Which is Learnt First Regular or Irregular Simple Past Forms? A Quantitative Study in the Context of the Undergraduate Arab Learners of English (ALEs) under Two Different Teaching Methods

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Author's contribution

"The only author performed the whole research work. Author Anwar Mourssi wrote the first draft of the paper. He also read and approved the final manuscript.

Research Article

ABSTRACT

Aims: To investigate which simple past forms are learnt first, regular or irregular forms, under two different methods of teaching writing, in the context of foreign language learning.
Study Design: Quantitative analysis for all the simple past forms produced by the participants in three chronological written texts collected in the experiment.
Place and Duration of Study: Sample of Male Arab Learners of English studying in a high school in the Sultanate of Oman 2010.
Methodology: 74 Arab Learners of English forming two groups, 34 represents the Experimental Group following the Innovated Writing Process approach, and 34 represents the Control Group following Traditional Product Writing approach.
Results: Arab Learners of English in the Experimental Group produced 670 (40.31%) regular simple past forms in the three chronological written texts and 992 (59.69%) irregular simple past forms. This is compared with participants in the Control Group who produces 588 (37.88%) regular simple past forms and 964 (62.12%) irregular simple past forms.

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Conclusion: Arab Learners of English learn the irregular simple past forms before the regular simple past forms in two different teaching methods of writing.

Keywords: Regular past; irregular past; SLA; simple past.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Experimental Group (the first writing after the first two weeks following the IWP).

AM   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Experimental Group (the second writing after the first two months following the IWP).

AF   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Experimental Group (the third and the last writing at the end of the experiment after spending four months following the WP).

BB   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Control Group (the first writing after the first two weeks).

BM   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Control Group (the second writing after the first two months).

BF   : Tracing the target-like and non-target-like simple past forms used by the samples of the study in the Control Group (the third and the last writing at the end of the experiment after spending four months).

RTL   : Regular target-like simple past form
RNTL : Regular non-target-like simple past form
IRTL   : Irregular target-like simple past form
IRNTL : Irregular non-target-like simple past form

1. INTRODUCTION AND RELATED LITERATURE

The aim of the study is to identify which simple past verbs is acquired first, regular or irregular simple past forms in the context of Arab Learners of English ALEs, under two different teaching methods. Having into consideration the grammar textbooks and teachers of EFL/ESL start teaching the regular forms of the simple past before the irregular simple past forms. In addition, the samples of the study are Male Arab Learners of English and had been learning English as a foreign language for eight years attending four to five sessions per week on average. It was expected that they would have acquired regular simple past forms before irregular simple past forms, but as first language learners, acquiring irregular past forms comes before acquiring regular past forms.

The researcher thinks that the Words and Rules model may shed light on the interlanguage data to do with simple past tense forms. That leads the researcher to discuss and evaluate the Words and Rules model and illustrate its implementations in Herschensohn's study in which he has used the Words and Rules model in his discussion, aiming at investigating which form was acquired in the context of Arab Learners of English as foreign language learners. In the following, the model will be discussed.

1.2 The Words and Rules Model

English has two types of verbs: regular and irregular. Regular verbs end with *–ed.* So, they are predictable such as: *walk-walked, look-looked, play-played* and so on. The list of regular verbs is open-ended. New ones are being added to the language all the time. When new words entered the language such as *fax, spam* and *mosh*, the past tense forms do not need to be introduced separately: it is deduced that they are *faxed, spammed* and *moshed,* which means we tend to add *–ed* to any new verbs [1]. It is noticed that children as first language learners not only create new words but venture into putting new verbs in the past tense using *–ed.* For instance*: smunched, speeched, eat lunched* and *cut-upped egg.* In addition, all children make errors in their speech such as: **I buoght a fire dog for grillion dollars.* And, **I stealed some of the people out of the boat.* This overgeneralization of the *–ed* rule is reflected in the samples of simple past tense forms from the Arabic data in the present study such as; **catched,*thinked, *goed,* and **finded.* The second type of verbs in English language is the irregular forms which do not have the *–ed* ending, for example: *hold-held.* In contrast to the regular verbs which are orderly and predictable, irregular verbs are chaotic and idiosyncratic. The irregular verbs in English do not have a definite rule like regular verbs. The past tense of *sink* is *sank* and the past tense of *sing* is *sang*. But the past tense of *cling* is not **clang*, but *clung,* the past tense of *sting* is not **stang,* but *stung*. The past tense of *bring* is neither **brang* nor **brung*, but *brought*. Also, irregular verbs form a closed list. The number of irregular verbs in English is only about 150-180, and there have been no recent additions [1].

