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AN EFFECT OF A DIRECT METHOD ON 5TH GRADE STUDENTS' ACQUISITION OF VERB INFLECTION MORPHEMES (- S, - ES, - ED, - ING)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not a direct method could help 5th graders acquire the target verb inflectional morphemes (- s, - es , - ed , - ing) at Assumption College Ubon Ratchathani (ACU), Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand. The participants were 6 5th grade students who were divided into two groups based on their English proficiency: low language proficiency and high language proficiency. Data were collected from different sources: the scores of the pre – test and post – test, the participants' usage of verb inflectional morphemes (-s, -es, -ed, and – ing) as shown in the Video (VDO) transcript, and the follow-up interview, which was mainly concerned with the students on the direct method. Results obtained from the present study showed that this teaching method yielded a positive outcome related to the participants' acquisition of verb inflectional morphemes. They also proved useful for developing the participants' proficiency in other language skills, such as listening and speaking.

Keywords: The Direct Method; Inflectional Morphemes.

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1. Introduction

The first (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition has been recognized as being a different process. Whereas L1 acquisition focuses on language that children learn from his or her family, also known as a primary language or mother tongue, L2 acquisition involves a process in which children learn after they have acquired the first language (Selinker, 1994). During L1 acquisition, children acquire not only language, but also knowledge of the real world. This is because children receive every hour of naturalistic exposure to language from people and the society around them.

For a second language, the acquisition involves complex cognitive skills, which initially demand learners' attention and controlled processing (McLaughlin, 1987).

Particularly, when a person is beginning to learn a second language, s/he basically needs to concentrate on comprehending and producing basic vocabulary and syntactic structure. After that the whole process becomes automatized, during which a person is able to attend to a more complex and higher-order content. This is to say that acquiring L2 is not an easy task, especially when it is different from L1 just like in the case of Thai (L1) and English (L2). Evidently, the two languages differ to a certain degree. For instance, while Thai carries five tones: rising, falling, low, middle and high, English does not. And these tones determine the meaning of each word in Thai (Karoonyboonyanan, 1999). Upon encountering "mai-mai-mai-mai" (meaning "New wood doesn't burn"); therefore, speakers of non-tonal languages, such as English will find it extremely difficult to understand the sentence (Anyan, 2006).

Contrasting to English, Thai does not have inflectional morphemes to indicate persons, tenses, or numbers. Inflectional morphology is mainly concerned with the attachment of suffixes to the base words to show the grammatical relationship between the inflected words and other words in the construction (Brinton, 2000). For example, the -s ending shows plurality in nouns as found in "many dogs in the field" or make the agreement between the inflected verb and the third person singular subject as shown in "he plays guitar" (Lieber, 2010). The same -s ending also indicates the sentence's present simple tense. In contrast, Thai does not use inflectional morphemes to mark lemmas for grammatical phenomena, such as tense, aspect, number, gender, person, etc.

Based on the researcher's experience as a language teacher, among different inflectional morphemes in English, the verb inflection seems to be one of the most difficult areas for Thai language learners. A study conducted by Rungrojsuwan (2007) interestingly confirmed that English morphology was one of the most difficult subjects for Thai students. Rungrojsuwa's study focused on the English text memorization by Thai students. The experiment was designed to measure L2 memory span, which reflected the capacity of learners' working memory. The results revealed that some learners recognized only the base morphemes, while many ignored the grammatical related elements, such as the -ed as found in "called." Another study by Yordchim (2014) similarly supported this tendency. In this work, the error analysis of eight types of inflectional affixes used by Thai university students was carried out, and the results showed that out of the eight types of inflectional affixes, the students produced the highest number of errors related to the three inflectional morphemes: the third person singular, the past tense, and the verb-in.

