

Level of Grammatical Proficiency and Acquisition of Functional Projections: The case of Iranian learners of English language

Fariba Khorvash, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

fariba.khorvash@gmail.com

Ahmad Reza Lotfi*, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

lotfiahmadreza@yahoo.com

Ahmad Ameri Golestan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

ahmadamerigolestan@yahoo.com

Abstract

Unlike Lexical Projections, Functional Projections (Extended Projections) are more of an 'atstratt' in nauuæ. hherefore, Fnciional Prjje ciions seem oo be acciire i later hhan Lecccal Prjje ciions yy hheL2 learners. hhe present syyyyiniesii ia tes Iranian Li learners' acuuision of English Extended Projections taking into account their level of grammatical proficiency. Specifically, the aim is to identify the level of grammatical proficiency at which the acquisition of Extended Projections could occur in the process of learning English by the Iranian students. Two hundred and seventy Iranian female L2 learners of English participated in this study. Participants were administered three tests with a ten-day interval between each test. First, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used oo classify hhe parccctants' lelel of grammaical proficiency. Second, a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) was administered in order to assess hhelearners' aiiil tty ooreciini ze grammaical brbblebs in Ett ended Prjje c...ns. F,nall,, a picture descrttt oon kask kkkkk was aiii ntstered oo exaii ne hhe learners' aiiil tty oo uruuue grammatical Extended Projections. The results indicated that the learners are able to recognize and produce English Extended Projections even at lower levels of grammatical proficiency. The restlt s also swwwwtttat tte learner's rectnttt ttn and uruuuuuion of Enili si Ette nded Prjje ciion improves with their increased level of grammatical proficiency.

Keywords: Functional Projections, Grammaticality Judgment Task, L2 learner, Picture Description Task, second language acquisition

Introduction

An essential part of learning a second language (L2) is learning how to put the words together to make phrases and how to fit those phrases together to make grammatical sentences. This combination of properties of words and phrases is known as syntax. If a sentence is built according to the properties determined by syntax, it is grammatical. Otherwise, it would be considered ungrammatical (Hawkins, 2001). What is responsible for generating grammatical scrcccres in a Ræccclar lanuuæ is a set of tnstreciions wnwwnas "grammar". hhe Grammar of a language specifies the pronunciation of a sentence , its syntax and the meaning given to that sentence (Hawkins, 2001). Roux (1996) considers understanding the grammar of a language as an important part of learning a language. However, Roux believes that it is impossible to understand how the grammar of a language is acquired without understanding the knowledge of that grammar and its representation in the mind of an L2 learner. In order to understand this mental

grammar of an L2 learner, it is necessary to collect observations about second language syntactic structures.

A sentence in any language, contains phrases as its fundamental syntactic structures. These phrases could be lexical or functional phrases usually known as Lexical and Functional categories. White (2003) differentiates between Lexical categories (Lexical Projections) and Functional categories (Functional Projections/Extended Projections). Lexical categories include, head categories such as Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs and Prepositions, and the functional categories include head categories such as Determiners, Inflections, Complementisers, Negations, e... Cinsi dergng gvrver's 333333 definition, lexical category constitutes the lowest structural domain of an Extended Projection and the sequence of Functional Projections is built on top of the Lexical Projection and constitutes the higher domain of an Extended Projection (Corver, 2013).

One of the main topics of interest among researchers in second language acquisition (SL) is iniesii ia iing L2 learners' aciiisi iion and develmmment of Funciional Prjje ciions or Ette nded Prjje ciions (EPs) vvrver, ;;;; ;a w,,ns, et al. ;;;; ;' Gra,,, ;;;; Rizzi, 2016; White, 2008). Compared with lexical categories, which are acquired earlier, functional categories are acquired in later stages both in first and second language acquisition. The reason for this delay might be that function words (functional morphemes) are more abstract in nature. However, they are considered important elements in a sentence since they are needed to glue the content words together. Therefore, it seems that Functional categories do have a crucial role in developing grammatical constituents in a language.

; ; cgrgngggRzzi 1111) "hhhh hf hhecpppl ettt y of stnt aciic scrcœccres resddesdn hhe fnciional layers" ... 44... Cinsi dergngg zzz's defiiiiini hhecpppl ex and non-realistic nature of Functional categories, may explain why second language learners seem to experience more difficulties learning and using them to make grammatical structures. As a result, it is essential that language instructors and language learners be aware of the critical role of Functional Projections (Extended Projections) in learning a new language so that they can apply better techniques and more useful materials to acquire these constituents more practically.