1.2.1 Evaluating the words-and- rules theory

According to the Words-and-Rules theory, regular forms are generated by rules while irregular forms are retrieved from memory. According to the way that memory works, the more often you hear something the better you remember it. Therefore, uncommon words have weak memory entries and should be harder to retrieve [1]. The statistics of the English language provides a good resource to look at how often both the regular and irregular verbs are used.

Pinker [1] illustrated the statistics of using regular and irregular verbs in a text of a million words. Here is a Top Ten list, the ten most common verbs in English:

Verb	Number of occurrences in a million words of text
1.*be*	*39,175*
2.*have*	*12,458*
3.*do*	*4,367*
4.*say*	*2,765*
5.*make*	*2,312*
6.*go*	*1,844*
7.*take*	*1,575*
8.*come*	*1,561*
9.*see*	*1,513*
10.*get*	*1,486*

Pinker [1]

The top ten verbs are all irregular. The top four are also irregular in both past and present tenses, at least in terms of pronunciation in the case of the last two: be-is/are, have-has, do-

does, and say-says. And the first and sixth spots contain verbs whose past tense forms are different words altogether: be-was/were and go-went [1].

Here are some of the least common verbs in English:

Verb	Number of occurrences in a million words of text
Abate	*1*
Abbreviate	*1*
Abhor	*1*
Ablate	*1*
Abridge	*1*
Abrogate	*1*
Acclimatise	*1*

Pinker [1]

As we can see, all ten verbs mentioned are regular. A conclusion could be drawn which is that irregular verbs are the most common verbs and vice versa. The reason is that irregular forms have to be memorized repeatedly to survive in a language and the most commonly heard forms are the easiest to memorize. In the following, implementing the Words and Rules model in Herschensohn's Study will be presented.

1.2.2 Implementing the words and rules model in Herschensohn's study

It was indicated that the mastery of verbal inflection is significant in second language acquisition for there is a possible indication of morphological, syntactic and semantic competencies [2]. In the grammars of native speakers, researchers have distinguished two kinds of morphological knowledge, namely: rule-governed and rote-learned (Pinker, 1999). As Herschensohn [2] explained, in the domain of verb inflection, regular alternations like *play-played-played, work-worked–worked* illustrate rule-governed morphology, while alternations like *see-saw-seen, go-went-gone* illustrate rote-learned forms. Commenting on the rule and rote model, Herschensohn [2] added, the rule-governed operation is open-ended – applying to the new verbs that enter the language; and onto processing, it is also not subject to frequency effects. By contrast, rote-learned forms are a closed class and are subject to frequency effects in processing: Herschensohn [2] argued that the more frequent verbs are processed faster than rarer forms and hence made a conclusion that in such evidence as this, the rule-governed and rote-learned forms are thus stored differently in the mental grammar. Beck [3] also made a similar observations positing that a "dual storage" of morphological forms exists in the mental grammars of L2 speakers.