At Assumption College Ubon Ratchathani (ACU), the researcher has been teaching in an English Bilingual Program (EBP) for several years. In this program, the direct method is mostly employed by our school's native English-speaking teachers. This teaching method puts an emphasis on the teaching of second/foreign language the same way children learn their first language, and therefore grammar is taught inductively in class (Pratiwi, 2011). Moreover, the method operates on the premise that language could best be taught by being used actively in the classroom. Inductive grammar learning needs to be encouraged, and a chance of using learners' mother-tongue should be minimized (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). More specifically, inductive grammar teaching aims at providing students with a window of opportunity to be immersed in the target language and then

encouraging them to come up with grammatical rules. The students will thus learn to apply and generate language by themselves. It is a more student - centered approach to learning. Inductive activities are also highlighted since they are generally more stimulating and require greater students' participation in acquiring knowledge (Stern, 1983).

To this base, it should be worth exploring if a direct method could help develop young EFL learners' language proficiency in the area of grammar at ACU. In this case, the focus will be placed on the verb inflectional morphemes, one of the language aspects not evident in Thai. This type of research should prove useful to provide insights into a second language acquisition in Thailand where only several studies have been pursued in this area. Important Second Language Acquisition (SLA) hypotheses, such as a critical period, a natural order hypothesis, and a language transfer should also be tested using data collected in this work. More importantly, the obtained findings will serve as a crucial guideline for classroom instructions and material preparations for young learners dealing with grammatical aspects, such as those of the English verb inflectional morphemes.

Research Questions

Does the Direct Method help young learners acquire the selected verb inflectional morphemes?

2. Theoretical Framework

What Is Second Language Acquisition?

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their mother tongue as well as the process of learning that second language. The additional language is basically called a second language (L2) even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired (Troika, 2003). In a similar line, Krashen (1982) refers to SLA as a process in which learners learn and practice language subsequent to their L1. In Krashen's view, the term acquisition is normally used to emphasize the non-conscious nature of a learning process. Understanding how SLA operates also requires knowledge on a relationship between L1 and L2 of an individual. As stated by Houma far, Hayes, &Herbst (2005), the first and second languages are interrelated, and the history of the first language is a participatory factor in the acquisition of the second language and its maintenance.

Concentrating on the case of Thai language learners learning English, one may recognize that there is a variety of differences between the two languages, which are likely to lead to learning difficulty. One of the frequently cited data found in the literature is related to the auxiliary system. In Thai, there is no use of auxiliary, such as is, do, and have to indicate tense. Also, Thai people do not use auxiliaries in questions or negative sentences (Baker, 2002). To form a question, Thais will add a question word at the end of the sentence. And as a result, when Thais want to ask some questions in English, they tend to omit the auxiliary verb. For example, the sentence "You come back when," uttered by Thais, could refer to its correct English question form as found in "When did you come back" (Smith, 1997).

Other interesting structure that reveals differences between Thai and English is a noun system. Unlike English nouns, the morphological marks are not used to indicate plural nouns in Thai. Thai people use numeral classifiers, instead of using a plural marker (Ingkaphirom, 2005). Ingkaphirom

then adds that because morphological markers are not used to indicate plural nouns in Thai, Thai people tend to omit morphological markers such as -s, -es, -ices when they use English. Also important is the fact that in Thai adjectives come after nouns, but in English adjectives come before nouns. For example, in “a beautiful girl,” the adjective beautiful comes before the noun in English, but in Thai it is “a girl beautiful”. Other major differences between Thai and English are linked to verb inflection. While Thai does not have verb inflectional morphemes, such as the third person singular – s, - es or – ed in the regular past tense and – ing in the present present progressive, English has several verb tenses to be applied in twelve tenses (Iwasaki, 2005).

Teaching Methodology and SLA

Understanding how L1 differs from L2 is an integral part of SLA, and to successfully achieve the goal of acquiring a second language, one should also take into consideration the role of teaching methodology. Throughout history, methods for language teaching have changed several times. As Richards & Rodgers (1986) state, those changes in language teaching methods not only reflect and acknowledge the shift of attitudes towards proficiency, thought to be desirable for learners of the language, but they also mirror the alterations in the way the nature of language in general and the nature of language learning are understood during that particular time. There are different language teaching methods, and the classic ones include a grammar – translation, followed by a direct method, an audio-lingual method, and a communicative language teaching.