In this respect, the present study aims to investigate the level of grammatical proficiency Iranian learners of English can acquire the four English Extended Projections including Determiner Phrases (DPs), Infelectional Phrases (IPs), Negative Phrases (NegPs) and Complementiser Phrases (CPs). Regarding the complexity of Extended Projections and the difficulty of their acquisition, it is assumed that learners may not have access to these categories in lower levels of grammatical proficiency. Therefore, after classifying the participants into three groups of Low, Mid and High according to their proficiency scores, this study utilises Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) and Picture Description Task (PDT) in order to assess the degree of acquisition of the above Extended Projections in each of the three groups. Analysing each of the groups, the study attempted to answer the following research question:

Q: At which level of grammatical proficiency are Extended Projections acquired by Iranian learners of English?

Empirical Background

Acquisition of Functional Projections has received a lot of attention by researchers of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through decades. Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado (2008) conducted a study on acquiring English articles by Spanish learners of English. The results showed that they are able to use articles accurately even from the beginning. This lack of

fluctuation was explained by the fact that English and Spanish are similar regarding their article systems, both marking definiteness.

In a study on the acquisition of the 3rd person singular –s morpheme by Spanish L2 learners of English, Jara (2015) reported that students made errors in the production of 3rd person singular morpheme -s when using the present tense: they omitted the –s morpheme of the 3rd person singular in the vast majority of the verbs they used. Yoshimura & Nakayama (2009) investigated the L1 influence on the syntactic or morphophonological domain by examining how Japanese college EFL learners (15 in Low Group and 15 in High Group) proceeded to acquire inflectional morphology (3rd person singular –s, plural –s and past tense –ed) in English. The results demonstrated that: (a) The production of agreement –s improved as Japanese EFL learners' Enili si irif iie ncc ncreaseww wwever, iieir raoes ofooosslmn mn nmmml mlndras and past tense ped did not decrease siini fii antl.. In atttt „n, „e lanuuuae learners' iii sssion rates of the 3rd person singular –s and the plural –s significantly differed from the omission rate of the tense –ed. This revealed that the tense inflection was the easiest to acquire. In sum, examining the compositions written by 30 Japanese EFL learners of the lower and higher proficiency groups revealed 11a1 L1 effects affecte2 L2 learners' prddcciiion of onflœiipn pprp pplpppp

Jabbari and Pourhashemi (2011) investigated whether UG is accessible in the acquisition of English as a foreign language observing IPs and functional category of Neg in the three tasks done by ninety Iranian subjects. The results of the study showed a significant difference between the subjects at three levels of proficiency. With regard to constructing non-grammatical negative structures, the finding showed a significant difference among the three levels in a way that elementary subjects had the highest rate of non-grammatical negative construction and advanced group produced the lowest. On the other hand, advanced subjects had a better performance than the other two groups in producing grammatical sentences and had the least transfer from their mother tongue.

In a part of his study Hopp (2017) investigated the effect of L1 word order and proficiency on comprehension processing of which-questions. The study was done among 60 German-English adult learners at different stages of proficiency. According to the results, the accuracy data provided clear differences according to proficiency. The upper-intermediate L2 adults showed to be more accurate than the intermediate ones and the advanced group had high accuracy over-all. According to Hopp, the results were compatible with Full access/ Full Transfer Hypothesis proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996), which identifies the L1 grammar as the initial state of adult L2 acquisition with subsequent restructuring of the Interlanguage grammar as exposure rises and proficiency improves.

Aryanik and Lotfi (2015) also conducted a study on exploring the differences between the Farsi as the first language and English as the second language regarding the acquisition of CPs using seventy (70) Persian learners of English. According to the findings, students had access to the CPs in all the three levels of elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The participants had already begun to specify their representations for English C and CP at the initial stages of EFL acquisition. Later, they improved the use of CPs based on the positive evidence they received as they went through different levels of proficiency, thus, there was a rise in the correct use of CPs from the elementary to intermediate and consequently to advanced level.