It was discussed the relative importance of naturalistic input versus instructional input in L2 acquisition. Klein [4] in Herschensohn [2] categorised second language acquisition as either spontaneous or guided. The term "spontaneous learning" is used to denote the acquisition of a second language in everyday communication that occurs in a natural fashion and free from systematic guidance. On the contrary, guided acquisition refers to the domestication of a natural process that differs from spontaneous by its structured presentation of materials, and contrived opportunities for practice and systematic intervention. It was argued that, while naturalistic input is important to second language acquisition, it does not guarantee mastery of L2. However, instructional support and conscious effort on the part of the L2 learner do not assure L2 acquisition either [2]. It was contended that learners who receive naturalistic input acquire unconscious knowledge exclusively from primary linguistic data [5,6]. Schwartz

[5] provided convincing arguments supporting why primary linguistic data are necessary for the growth of the system of linguistic knowledge.

On the other hand, there are studies [7] that support the importance of guidance for second language acquisition. Ellis [7] cited evidence concerning structured input in second language acquisition, suggesting that instructed learners outperform naturalistic ones particularly with the use of instructional aids useful in learning linguistic rules and formula.

Some empirical studies in areas ranging from morphology to syntax postulated that form-focused instruction can play a remarkable role in improving post-instruction awareness of morphology and syntax in second language. For example, Scott [8,9] made a comparison between implicit and explicit grammar teaching, and concluded that explicit teaching results in improved recall and production on tests targeted to the grammar points in question. Moreover, White [10,11] and Arteaga and Herschensohn [12] measured the efficacy of instruction in cognate recognition and posited that teaching particular points can result in statistically measurable improvements on a short term basis.

In discussing the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge, Fotos and Nassaji [13] noted that some researchers [14,15,5] argued that there is no relationship between the two forms of explicit and implicit knowledge. However, many SLA researchers now believe that there is a relationship that exists between them, particularly through the performance of activities that promote the learners' attention to target forms while processing input [16,17,18,19,20,21,22] or, through repeated practice and increased exposure (for example, [23,24,25] or, through making the learning process more efficient by helping learners attend to features in the input that they would not otherwise notice [26,27,21].

In the same vein, Herschensohn [2] mentioned that most form-focused studies have generally agreed that instruction is not detrimental to second language acquisition, for it enhances instead the process of guiding the learner towards certain rule-governed behaviours of the target language. Herschensohn [2] further added, second language learners do not assimilate all the grammatical structures they have been taught about or lose certain knowledge over time. Findings by [28] provided evidence that instruction does not ensure learning and it is difficult to pinpoint where, how and when a given piece of grammatical knowledge actually becomes integrated into the interlanguage grammar. In what follows, an evaluation of Herschensohn's study will be presented.

1.2.3 Evaluation of Herschensohn's study

The nature of the Interlanguage morphology of two subjects was discussed in [2]'s study: one from an instructional context and the other from a natural learning perspective. With a set of data collected from two subjects – Emma and Chloe, Herschensohn [2] identified the characteristics of their errors by evaluating the appropriateness of a rote and rule morphology model after addressing the question of spontaneous versus instructed input.

In that study, Emma learnt French in a formal environment. Her exposure to French input was one hour per day in the classroom with additional time permitted for studying through text, workbook, audio and video tapes. She did not receive primary linguistic data (PLD) from the teacher supervising her, who was not a native speaker. In contrast, Chloe was in a nearly total francophone environment. She lived with a French family. In addition, she took a normal academic programme in a French lycée. She was obliged to use French in written

assignments. She reported receiving correction from teachers, peers and family both in the academic setting and in social conversation outside the school.

It was pointed out that the most significant difference between Emma's and Chloe's exposure to French language during the six-month period was in the realm of naturalistic input: Chloe was exposed to large amounts of naturalistic French whereas Emma received limited input in a classroom setting. Chloe received five hours a week of English and 107 hours of French whereas Emma was exposed to five hours a week of French and 107 hours of English, whereas. [2]'s findings show that both subjects achieved an increase of tokens for the target-like usage. Chloe had a slightly higher marking for target-like usage than Emma. In the final interview, Chloe used 91 tokens versus 85 for Emma. The number of lexically distinct verbs has also increased. Emma's verbal vocabulary is higher at 38 than Chloe's with 32.

