Difficulty In The Acquisition Of Complex English Structures By Jordanian Students In The First Secondary Class

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the difficulty that Jordanian male students in the first secondary class experience in acquiring Complex English Structures. The basic hypotheses of the study were:

1. The finite, participial and infinitival grammatical forms of the embedded structures pose no significant difference in difficulty for Jordanian male students in the first secondary class.

2. The three syntactic processes of nominalization, relativization and adverbialization which are involved in embedding one sentence into another pose no significant difference in difficulty for Jordanian students in the first secondary class.

3. There is no significant interaction between the syntactic process involved in embedding one sentence into
another and the grammatical form of the embedded structure.

The sample of the study consisted of 675 students enrolled in thirteen sections which were randomly chosen from 26 sections in the five schools which constituted the population of the study. These were randomly assigned to one of the nine tests in the study. Data were collected and analyzed using a 3 x 3 two-way analysis of variance.

The results of the study showed that Jordanian male students in the first secondary class generally found it more difficult to:

1. relativize structures than to nominalize or adverbialize them.

2. embed finite and participial structures in the matrix sentence than to embed infinitival structures.

The result of the study showed also that there was a significant interaction between the syntactic process and the grammatical form of the embedded structure. The study revealed that it was more difficult to:

1. relativize infinitival structures than to adverbialize them.

2. adverbialize participial structures than to nominalize or relativize them.
3. relativize finite structures than to nominalize them.

A profile method which was used to compare the difficulty of the items in the nine tests to detect if the semantic function of the embedded structure in the matrix sentence had any effect on difficulty revealed that it was generally more difficult for students to:

1. nominalize finite, participial and infinitival structures when they function as appositives or as subjects in the matrix sentence than when they function as objects or as adjective complements.

2. relativize structures to a noun phrase functioning as subject in the matrix sentence than to a noun phrase functioning as object.

3. adverbialize participial absolute structures than to adverbialize them when the subjects of the participial structure and the matrix sentence are the same.

Attempts were made to explain these results with reference to principles of transfer, frequency and amount of learning, transformational complexity and universal psychological factors. The results of the study have shown that
both environmental and psychological factors play a role in determining difficulty.

The conclusion reached in this study was that items in a syllabus for teaching complex structures should not be built on formal grammatical grounds only but functional and psychological factors should be considered, too, to provide a more accessible approach for a full command of the embedding process.

Implications for further research included studies to assess the effect of number of embeddings, transformational complexity and semantic function of the embedded structure on the difficulty of complex sentences.