Schulz (2006, 2011) investigated the acquisition of English complex questions by German and Japanese English learners. The results of the study showed that the errors observed in the acquisition of English complex questions (including wh-embedded clauses) stem from interlanguage stage. Schulz concluded that the discovered errors in the mentioned field were due

to lack of knowledge, which could be eliminated by gaining more and more proficiency in English.

In a study done by Khorvash & Lotfi (2019), the relationship between grammatical proficiency and learners' access to Extended Projections was investigated through a correlational study. The study was conducted among Iranian learners of English. The results of the study showed that there was a positive, significant correlation between grammatical proficiency and having access to Extended Projections.

Methodology

Participants

The current research is a descriptive study with the aim of assessing the acquisition of Extended Projections (DPs, IPs, NegPs, and CPs) among Iranian learners of English. The study was conducted among Iranian female English language learners in several language institutes in Tehran. The study also included undergraduate students majoring in English translation, English literature and English language teaching at two branches of Islamic Azad University in Tehran province. Two-hundred and seventy (270) female language learners participated in this study. Gender was controlled in this research by using only female students. Because the focus of the study was on L2 learners' acquisition of Extended Projections, which are acquired in later stages, the participants had the experience of at least two years of studying English or were at pre-intermediate levels and above in their language schools.

Materials and instruments

The instrument used in this study comprised of three tests, which were administered with a ten-day interval between each. First, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to obtain the grammatical proficiency level of the participants. After a ten-day interval, a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) was conducted to evaluate the participants' ability to recognise four Extended Projections (DPs, IPs, NegPs and CPs). Lastly, a Picture Description Task (PDT) was administered to measure the ability of participants in producing the four Extended Projections.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) Administration

In order to obtain a proficiency score for each participant, an OPT (Allan, 2004) was administered. Because learners' grammatical proficiency was the focus of the study, only the grammar test papers of the OPT was utilised. Complete and detailed instructions and examples were given to the students at the beginning of the test both in English and in Persian to ensure that all the students taking the test understand what they were supposed to do. Considering the test instruction, about 50 minutes were allocated to do the test. According to OPT marking kit, one point was given to correct response and no point to incorrect ones. The points then were added up in order to obtain a complete score out of 100 for each participant. The participants then were given a code and their grammatical proficiency scores were calculated and ranked from the highest to the lowest. The OPT scores of the participants were then categorised into three groups of low, mid and high.

Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) Administration

A researcher-formulated GJT was administered ten days after the OPT to assess the learners' ability to recognise grammatical structures in English sentences. Sentences used in GJT were selected from the sample sentences provided in '*Second Language Syntax: A*

eeeeiiii ve ttt ccccc c' by Roger Hawkins (2001). The validity of the task was reviewed and approved by experts before administration. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the test was administered to a group of thirty language learners in different language schools in Tehran province. Kuder-Richardson-21 (KR-21) test was utilised to measure the reliability of the instrument.

Therefore, the participants were presented a set of forty-seven grammatical and ungrammatical sentences including fillers. The sentences contained Extended Projections (IPs, DPs, CPs, and NegPs) and the participants were asked to indicate whether they consider them grammatical English sentences or not. This was followed by a request to correct those sentences they had judged to be incorrect. The participants were provided with detailed explanation of what to do both in English and in Persian. Based on the pilot study, the amount of time given to the participants to complete the test was about twenty-five minutes. Points were given to (1) correctly identify the sentences as either grammatical or ungrammatical sentences and (2) correct the ungrammatical sentences.

Picture Description Task (PDT) Administration

For eliciting narrative discourse samples from the participants, a PDT was administered ten days after e test tdddrsd hhræ ii cuurs kalen frmm "fahler and son ll ater dnd s""n"" ciii cs yy Plauen (2014). The participants were supposed to write down at least ten sentences describing the event portrayed in each picture in English. Considering the pilot study done before, about fifteen minutes were allocated to complete the task.

Results

Results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

hhe parccctants' stores on hhegrammaical seciion of TTT was used oorank hhelearners' grammatical proficiency. The mean score of the participants was 61.60 out of 100. The lowest score was 66 and hheggghst score was ... Table 111swwwwswparcccparts' vverall TTT score distribution.