It was also examined L2 verb inflection to determine how morphological knowledge is represented in the L2 grammar and how such knowledge is developed. Herschensohn's study reveals that the exact nature of morphological storage for the interlanguage grammars of Emma and Chloe is not verifiable. But it is possible to infer that the learners store morphological information both as individual items and as rule-governed patterns. Herschensohn [2] also demonstrated that the Words and Rules model provides a reasonable account of the L2 morphology as it is presented in her corpus. The ability of Chloe and Emma to produce accurate verbal inflection is an indication that the grammatical knowledge of morphological rules and inflectional forms is on-line, ready for actual discourse. Herschensohn [2] concluded that both subjects have interlanguage grammars with morphological knowledge which resembles that of the native speaker.

The outcomes of Herschensohn's study do not show any significant differences between the two different contexts namely instructional input versus naturalistic input. It appears that both subjects achieved an increase in morphological competence despite the fact that the level of inflectional accuracy of Emma is 89% against 98% for Chloe. The only difference is Chloe's nearly error free performance in verb inflection which might be attributed to her six-month exposure to spontaneous input. Herschensohn posits that Chloe's improvement must be attributed to her exposure to primary data and her ability to use PLD to construct her L2 morphology although the focus of her formal instruction was on literature, biology and maths not French grammar. On the other hand, Emma is exposed to L2 data only as formal instruction, yet she manages to learn a substantial amount of regular and irregular morphology and she was able to use it in real discourse. In what follows, I will discuss the Foreign Language Learners and the acquisition of regular and irregular simple past forms.

1.3 Foreign Language Learners and using Regular and Irregular Simple Past Forms

Previous works on the acquisition of the simple past tense in English as an L1 have noted that irregular simple past forms are acquired before regular simple past forms. Brown [29] presented the following order of language acquisition:

- Present progressive –*ing* (Mommy runn*ing*)
- Plural –*s* (Two book*s*)
- *Irregular past forms (Dady went)*
- Possessive *'s* (Daddy *'s* hat)

- Copula (Annie *is* happy)
- Articles *the* and *a*
- ***Regular past –ed (She walked)***
- Third person singular simple present –*s* (She run*s*)
- Auxiliary *be* (He *is* coming)

It was confirmed that children learning English as a first language mastered the morphemes at different ages, but the order of their acquisition was very similar. In other words, irregular simple past forms are acquired before the regular simple past forms [30]. Bardovi-Harlig [31] concluded that irregular morphology precedes regular morphology in learning English as L2 as well. In the current study, I will investigate the Words and Rules model using all the written texts collected from all the subjects in both the Experimental Group and the Control group to investigate whether Arab learners of English follow the same sequence However, their L1 is different from L2.

In discussing the errors of second language learners acquiring the simple past, Ramadani [32] discovered that the most common error students make in using simple past tense is with the structure of question sentences in the simple past tense where the use of regular or irregular verbs generate a different meaning. He also noted that remembering the irregular past tense form is another problem. In the same vein, Yap and Alsagoff [33] investigated errors in past tense marking in Singapore secondary school students' composition. They claimed that a learner will acquire an appropriately morphological tense marking for telic verbs (i.e. achievements and accomplishments) before atelic verbs (i.e. states and actives). They mention that the Aspect Hypothesis suggests that the distribution of tense errors can be predicted on the basis of telicity. In their study, they formulate and test the hypothesis that the aspectual classes of verbs can explain patterns of errors in past tense marking. Their data collection consists of the middle of year examination composition scripts from a secondary school to ensure that the outputs from the subjects are not influenced by teachers or peers. Compared with the current study, the output was as a result of the teacher's input in both groups. Findings from their study reveal that the lexical semantic of verbs can account for tense marking errors.

