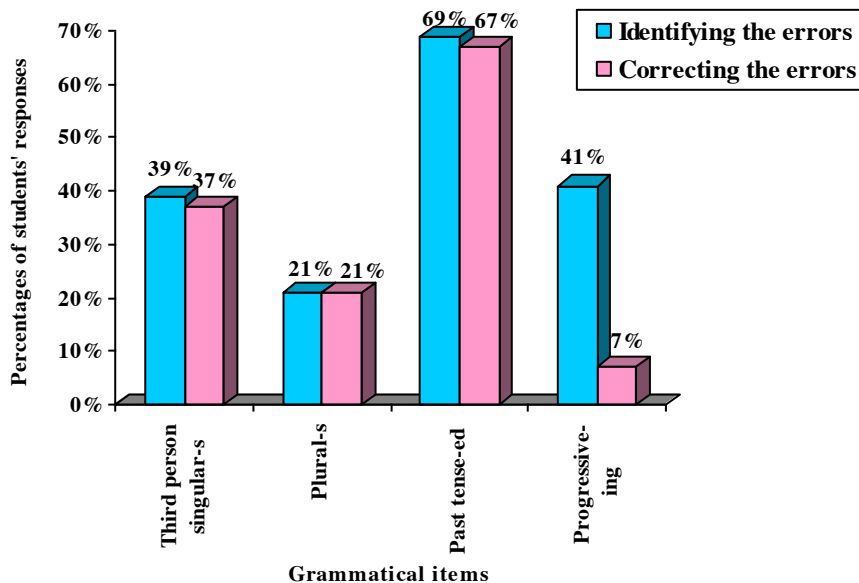


Figure 3. Percentages of students' responses for incorrect sentences

Third person singular -s

Among the four test items, third person singular -s, plural -s, past tense, and the progressive aspect, the participants find most difficulty in identifying the plural -s errors. On average, 39% of the learners can identify the errors and 37% can correct them.

For Sentence 14, 'Each of the *room* in this hotel has its own bathroom', 31 students (62%) think it is correct and for Sentence 17, 'One of my friends *live* in London', instead of identifying the error *live*, 17 students (34%) identify the word *friends* as incorrect and give the response *friend* for correction. This shows the learners' assumption that singular nouns are used, after *each of* and *one of*. This feature, the occurrence of singular nouns after *one of*, *another of* and *each of*, is

common in Hong Kong English, in Southeast Asian English as well as in Jamaica English (Newbrook, 2006; Shields, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Deterding and Salbrina, 2013).

In the case of Sentence 13, ‘The show opens on May 1st and *close* on May 31st every year’, 23 students (46%) think it is a correct sentence. The cause for omitting the third person singular -s may be mother tongue influence: there is no third person singular present tense -s in Myanmar and learners possibly transfer this feature to their use of English grammar.

In Sentence 9, ‘Everyone loves comic books and *buy* lots of them’, 11 students (22%) identify *loves* as an error and give the response *love*, instead of identifying the error *buy*. It seems that they assume *everyoneto* be a plural noun. This feature, *everyone* as a plural noun, can also be found in Malaysian English (Stapa and Izahr, 2010).

Plural –s

On average, 21% of the learners can identify the errors in the use of plural –s and correct them. In Sentence 18 ‘How many *module* do you need to take every year?’, 13 participants (26%) can identify the error *module* and all gave the correct answer *modules*, while two students (4%) gave no response. Still, a large majority of 35 students (70%) consider this sentence to be correct.

The learners find it difficult to use plural -s and the reason may be mother tongue influence: in Myanmar, there is no phonetic equivalent of the word-final –s and the use of plural particle is usually omitted.

Past tense –ed

In the case of Sentence 3 ‘The Second World War *end* in 1945’, 25 participants (50%) can identify the error *end* and 24 of them (48%) can give the correct answer *ended* while one participant gives the incorrect response *was ended*. Half of the students (50%) think it is a correct sentence. This sentence creates the most difficulty for the respondents among the four test items for past tense.

On average, 69% of the learners can identify the errors and 67% can correct them. Among the four test items, the learners find least difficulty in dealing with past tense errors as on average, 69% of the learners can identify the errors and 67% can correct them. This may be due to the positive first language transfer; the suffix *hkai* [gɛ] denotes an action that took place in the past, in both spoken and written Myanmar. Furthermore, the use and addition of regular past tense suffix *-ed* can clearly be noticed in the written form whereas, for young native speakers of English, they find it difficult to notice *-ed* suffix in the spoken form to which they are have been exposed to since early childhood.

Progressive aspect –ing

On average, 41% of the learners can identify the errors and just 7% can correct them so this feature (progressive aspect) creates the most difficulty for learners in error correction among the four grammatical features investigated.

