Clustered in the Acquisition of English by Thai Students

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Abstract

This paper presents two desirable aspects of theoretically oriented SLA studies. It uses data from Thai students of English to test a clustering model of a second language acquisition based on the Minimalist framework. Clustering is defined in this study as the concurrent development of structures related by a single syntactic operation. The study attempts to refine the assessment of clustering by separating knowledge of grammatical structures from relative difficulty and uses correlations to measure clustering. Correlations were argued to be adequate since structures may be related even if one structure is more difficult than another.

Adopting the Minimalist framework (Chomsky 1995: chapter 3), clustering was predicted to occur in regular object and Exceptional Case Marking (ECM) constructions, both of which involve accusative Case checking, and in Progressive and Perfective Negatives where the same overt raising of the aspectual auxiliaries be and have to higher functional heads is involved. Clustering was also predicted in preverbal adverbs and do-support in negative clauses, assuming their association with English weak Agr, based on the Economy of Derivation framework (Chomsky 1995: chapter 2).

Sixty-nine Thai students who were learning English in grades five to twelve in Bangkok, Thailand were tested on the same Grammaticality Judgment and Elicited Production tasks. Results provided mixed support for the predictions; Economy of Derivation predictions fared poorly. Theoretically, this study suggests that clustering occurs when three conditions hold, namely, types of morphological features, checking domains, and interface levels. Methodologically, the study provides a refinement in L2 research, which includes distinguishing knowledge from difficulty and the need for multiple tasks to closely evaluate L2 learners' competence.