Table 4.1. iiii i tttt tt PPT cceet ttt tttt tt

OPT Scores Distribution	
Number of the participants	270
Mean	61.60
Median	64.00
Mode	64
Std. Deviation	14.198
Variance	201.594
Minimum	16
Maximum	94

The participants were divided into three groups based on their OPT scores. This study used the scores of 56 as the cut off score for the Low Group, the scores between 60-68 for the Medium group, and 72 and above for the High Group (Table 4.2). Organizing the scores in to the three groups in this study was compatible with OPT proficiency level chart (Allan, 2004).

Table 4.2. Classifying Grammatical Proficiency Group Based on OPT Scores

and mid and High Group ($p < 0.01$). More progress in correct recognition of DPs is significantly achieved as the grammatical proficiency improves.

Results of IPs

The participants were asked to judge nine sentences as grammatically correct and incorrect. The frequency and proportion of the participants with correct recognitions of grammatical and ungrammatical IPs in three proficiency groups are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Results of IPs Recognition in GJT in Three Proficiency Groups

Number of correct Recognition	Proficiency Groups					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
0	-	0.00	-	0.00	-	0.00
1	-	0.00	-	0.00	-	0.00
2	-	0.00	-	0.00	-	0.00
3	1	0.01	-	0.00	-	0.00
4	8	0.09	1	0.01	-	0.00
5	13	0.15	4	0.05	1	0.01
6	22	0.26	12	0.15	3	0.04
7	28	0.33	24	0.30	18	0.27
8	8	0.09	28	0.36	33	0.49
9	7	0.08	10	0.13	12	0.18
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value < 0.01

The results show that, 50% of the participants in the Low Group, 79% in the Mid Group and 94% in the High Group could correctly recognize seven or more of the IPs. The findings in this part also show participants' recognition of English IPs correctly from the lower levels of grammatical proficiency however, their ability has increased significantly with increase in grammatical proficiency ($p < 0.01$).

Results of NegPs

Seven sentences should have been identified as correct or incorrect by the participants. Table 4.5, shows the frequency and proportion of the participants who could correctly recognize grammatical and ungrammatical NegPs.

The results show that 47% of the participants in the Low Group, 62% in the Mid Group and 86% in the High Group could correctly recognise five or more of grammatical and ungrammatical NegPs. As is shown in this table, the High Group has a significantly better performance compared with the Mid Group who themselves are remarkably better than the Low Group ($p < 0.01$). It should be noted that participants' performance is significantly different among the three groups, correct recognition of NegPs can be observed even in the participants with low level of grammatical proficiency (i.e. Low Group).

Table 4.5. Results of NegPs Recognition in GJT in Three Proficiency Groups

Number of	Proficiency Groups					
-----------	--------------------	--	--	--	--	--

correct Recognition	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
0		0.00	-	0.00	-	0.00
1	-	0.00	-	0.00	-	0.00
2	5	0.06	2	0.03	-	0.00
3	18	0.21	8	0.10	1	0.01
4	23	0.26	20	0.25	8	0.12
5	25	0.29	31	0.39	19	0.28
6	15	0.17	15	0.19	22	0.33
7	1	0.01	3	0.04	17	0.25
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value<0.01

Results of CPs:

Table 4.6 shows the proportion of the participants who could correctly recognize grammatical and ungrammatical CPs. The participants were supposed to recognize nine phrases as grammatical and ungrammatical. The results reveal that 14% of the participants in the Low Group, 32% in the Mid Group and 71% in the High Group could correctly recognize seven or more of the CPs. According to the findings, there is a significant difference between the three groups concerning their ability to recognize correct CPs ($p < 0.01$).

Although it seems that CPs are accessible from the low levels of grammatical proficiency, they are more readily available to higher groups in comparison to other Functional Projections. It's also worth noting that while CPs are available to all three groups just like the other Functional Projections, but due to the complexity of CPs they are acquired at the higher-level grammatical proficiency than other Functional Projections.