The grammar-translation method is based largely on students’ native language as the medium of instruction. It is used to explain new items and to enable comparisons to be made between the foreign language and the student’s native language (Richards & Rodger, 1986). Consequently, the conscious knowledge of grammatical rules, the ability to read literature in that language, and to write and translate in and out of the target language are the principles of this method (Stern, 1983). However, toward the mid-nineteenth century, doubts arose in regard to the effectiveness and practicality of this teaching method. This is due partly to several changes and advanced technology, resulting in more opportunities for people to communicate with those from other countries. This helps create a higher demand for oral proficiency, which requires the rethinking of the current language teaching model (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Responding to this demand, a new teaching method was introduced, and it was a complete departure from the grammar-translation method. This is called a direct method, which is considered as one of the natural methods of language teaching.

Its emphasis lies on communicative skills rather than grammar, reading, or writing. According to Howett (2004), a second language can be taught similar to the way a first language is acquired. The use of materials (e.g. pictures and other visuals), direct demonstration (e.g. doing pantomime), and paraphrasing are encouraged in order to explain the materials in L2, and these will help students connect meaning directly with the respective word. Additionally, there is an exclusive use of the target language in the classroom, and translation into the students’ native language is to be avoided (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Grammar is also taught inductively, requiring students to work out the rules and generalizations through given examples. Furthermore, oral communication skills are obtained through a graduated progression in which students and the teacher mainly engage in a question-answer-dialogue (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Related Studies

Since the time it was introduced, a direct method has attracted a lot of interests from scholars around the world. For instance, Hussain (2010) explored the effect of a direct method on the academic achievement in English of high (excellent students) and low achievers (poor students) at a secondary school level. The pre-test and the post-test were used to measure the achievement. The participants were initially classified into two groups: experimental and control groups. While the former group was taught by using the direct method, the latter was taught by the traditional method for six-week periods. The pre-test and the post-test were administered, and their scores were compared afterwards. Interestingly, the obtained results revealed that the direct teaching method was more effective than the traditional one. It was also found that the low achievers in the direct teaching method group showed significant superiority over those learning English through the traditional method. For the high achievers, whether or not they were taught by the direct or traditional method, they retained learned materials at the same rate. But the low achievers who were taught by the direct method retained more materials than the low achievers taught by the traditional method of teaching.

In a similar vein, Handayani (2011) investigated the effectiveness of using a direct method on students' vocabulary learning. The participants were 15 kindergarten students. The instruments used in this work were the pre - test and post- test. During the treatment, the participants were taught by using a direct method. Before the treatment, the participants were required to take the pre – test containing 10 items. After the treatment, they were again required to take the post – test, which contained the same items as found in the pre – test. The study revealed that the average scores of the post- test were higher than the average scores of the pre – test. And this could imply that teaching vocabulary using the direct method was effective in terms of increasing students' ability to learn English vocabulary.

In a slightly different manner, Wahyuni (2012) examined the effectiveness of the use of a direct method in improving students' speaking skill. The participants were divided into two groups: experimental group and control group. The questionnaire was distributed to show students' responses to the use of direct method. Data were collected by using a role play as a speaking test (pre-test and post-test) which aimed at measuring the effectiveness of the use of a direct method. The findings showed that the use of direct method was effective in improving students' speaking skill. There was a significant difference between the post-test and the pre-test means for both experimental and control groups. In addition, the results of a questionnaire revealed that students gave positive responses to the use of direct method in their classroom.

Based on the previously discussed studies, it could be pointed out that a direct method has been tied into different language aspects, such as vocabulary and speaking. Nonetheless, this so-called direct or natural approach for language learning has scarcely been associated with the area of grammar, namely the verb inflectional morphemes for young EFL learners.