For Sentence 12 ‘Look! That man *tries* to open the door of your car’, only three students (6%) can give the correct response while 22 students (44%) consider it correct. This means that they seem to confuse progressive aspect with simple present tense because these four test items involving simple present tense instead of progressive aspect are considered correct. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers in the Myanmar ELT context to focus more on the progressive aspect.

In response to grammatically correct Sentence 10, ‘When I was at school, I wrote many compositions’, two participants (4%) identify *was* as an error and give the response *were*. This may be the result of overgeneralisation of the first person pronoun rule in the present tense: ‘I’ (first person singular pronoun) is followed by plural verbs such as ‘I do’ and ‘I run’. It is also possible that students are confused by the subjunctive ‘If I were ...’ in a hypothetical conditional (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990) and extend this usage to a temporal clause ‘When I were ...’. For the correct Sentence 15, ‘I hope you don’t mind starting early’, one student (2%) identifies *starting* as an error and gives the response *start*. This possibly points to the learner’s lack of awareness of the rule which requires *-ing* form to follow the verb *mind*.

The findings suggest that the participant learners find more difficulty in the use of progressive aspect, plural *-s*, and third person singular *-s* than that of past tense, regular past tense form in particular. The finding that the use of regular past tense form is easier than that of other given grammar elements is contrary to the assumption of Krashen (1987) who proposed the order of grammar acquisition as *progressive aspect, plural -s, copula, auxiliary, article, irregular past tense, regular past tense, third person singular -s*, and *possessive -s*. It can be seen that the learning of regular past tense happens much later in the continuum at the sixth place.

According to his theory, regular past tense should be acquired later than progressive aspect and plural *-s*, but in this study, students find much less difficulty in identifying and correcting regular past tense errors than progressive aspect and plural *-s*. Thus, this study does not confirm the acquisition order of grammatical morphemes for English as a second language learners developed by Krashen (1987). However, one may also question whether the sentences in each category in the current research are of equal difficulty. While we note that students have problems with plural nouns, this seems to be triggered by the use of nouns such as *everyone* which might be regarded as logically plural. Furthermore, some of the sentences involving progressive aspect may be inherently more difficult to correct than those involving past tense.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, Myanmar people are becoming increasingly interested in learning English for success in different areas of life, above all in education and business, since English is publicly and officially recognised in many countries including Myanmar as the linguistic tool which enables people to communicate with the rest of the world. Grammatical knowledge plays an important role in the production of structurally accurate sentences. The current study was conducted to investigate Myanmar young learners’ grammatical difficulty, focusing on plural *-s*, third-person singular *-s*, past tense *-ed* and progressive aspect *-ing*.

Difficulty learners experience in the use of plural *-s* may have stemmed from mother tongue influence: in Myanmar, the use of plural suffixes is not common particularly when a noun is preceded by a number or a quantifier such as *how many*. The reason for omitting third person singular *-s* may be due to mother tongue influence: there is no equivalent particle to be used for third person singular in the present tense in Myanmar. The participants also have difficulty with progressive aspect *-ing*. Indeed, their confusion of the progressive aspect with simple present tense is obvious when they assume that the four test items containing the incorrect use of simple present tense instead of the correct progressive aspect are acceptable.

They find the use of regular past tense particle *-ed* least difficult among the four grammatical features and this may be due to the positive first language transfer because there is a past tense morpheme in Myanmar, just as in English. It is also possible that the addition of *-ed* to the verb stem is clear-cut and easily noticed by the learners in writing. This is in contrast to the natural order proposed by Krashen (1987) in which regular past tense form is acquired much later than

the irregular verbs which have been learnt in chunks much earlier. For Myanmar learners with more extensive exposure to reading and writing in English, it is relatively easier to notice the combination of verb stem and the *-ed* suffix on paper thus resulting in few errors. The fluctuations experienced by native English-speaking learners and those with more extensive exposure to listening and speaking in English (Taatgen and Anderson, 2002) are evidently not experienced by Myanmar learners for the most part.

Although morpheme errors do not lead to communication problems, it is recommended that teachers should help their students to overcome grammatical difficulties by trying to understand the underlying causes of the problems in order to help learners produce sentences using standard grammar, especially in writing. Adherence to standard grammar in writing may be considered important by many people even if non-standard grammar does not lead to misunderstanding. Accuracy in the use of grammatical forms and structures increases in importance when learners are aiming for formal qualifications and positions which require writing formal application letters and CVs as well as sitting for formal tests and examinations.

In this study, the number of respondents is limited only to 50 participants so it would be interesting to investigate learners' grammatical difficulty on a larger scale. As this study targets just four grammatical items, it would also be of interest to examine learners' grammatical difficulty for other grammatical features.

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