Table 4.6. Results of CPs Recognition in GJT in Three Proficiency Groups

Number of correct Recognition	Proficiency Groups					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion

0	2	0.02	-	0.00	-	0.00
1	1	0.01	-	0.00	-	0.00
2	2	0.02	-	0.00	-	0.00
3	8	0.09	3	0.04	3	0.04
4	25	0.29	7	0.09	1	0.01
5	26	0.30	20	0.25	8	0.12
6	10	0.11	24	0.30	7	0.10
7	8	0.09	15	0.19	14	0.21
8	3	0.03	7	0.09	23	0.34
9	2	0.02	4	0.04	11	0.16
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value<0.01

Results of Picture Description Task (PDT)

Since the number of EPs produced by the participants varied greatly, it was decided to use the proportion of correct productions instead of the number of correct productions (see tables 4.7-4.10). The first column in each table shows the proportion of the correct productions of EPs by the participants, divided into three levels of 0.0-0.5, 0.6-0.7, and 0.8-1.00. The frequency and proportion of the participants in each of these proficiency groups, which fall in the shown levels is shown in these tables. A chi-square test was used to assess the difference among the three proficiency groups and their level of correct production of EPs.

Results of DPs

Table 4.7 shows the proportion of the participants who produced correct DPs in each of the three proficiency groups.

The results in this table show that 62% of the participants in the Low Group, 86% in the Mid Group and 94% in the High Group could produce eighty percent or more of correct DPs. The Chi-square test results reveal a significant difference in production of DPs among the three groups ($p < 0.01$).

Table 4.7. Results of DPs Production PDT in Three Proficiency Groups

Scores	Proficiency Groups					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
Proportion of Correct	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
0-0.5	4	0.04	1	0.01	1	0.01
0.6-0.7	29	0.33	10	0.11	3	0.04
0.8-1.00	54	0.62	68	0.86	63	0.94
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value< 0.01

Results of IPs

Table 4.8 shows the production of the participants who produced correct IPs in each of the three proficiency groups. The results indicate that 34% of the participants in the Low Group, 73% in the Mid Group and 79% in the High Group could produce eighty percent or more of correct English DPs (Table 4.8). The results of the Chi-square test show a significant difference among the three groups ($p < 0.01$).

Table 4.8. Results of IPs Production PDT in Three Proficiency Groups

Scores	Proficiency Groups					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
Proportion of Correct	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
0 -0.5	25	0.28	9	0.11	4	0.05
0.6-0.7	32	0.36	12	0.15	10	0.14
0.8-1.00	30	0.34	58	0.73	53	0.79
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value < 0.01

Results of NegPs

Analysis of the NegPs production in three proficiency groups is shown in table 4.9. The results reveal that 35% of the participants in the Low Group, 40% in the Mid Group and 41% in the High Group could produce eighty percent or more of English NegPs (Table 4.9).

The results of Chi-square test show that the proportion of correct production of NegPs among the three proficiency groups are not statistically significant from one another. It seems that grammar proficiency has no role on the correct production of NegPs. However, the obtained results could be due to low production of negative structures by the participants.

Table 4.9. Results of NegPs Production PDT in Three Proficiency Groups

Scores	Proficiency Group					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
Proportion of Correct	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
None	40	0.45	35	0.44	37	0.55
0 -0.5	15	0.17	9	0.11	5	0.07
0.6-0.7	1	0.01	3	0.03	1	0.01
0.8-1.00	31	0.35	32	0.40	28	0.41
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

Results of CPs:

Regarding the production of CPs, 43% of the participants in the Low Group, 65% in the Mid Group and 73% in the High Group produced eighty percent or more of English CPs (See table 4.10).

Table 4.10. Results of CPs Production PDT in Three Proficiency Groups

Scores	Proficiency Groups					
	Low Group		Mid Group		High Group	
Proportion of Correct	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
None	34	0.39	18	0.22	9	0.13
0 -0.5	12	0.13	5	0.06	11	0.16
0.6-0.7	3	0.03	4	0.05	2	0.02
0.8-1.00	38	0.43	52	0.65	49	0.73
Total	87	1.00	79	1.00	67	1.00

P-Value < 0.01

The results of Chi-square test reveal a significant difference among the three proficiency groups in production of CPs. ($p < 0.01$). Thus, as the level of grammatical proficiency improves, so does the ability to produce CPs.