In the Swedish Learners of English context, Andersson [34] investigated what types of errors the students make regarding time and tense and, secondly, compares the types of errors made with the results found from 1995 in *To Err Is Human* [35]. The result shows that most errors occurred in the present tense. As many as 117 errors were found in the present tense whereas 80 errors were found in the past tense, and 66 errors were found in the future tense. The errors made in the past tense are categorized into four groups, namely, the simple past, the present perfect, the past perfect, and the past passive. She found that out of the 80 errors found in the past tense, 50 per cent occurred with the simple past tense. She concludes that the school must start to teach grammar explicitly in order to give the students the chance to use the language in a target-like way in communication. In the following lines, methods will be presented.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section discusses the teaching methods used in the experiment, the subjects of the study, the research question and the methods used in the analysis of the written texts.

2.1 Teaching Methods Used in the Experiment

In the experiment, two types of teaching methods were followed. The first type is the Traditional Product Writing (TPW) implemented with the Control Group, and the second type is the Innovated Writing Process (IWP) implemented with the Experimental Group. Type two (IWP), is presented in detail in [36]. In the following part, I will shed light on the teaching methods.

2.1.1 Describing the Traditional Product Writing (TPW)

The TPW is a method of teaching writing, which emphases the students' finished written product. It is termed a product-oriented approach which focuses on what to write and the rules for writing; the teacher is the only one who evaluates the final product. My MA study Mourssi [37] indicated that product writing is a teacher-centered method, in which there is no role/space for the students to interact, discuss, negotiate, or get concrete feedback. Although some students can imitate certain styles of writing, the majority of the students produce weak written pieces which are full of non-target-like forms. The teacher evaluation is provided by putting a tick or writing "good, very good, well done or bad" and there is no space for interaction or enough feedback.

The product approach has been evaluated by a number of applied linguists who have shown the weaknesses of the product approach in language acquisition: Pincas [38] comments that in the product approach, the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns, these patterns are learnt by imitation; Eschholz [39] mentions that the product approach merely results in mindless copies of particular organizational plan or style; Prodromou [40] criticizes that the product approach for devaluing "the learners' potential" both linguistic and personal; Jordan [41] comments that the product approach has no practical applications; Nunan [42] similarly mentions that the product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms models supplied by the teacher. I think that the product approach does not teach how to write independently or teach learners how to think, and most of the students feel bored during the writing task.

2.1.2 Describing the Innovated Writing Process (IWP)

Mourssi [36] declared that the IWP and the CGLTA were designed to be a bridge to apply recent SLA and applied linguistic theories in pedagogical settings; the aim was for the IWP to create a relationship between Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and pedagogical settings in the classroom, while the CGLTA aimed to draw on error/contrastive analyses with metalinguistic feedback within a communicative framework.

Mourssi [43,36] thought that there should be a method which could be implemented to narrow the gap between the L1 and the L2 learners' internalized grammar system and which takes into consideration the big differences between the Arabic and English language. The researcher thought that this might be achieved by increasing the role of the teacher's interactions and instructions while concentrating on analyzing L2 learners' interlanguage grammar. The explanation and analysis of the learners' non-target-like forms should be performed using explicit grammar learning following *Meaning* negotiation and *Form* negotiation when it is needed and using corrective feedback. Implementing these stages might motivate L2 learners and give them the opportunity to revise and redraft their writing - most of them feel that writing activity is a boring task and they do not have desire to revise

and redraft as well - to develop their internalized grammar which will be reflected in their writing.

Mourssi [43,44] explained that the procedures of the IWP include: the processes of contrastive analysis and error analysis (metalinguistic feedback) based on the learners' mistakes; explicit grammar teaching; negotiation of meaning and form based on the learners' level of interlanguage grammar; interaction between teacher-students and students-students in a form of communicative grammar language teaching approach; and finally, feedback which is either direct or indirect.