3. Research Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 6 5th graders at Assumption College Ubon Ratchathani (ACU), Thailand. They learned English verb inflectional morphemes through the direct method. All of

them were Thai students whose first language were Thai. These students were first divided into two groups based on their English proficiency: high proficiency and low proficiency. This group of participants was chosen mainly because the content of English at this 5th grade level was mainly concerned with morphemes, such as verb inflections: -s, -es, -in, and -ed. There were two teachers in this study: one native English-speaking teacher and the researcher. While the native speaker was the main teacher who had to manage classroom activities and taught the whole subject, using the direct method, the researcher only acted as a facilitator who provided academic guidance during classroom activities.

Teaching Materials and Procedures

The teaching materials used in this study included the lesson plan, the school's English textbook (My World of English) and other supplementary materials, such as worksheets and handouts whose contents were parallel to the students' main textbook. These extra materials were designed by the researcher and the English native speaking teacher based on the course outline of the school. According to the lesson plan, the students studied the present progressive (- ing) in the first week, then followed by the present simple third person singular and the past tense in the following weeks as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Inflectional morphemes in English

Morphemes	Grammatical Functions	Examples
Present participle	Marks for present participle	walking, jumping, swinging
Present simple 3rd person singular	Marks to agree with singular third person (e.g. he, she, it), in the present tense	runs, waits, pushes
Past tense	Marks for past action	Dragged, backed, baited

In the classroom, the teacher normally spent the first 15 – 20 minutes to clearly demonstrate the use of each morpheme in context as well as the structure of each of them. The participants were then asked to answer a few questions, which were related to the morphemes they previously learned or were learning. When the students made mistakes, the teacher would help correct them immediately. During class, the participants also had to complete a variety of exercises, and at the end of the lesson the teacher would guide them to the correct answers on the board.

Pre-Test and Post-Test

In this study, the pre- and post-tests contained 20 items each with the aim of measuring the participants' ability to use the target verb morphemes in context correctly and appropriately. Before the experiment, students in each group were required to take the pre – test, which two test formats: multiple choice and gap-filling. The 10 multiple choice tests was given to the students before the 10 gap-filling test. After the teaching and learning, students were again requested to take the post-test. The contents of the pre-test and post-test were slightly different. However, the level of difficulty and format were kept identical: the multiple – choice test, followed by the gap filling one.

Data Collection

This research took place in the first semester of the academic year 2016. To collect data, the researcher made a VDO recording of students in both low language proficiency and high language proficiency groups while they were learning English on a day-to-day basis. Later, the researcher

transcribed their interactions with teacher and peers to see if there could be any development of the usage of verb inflectional morphemes (-s, -es, -ed, -in) over the period of the study time frame. The participants were taught by using the direct method for 20 hours (5 hours/a week) over the 4-week periods without their mother tongue involved in the classroom. Before and after the treatment, as already mentioned, students in each group were requested to take the pre – test and the post-test. Besides the scores of both tests, data were also compiled from the occurrence of the participants’ usage of inflectional morphemes in the VDO transcript when they had a conversation with their teachers and friends. Additionally, data were drawn from an informal interview regarding the use of a direct method in teaching the three functional morphemes of four forms. And the interview was about the students’ general opinion on the direct method.

Data Analysis

The scores of the pre – and post – test was analyzed and converted into percentage and compared in order to reveal if they were different. Moreover, the use of each inflectional morpheme over the 4-week period as evidence in the transcript was taken into account to show any language development of the four morphemes over time. The development of each morpheme was compared and contrasted to each other. For the informal interview, a descriptive analysis was applied to show any emerging tendency concerning the students’ opinions on using the direct method in teaching the verb inflectional morphemes.

4. Results

Table 2: below will show the pre- and post-test scores of the participants with low language proficiency: The score, percentage, and mean of the pre – test and post-test of the low language proficiency group

Student’s No.	Test (20 items)		Percentage		Mean	
	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test
L1	6	10	30%	50%	4.67	9.33
L2	6	8	30%	40%		
L3	2	10	10%	50%		

As shown above, every participant failed in the pre-test, each of which received the scores lower than 50%. For example, two out of three students could only complete 30% of the test correctly. Combining all scores of the participants in the pre-test also results in a low mean score at the level of 4.67. On the contrary, two of the participants passed the post-test. Their scores reached 50% of the test while only one still failed. Focusing on the post-test’s mean, the students overall showed a gain, almost doubling their mean from pretest to posttest. This could be an indication that the use of direct method could possibly help facilitate language acquisition.