Discussion

Accgrggnggghherestlts of TTT and PTT analysis in iii s syyyhhheparccctants' aiiit ty oo recognise and produce all four Extended Projections (DP, IP, NegP and CP) can be observed at all three levels of proficiency groups. The findings revealed that, despite the complexity of Extended Projections and the difficulty of their acquisition even the Low Group in the study had access oo all fuur Fnciional Prje citions oosmee.en. ...s f.n.n. .s sooooroeyy hhe 'Full cc ccess/Full Transfer' yyyyyiesis iriii sed by Shwartz and Sprou (1994, 1996). According to this hypothesis, L2 learners are fully accessed to all lexical and Functional categories relevant for constructing the mental grammar for a language from the initial state. Since the learners in the Low Group have not exposed to enough L2 input comparing with the Mid and High Group, they may use their steady-state of their mother tongue to the extend it could accommodate L2 input. Considering this view, it seems that L1 transfer and to be more specific transferring of similar Persian parameters could play a positive role in acquiring Functional Projections. This is in line with the study done by Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado (2008).

The results also point to a significant difference among the three proficcency prppps' performance in correct recognition and production of English EPs. In that, the performance of the Low Group was significantly weaker than the Mid Group and, the performance of the Mid Group was significantly weaker than the High Group. The significant difference among the three proficiency groups may imply that, not all Persian parameters are similar to the English parameters with regard to the acquisition of EPs. According to Hawkins (2001), the absence of similar features and parameters in L1 may cause difficulties for learners to acquire L2 structures. Additionally, transferring of L1 properties including parameterised features could be considered as a barrier for L2 learners to interpret positive evidence they receive from target-language input (Hawkins, 2001). Considering the results of the study, it could be concluded that lack of similarity between EPs in Persian and EPs in English and the interference of differed EP features and parameters in Persian may lead to weak performance of the Low Group comparing with the mid and High Groups.

hhe restlts also reveal „a,, „e learners' aiiilties in correct rectntt ttn and correct production of English EPs improved significantly as their grammatical proficiency level increased with the exception of production of NegPs. In other words, the participants in the Mid Group performed significantly better than the ones in the Low Group and those in the High Group significantly outperformed the ones in the Mid Group. According to Full Access/Full Transfer iiiiiiesis ilearners rescrccecre iieir initial state grammar on hhebasis of hheL2 unuu tyey year or read' HH,,ns, ,, , hhe siini fiiant mmmrvvenv vn correct rectntt ttn and production of all four EPs from the Low to the Mid and the High Group, could be in line with the assumption that the learners redesign their initial grammar or even acquire new parameter settings and feature values encountering positive L2 input. The results are compatible with the previous studies concluding that there was a rise in the correct use of Extended Projections from the lower levels of proficiency to higher levels among L2 learners (Araynik & Lotfi, 2015; Hopp, 2017; Ionin, et al. 2008; Jabbari & Pourhashemi, 2011; Khorvash & Lotfi, 2019)

It should be noted that the PDT analyses indicate that, the ability to *produce* NegPs did not improve significantly with the level of grammatical proficiency. This may indicate that learners might not have enough access to NegPs in any of the three proficiency groups. Thus, this

lack of fluency may have occurred due to lack of competence. According to Krashen's 'i+1' hypothesis, if learners formally study grammar rules, they will not be able to draw on that knowledge in spontaneous communication because it has not been acquired. Having the grammatical knowledge but avoid using some structures could be the matter of acquisition. Therefore, lack of competence may have caused learners avoid using NegP structures in PDT. On the other hand, the results of recognition task (GJT) show a significant difference among the three proficiency groups in correct recognition of NegPs. Therefore, lack of fluency may be the reason in the performance of NePPs. Like what 'Full access' theories argue, 'L2 syntactic development is not necessarily linked to surface morphosyntactic realizations. L2 learners may have the knowledge but do not use it' (Hakins, 2001). Many linguists differentiate between mental knowledge of a language and the real-time use of that knowledge to understand and produce utterances. Many distractions like random thoughts or background noise could lead to faulty output. However, such interferences are not related to underlying knowledge that one has about that language (Hakins, 2001). Considering this view, lack of NePP performance could be due to some performance reasons and not learner's lack of knowledge. As Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono (1996) suggest, it is plausible that a learner may know the target language but uses certain structures incorrectly or never uses them for performance reasons. One possible explanation for this observation is that generally speaking, production seems to be cognitively more demanding. Negative structures for instance may not naturally occur frequently in one's daily speech even in their mother tongue (Khorvash & Lotfi, 2019). Therefore, observing low number of NegPs in PDT, could be due to the design of the production task. The PDT designed for this study aimed at eliciting an extensive range of potentially natural, unmonitored performance of the learners. Thereby, using a more guided elicitation task or an argumentative one might be more appropriate to obtain enough samples of negative structures.

