EFL learners' use of question constructions over time: Patterns and proficiency effects

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ABSTRACT

A few studies have examined whether second language (L2) learners' lexico-syntactic development followed the predicted path of construction development from relying on formulaic patterns to gradually developing more abstract exemplars, but the results have been inconclusive. This study reports the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted to track the development of English question constructions in EFL learners (N = 7) from lower-, mid-, and higher-proficiency levels. The purpose of the study was to examine if the patterns of the *(wh-) aux-do* construction used by participants at different proficiency levels became more productive over time. Participants' questions produced over a period of 32 weeks were analyzed using *AntConc* to identify specific instances of the *(wh-) aux-do* construction for each participant and each data collection session. The results indicated that while all participants' relied on several frequent patterns when asking questions, learners at the three proficiency levels were at different stages of pattern analysis.

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1. Introduction

With the recent introduction of a dynamic systems theory to L2 acquisition research in an attempt to offer a more realistic view of how L2 development unfolds and what represents a learner's linguistic system (i.e., interlanguage) at a certain point in time, a new definition of second language development has been proposed. Specifically, De Bot and Larsen-Freeman (2011) defined L2 development as an ongoing process that does not include any points "at which it can be said that a language is completely acquired" (p. 6) and both the growth and the decline in linguistic skills have to be considered as equally relevant outcomes. What remains consistent is that learners continue using the language and, by doing so, they develop their interlanguage, regardless of whether their accuracy rates go up or down. This recognition of a dynamic nature of language learning underscored the need for a new approach to studying and measuring development and, thus, recently researchers have become more interested in examining learners' usage patterns and how they change over time.

The usage criterion was particularly useful for the purposes of the present study, because it investigated EFL learners' use of question patterns and their development over time. Although learners had received formal instruction about the target structure several years prior to the beginning of the study, none of them showed evidence of the mastery of English question structures by the time the study began. In order to contextualize the present study and point out its theoretical and

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methodological contributions to the field, the following sections provide an overview of earlier research on formulaic language in L2 morpho-syntactic development as well as more current investigations of L2 construction development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Earlier research on the use of formulaic language by L2 learners

During the 1970s, a number of seminal case studies exploring L2 learners' morpho-syntactic development were conducted with the goal of establishing the order in which L2 learners acquire the rules underlying English questions (Adams, 1978; Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky, & Schumann, 1975; Clark, 1974; Hakuta, 1974; Hanania & Gradman, 1977; Huang & Hatch, 1978). As the byproduct of this formal linguistic analysis, researchers were able to establish that learner output included chunks of language which seemed to play an important – facilitative – role in participants' language production. These earlier studies have determined that, on the one hand, learners produced completely fixed phrases, often referred to as *formulas* or *routines*, which were not analyzed (i.e., parsed) in terms of their constituents and were used as wholes (e.g., *What's that? What doing*?). On the other hand, learners were found to be producing *patterns*, also referred to as *semi-formulaic patterns*, that were only partially unanalyzed (e.g., *That's X. Do you want X?*). Patterns consisted of two parts: a *pivot* and an *open slot*. While the pivot had formula-like characteristics and was often beyond the level of learners' linguistic maturity, the open slot (marked as *X* in the example above) was filled with the material that was at level and exhibited learners' creative experiences with the language.

Although a number of earlier studies have reported intriguing findings about learners' use of formulas and patterns, the topic in general received very little attention for almost two decades following the initial research conducted in the mid-to-late 1970s.

2.2. Formulaic language in L2 construction development

In more recent investigations on the role of formulaic language in L2 acquisition, researchers explored if and how language chunks feed into the process of language development by focusing specifically on learners' usage patterns of linguistic structures and their change over time. This new wave of L2 studies has been motivated by the work conducted in L1 acquisition by Tomasello and his colleagues who argued that L1 learners' grammatical development unfolded in a piecemeal manner from small chunks of language initially identified in the input and used to accomplish a specific communicative purpose (Kidd, Lieven, & Tomasello, 2010; Lieven, Behrens, Speares, & Tomasello, 2003; Theakston, Lieven, Pine, & Rowland, 2001; Tomasello, 1992). Researchers examining L1 acquisition viewed these chunks of language as form-meaning mappings, also referred to as *constructions*, which are stored by a language learner as a network of all previously experienced linguistic units and then cataloged by the overlap in either their form or meaning.

Similarly, as L2 learners gain more experience with the target language and develop the ability to recognize the overlapping content and identify how new information fits in the familiar string, their constructions become increasingly more complex from being entirely lexically-specific and invariant to becoming partially schematic and including open slots in which various linguistic material can be inserted. At a certain point, a repeated encounter and use of open-slot patterns promote the formation of more abstract generalizations leading to full schematicity for certain constructions, as well as establishing connections among various constructions and contributing to the creation of lexical and phrasal categories (for more L1 and L2 research on construction development, see Bannard & Lieven, 2012; Goldberg & Casenhiser, 2008; Langacker, 2008; Lieven & Tomasello, 2008; Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011).

In L2 acquisition, Myles and her colleagues (Myles, 2004; Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998; Myles, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1999) have become the pioneers in investigating the emergence of L2 constructions from formulaic chunks. The researchers tracked the occurrence of three common verb chunks – *j'aime, j'adore,* and *j'habite* – and various interrogative chunks in participants' data and concluded that learners' use of the morphosyntactic properties (e.g., inflected verb forms, clitics, and *wh*-question structures) was evident only within frequent chunks which initially were well beyond learners' grammatical competence. As learners' morphosyntax developed, they were able to add new chunks to their repertoire that cohabited with very simple constructions for extended periods of time. Myles (2004) characterized the development of early grammars as the process driven by chunks which "do not become discarded; they remain grammatically advanced until the grammar catches up, and it is this process of resolving the tension between these grammatically advanced chunks and the current grammar which drives the learning process forward" (p. 152).

In another longitudinal study of 16 adult L2 learners Bardovi-Harlig (2002) analyzed the emergence of future expressions with *will* and *going to* in participants' oral and written production. Overall, only five of the 16 learners followed the expected pattern for the *going to* expression, with the majority of learners showing individual variation in the use of formulaic chunks. The analyses also revealed that participants were quick to start using *will* productively in various future expressions, suggesting that either their initially produced exemplars of the *will* construction were far from being formulaic or the formulaic stage was so short that it was not detected in the corpus. Furthermore, Hall (2010) investigated oral production of three adult beginner L2 learners over a period of nine weeks. Similar to Bardovi-Harlig (2002), Hall reported that formulaic chunks were minimally present in learner data and, although there were formulas and constructions of the same structural type, it was impossible to establish a clear developmental relationship between them.