In the next section, the obtained results concerning the participants’ performance in the high language proficiency group will be reported:

Table 3: The score, percentage, and mean of the pre –test and post - test of the high language proficiency group

Student’s No.	Test (20 items)		Percentage		Mean	
	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test	Pre-test	Post test
H1	13	15	65%	75%	13.33	17.33
H2	12	18	60%	90%		
H3	15	18	75%	90%		

Generally speaking, Table 3 shows that every student in the high language proficiency group passed the pre-test, each of which received the score higher than 50%. For example, Student H2 got 60% out of the full score, the lowest one in this group, whereas the highest score was 75%. From all the pre – test scores combined, the mean was at the level of 13.33, which was much higher than the mean of the low language proficiency group. In contrast, the post - test shows that each student received higher scores when compared to their pre – test ones. For example, Student H2 could perform 30% better. Overall, the mean score of the post-test of the high-language proficiency group was 17.33, which was clearly better than the post-test means of the firstly reported group. Indeed, it should be worth mentioning here that the direct method yielded a positive outcome on students’ learning process, encouraging them to produce more correct forms of the target English verb inflectional morphemes.

To provide a clearer picture of the effect of a direct method on students’ morpheme acquisition, the VDO transcripts were analyzed, which led to the information in Table 4 and 5 below, which demonstrate the time period each student in both groups had spent on acquiring each verb inflectional morpheme:

Table 4: The time period to acquire a correct form of each morpheme (Low language proficiency)

Verb inflectional morphemes	Students’ Number	The acquiring period
Present progressive (- ing)	L1	2 days
	L2	3 days
	L3	2 days
Present simple tense third person singular (- s, - es)	L1	3 days
	L2	4 days
	L3	3 days
Past tense (- ed)	L1	4 days
	L2	4 days
	L3	4 days

Table 5: The time period to acquire a correct form of each morpheme (High language proficiency)

Verb inflectional morphemes	Students’ Number	The acquiring period
1. Present progressive (- ing)	H1	1 day
	H2	1 day

	H3	1 day
2.Present simple tense third person singular (- s, - es)	H1	2 days
	H2	2 days
	H3	2 days
3.Past tense (- ed)	H1	3 days
	H2	3 days
	H3	3 days

Based on the above tables, it was found that students in the low language proficiency group took longer time to produce a correct form of each morpheme when compared to the high language proficiency group. For instance, before reaching the 3rd period of the week (Day 3), Students L2 produced different ill-forms of the-ing, including ‘My friend are doing homework.*, the teacher speaking to my friends.* or Koi is sing a song.*’ Among the three morphemes of four forms under investigation, the – ed ending, which is associated with the past tense appeared to be the most difficult one to acquire mainly because it took students longer time in both groups to produce this morpheme correctly.

After the experiment, the students in both groups were asked to give general opinions on the direct method that they had been immersed into for a month. It was found that the majority of students felt good about the direct method. They provided the reasons that this teaching technique helped improve both of their listening and speaking skills, especially the former one. Every student also stated that the direct method really helped improve their ability in using the verb inflectional morphemes. They further supported their claims by acknowledging that after they had been taught using this method, they tended to make less mistakes when they spoke or wrote a sentence in English. Additionally, they said that the direct method not only improved their ability in using the verb inflectional morphemes, but it also improved their listening, writing, and vocabulary. Finally, the follow up interview also suggested that the (– ed) verb inflectional morpheme was the most difficult to acquire, while the (– ing) verb ending was the least difficult one. For the present simple third person singular (- s and – es), students acknowledged that it was not too easy or too difficult for them to acquire.