It is worth noting that the participants in this study were learning English as a foreign language in classroom environment and through mostly formal, explicit instructions. Therefore, in addition to transferring of similar parameters from L1, having access to EPs from lower levels of grammatical proficiency could be the result of formal instructions implying that learners have acquired English EPs through learning. This is compatible with the studies done by Long (1983) and Ellis (1985, 1990) suggesting that learners exposed to formal instruction of an L2 syntactic properties, develop knowledge of those properties more quickly than learners exposed to those samples of the L2 in naturalistic settings. Ellis (1990:133) reviewing and incorporating a number of studies, concludes that it seems reasonable to assume that formal instruction is of value in the early levels of acquisition.

In line with Krashen's 'zero hypothesis' and his theories in the absence of acquisition-learning overlap, it seems that learning could lead to acquisition. The importance of instruction in acquiring a second language is also found in works by Gass & Selinker, 2001; McLaughlin, 1978 and Swain, 2005 who questioned the fuzzy distinction between (unconscious) acquisition and (conscious) learning.

The results are also supported by Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) approach proposed by Long (1991) and proved to be beneficial in acquiring grammar. Recent studies have reported the effectiveness of explicit and form-focused instruction on acquiring grammatical knowledge, automaticity and fluency of language learners (Hernández, 2011; Lingli and Wannaruk, 2010; Parviz and Gorjian, 2013; Spada et al. 2014).

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to identify the level of grammatical proficiency at which Iranian learners of English could acquire English Extended Projections (EPs). The results show that the process of acquisition starts from the low levels of grammatical proficiency. Although the learners may be able to recognize and produce all four English EPs correctly from the beginning, they seem to acquire the parameters of English Functional categories as their proficiency improves and as a result have a better performance.

Since the participants of this study were learning English as a foreign language, it seems that the role of form-focused instruction could not be ignored in the acquisition of English Functional Projections. In order to best meet the needs of language learners in acquiring Functional categories, this study suggests language instructors to consider Form-Focused Instructions and activities as a feasible alternative to be integrated into teaching practice where the communicative way of teaching grammar cannot be practical enough.

There are still many questions about the nature of L2 syntactic knowledge of Functional Projections and the difficulties faced by L2 learners in acquiring them. In addition to absence of features and parameters of L2 Functional categories or L1 interference, some researchers like Spinner and Juffs (2008) consider other factors to be influential in having difficulties in acquiring syntactic properties. They claim that insufficient lexical learning, mapping difficulty, processing pressure, and parsing errors may cause functional paradigms to be inadequately learned. Such controversies would generate further empirical research into understanding of EP acquisition and its impact on L2 learners.

References

- Allan, D. (2004). *Oxford Placement Test*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Aryanik, A., & Lotfi, A.R. (2015). Complementiser projections in English (L1=Persian) interlanguage: A generative study of second language acquisition. *Salmagundi-A Quarterly of The Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(1S), 132-140.
- Brown, H.D. (2014). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching: A Course in Second Language Acquisition*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Corver, N. (2013). Lexical categories and Extended Projections. In M. Den Dikken (Ed.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Generative Syntax* (pp. 353-424). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eptatein, S., Flynn, S. & Martohardjono, G. (1996). Second Language acquisition: theoretical and empirical issues in contemporary research. *Brain and behavioral sciences*, 19, 677-714.
- Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hawkins, R. (2001). *Second language syntax: A generative introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, MA.
- Hawkins, R., Al-Eid, S., Almahboob, I., Athanasopoulos, P., Chaengchenkit, R., Hu, J., ... Velasco-Zarate, K. (2006). Accounting for English article interpretation by L2 speakers. In Foster-Cohen, S. H., Marta Medved rajnovic and Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović (Eds.), *EUROSLA Yearbook* (Vol.6, pp.7 – 25). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hernández, T. (2011). Re-examining the role of explicit instruction and input flood on the acquisition of Spanish discourse markers. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(2), 159–182.