5. Discussion

As reported in the previous section, the scores of the post – test of all students in both low and high language proficiency groups were higher than the pre – test scores. This could be a good indication that the students had developed their language ability in using the verb inflectional morphemes under investigation over a period of one month through the direct method. This tendency could be explained by several reasons. Firstly, the increased scores may have been resulted from the high amount of language input used by the native English-speaking teacher in class. More particularly, the teacher had employed only English as the medium of instructions without any help from the students’ mother tongue, Thai. By doing so, the students had much more opportunities to listen to what the teacher had said, which helped them internalize the target language more naturally and easily.

Once this language input is comprehensible enough, the learners will be able to use their comprehensible input to build up their own speech. As Krashen (1981) points out, language

acquisition can take place in an environment where the learners have direct and intensive exposure to language input. Moreover, by being encouraged not to use their mother tongue during the lessons, students had been provided with more opportunities for controlled processing of English when interacting with their teachers and friends (McLaughlin, 1987). All of these factors would possibly be responsible for the students' higher scores in the post - test. As also suggested by Mendelson (1994), the direct method truly helps language learners focus on their listening skills to achieve other skills later on. The tendency related to students' better scores in the post – test also helps support the idea that the more students are immersed into the target language, the better opportunity they will have to acquire the target language (Willings, 2005).

Based on the conversion analysis, when the students were initially asked questions, they made some mistakes. But whenever they made mistakes, the teacher would help correct them immediately. This immediate feedback seems to provide students with chances to see their mistakes, and they could fix them right away. On the 2nd day, when students were asked the same question again, they made less mistakes. They slowly developed their language ability by showing a more correct form of each inflectional morpheme over the course of 2 – 4 days, depending on the type of it. According to the aforementioned phenomena, we can see that the students used the verb inflectional morphemes (- s, - es, - ing and – ed) every day through various question – answer sessions. And this is emphasized as one of the important elements in the direct method: the question – answer exercises in conjunction with the teacher and students' self – correction and conversation practice (Doggett, 1993).

As discussed earlier, students felt more confidence in using the target language because they could see immediate feedback from the teacher and friends whenever they made mistakes. As Williams (2005) advocates, feedback, either from friends or teachers, can help stimulate explicit knowledge of students. He then explains that explicit knowledge is the knowledge of language rules that students can activate and provide reasons that certain rules should be applied. In addition, students could see the way to speak, to answer, and to build the sentences from their fellow friends who are more proficient in the classroom. Feedback can increase students' attention on what they are speaking, and this attention would basically lead to improvement (Williams, 2005).

According to the interview with the subjects in both groups, it was clear that they had positive views toward the direct method, which helped them acquire the verb inflectional morphemes more easily. At the very beginning of the project, students showed their difficulties in understanding some words and sentences. Soon after, however, they gradually liked the method, giving the reasons that it helped improve their listening and speaking skills because they had to communicate in English all the time. They further explained that the Direct Method helped them know more of new vocabulary because when they did not understand some words, the teacher would provide some clues or synonyms, which helped them figure out what the teacher meant by themselves. By doing so, they got to learn new vocabulary along with the vocabulary they had already known.

Based on the students' general views toward the difficulty level of these four forms of the verb inflectional morphemes (- s, - es, – ed, and – ing), most students agreed that the - ed was the most difficult morpheme to acquire, and all of them agreed that the – ing was the easiest one. According to the Natural Order Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1987), which focuses on the acquisition of grammatical structure occurring in a predictable sequence, second or foreign language learners

seem to follow the same predictable order. For instance, learners of English as a second language generally acquire the grammatical structure of yes-no questions before the grammatical structure of why- questions. And in the morpheme case, native speakers of English will show a tendency of acquiring the progressive marker – ing first, followed by the third person singular. Therefore, it may be concluded that students' opinions are in the line with the premise of the Natural Order Hypothesis.

6. Conclusion

The direct method could help students acquire the verb inflectional morphemes under investigation. It not only improves their ability in using these morphemes, but also helps develop their proficiency in some other important language skills, such as listening and speaking. And every mean of data collection in the current work appears to confirm this tendency: the students' scores of the pre – test and post – test, the conversation analysis, and the interview. The findings also well highlight the fact that the direct method could probably work well with not only the high language proficiency students, but also with the students who had low English proficiency.

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