Hopp, H. (2017). The processing of English wh-questions in adult L2 learners: Effects of L1 transfer and proficiency. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft*, 36(1), 107–134.

Ionin, T., Zubizarreta, M. L., & Philippov, V. (2009). Acquisition of article semantics by child and adult L2-English learners. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12(3), 337–361.

Jabbari, A., & Pourhashemi, M.R. (2011). The Acquisition of English Negation as a Foreign Language by Persian Speakers. *Journal of Literature and Language*, (27), 46-69.

Jara, L.P. (2015). *The Acquisition of the 3rd person singular –s in English: Exploring its use by L2 learners of English in written and oral register*. Bachelor's thesis retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk>

Khorvash, F., & Lotfi, A.R. (2019). Grammatical proficiency and access to Extended Projections in Iranian learners of English as a second language. *Cogent Education*, 6 (1), 1-11.

Krashen, S. (1977). The monitor model for adult second language performance. In M. Burt, H. Dulay, & M. Finocchiaro (Eds.), *Viewpoints on English as a Second Language*. New York: Regents.

Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Lingli, D., & Wannaruk, A. (2010). The effects of explicit and implicit instruction in English refusals. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 33(3), 93–109.

Long, M. (1983). Does second language instruction make a difference? A review on the research. *TESOL Quarterly* 17, 359-82

Long, M. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In de Bot, K., Ginsberg, R., Kramsch, C. (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

McLaughlin, B. (1978). The monitor model: Some methodological considerations. *Language Learning*, 28, 309-332.

McCloskey, J. (1986). "Censorship" versus "uncensored" learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24, 617-634.

McGee, W. (1966). *The problem of verbal inflection in second language acquisition*. Invited talk to the Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics, to appear in the proceedings.

Parviz, M., & Gorjian, B. (2013). The effect of form-focused instruction (FFI) on teaching English grammar to Iranian students at the intermediate level. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 4(4), 450–462.

Plauen, E. O. (2014). *Vater und Sohn - Zwei, die sich lieb haben*: Südverlag GmbH.

Rizzi, L. & Cinque, G. (2016). Functional categories and Syntactic Theory. *The Annual Review of Linguistics*, 2, 139-63.

Roux, C. L. (1996). Linguistic theory and second language acquisition! How not to lose sight of the wood for the trees. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics*, Vol. 30, 43-63

Schulz, B. (2006). *Wh-scope marking in English interlanguage grammars: Transfer and processing effects on the second language acquisition of complex wh-questions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hawaii, HI, USA.

Schulz, B. (2011). Syntactic creativity in second language English: Wh-scope marking in Japanese-English interlanguage. *Second Language Research*, 27(3). 313–41.

Schwartz, B. & Sprouse, R. (1994). Word order and nominative case in non-native language acquisition: a longitudinal study of (L1 Turkish) German interlanguage. In T. Hoekstra

& B. Schwartz (Eds.), *Acquisition studies in generative grammar: Papers in honor of Kenneth Wexler from the 1991 GLOW workshops*, (pp. 317- 368). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Scwwarz, B. & SuruuseuR. 666666L2 cttntt tte states and hhe ‘full uransfer/full access’ model. *Second Language Research*, 12, 40-72.

Spada, N., Jessop, L., Tomita, Y., Suzuki, W., & Valeo, A. (2014). Isolated and integrated form-focused instruction: Effects on different types of L2 knowledge. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(4), 453–473.

Spinner, P. & Juffs, A. (2008). L2 grammatical gender in a complex morphological system: The case of German. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 46, 315–348.

Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*, (pp. 471-483). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tasseva-Kurktchieva, M. (2015). Can production precede comprehension in L2 acquisition? *Second Language Research*, 31(4), 493-522.

White, L. (2003). *Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar*: New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

White, L. (2008). Definiteness effects in the L2 English of Mandarin and Turkish speakers. In Chan. H, Jacob. H, & Kapia E. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development (BUCLD)*, (pp.550-56). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.

Yoshimura, N., & Nakayama, M. (2009). L1 effects in the acquisition of inflectional morphology by Japanese EFL Learners. Retrieved from: http://www2.fcsn.unl.pt/clunl/pl2/pdfs/Noriko_Yoshimura_%26_Mineharu_Nakayama.pdf.