2.2 The Subjects of the Study

Two classes were selected from a total of 12 enrolled in grade 12. The target location was in one of the Omani government male secondary schools (High School). Each group consisted of 37 Arab Learners of English (ALEs), with ages ranging between 16 and 18, pre-intermediate to intermediate level in English. The subjects were all Arabic speakers and had been learning English as a foreign language for eight years attending four to five sessions per week on average. One aim of this study is to identify which simple past form is first acquired, regular or irregular simple past forms under two different teaching methods? In the following, the research question is presented.

2.3 The Research Question

The current study seeks to answer the following question:

Which simple past forms is first acquired? Is it regular or irregular simple past forms? Are Arab learners of English as foreign language learners follow the same stages of first language learners (who acquire the irregular simple past forms before the regular simple past forms)? This is to provide empirical evidence in relation to the acquisition of the simple past tense forms to test hypotheses emerging from the Rote and Rule model, and thus contribute to the advancement of theory on Second Language Acquisition.

2.4 Methods Assigned to the Research Question

For the research question presented above, quantitative analyses were followed for all the simple past tense forms produced by the samples in 222 written texts which had been collected chronologically. The author thinks that in order to explore which simple past forms are acquired first, three writing texts were collected from each sample in both groups, the first writing text (AB) from the Experimental Group and (BB) were collected after the first two weeks; the second writing (AM) from the Experimental Group and ((BM) from the Control Group after the first two months while the third writing (AF) from the Experimental Group and (BF) from the Control Group were collected at the end of the experiment. The author thinks that writing is one way to get evidence of the state of a student's internalised grammar system. Discussion will be presented in the following section.

2.4.1 The criteria used in discussing the written samples

Three pieces of writing produced chronologically as part of the course produced excellent data for the investigation of students' interlanguage development and a decision was taken to look in detail at simple past tense forms. The researcher used the three writing texts,

produced in chronological order as the course went on, to trace both qualitatively and quantitatively the development of simple past tense forms. The instructions were very clear to all the subjects in both groups, which was "Use the following pictures to write a story using the simple past tense in about (100) words". The three chronological writing texts constitute the type of "text data" highlighted in [45] as being suitable for morphological analysis.

In general, the Innovated Writing Process IWP and the Communicative Grammar Language Teaching Approach CGLTA [46] were designed to be a bridge to apply recent SLA and applied linguistic theories in pedagogical settings; the aim was for the IWP to create a relationship between Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and pedagogical settings in the classroom, while the CGLTA aimed to draw on error/contrastive analyses with metalinguistic feedback within a communicative framework [46]. One aim of the current study is to investigate which form is learned first, regular or irregular simple past form.

Each occurrence of a simple past tense form in the students' written samples was carefully counted and analyzed. Intuition has been used to allocate examples to different categories. It is noticed that learners use different forms, for example: using *run* instead of *ran,* and using *thanks* instead of "thanked". With respect to the distinction between types and tokens in calculating the rates of development in L2 learners' simple past forms, even though *goed* or *wented* are non-target-like forms, they show some kind of development in a student's interlanguage grammar. Each form produced by the subjects is discussed and analyzed for the purpose of this study. The regular and irregular verbs are presented in numbers and percentages to show whether regular or irregular forms were produced first, and to give the reader an insight into how frequently each type of error and mistake occurred.

Categorizing the forms in sequence interlanguage stages is based on particular categories that were established from the start and were confirmed as the study went along, the categories were also confirmed by calculating all the non-target-like and the target-like forms produced by all the samples of the study. The students' non-target-like forms were categorized into seven types as follows: first, using the root or the simple present forms, second, using spoken target-like forms but written non-target-like written forms, third, overgeneralizing the –*ed* to irregular verbs, fourth, using verb to *Be* + the simple past, agent, the past participle or the gerund etc, fifth, number concord errors in the target-like verb forms, sixth, using blended forms (using *have*, *has* + the simple past or the past participle, and using infinitive *to* + the past simple or the past participle), finally, overgeneralizing a sub-rule of irregular simple past on other irregular simple past or regular simple past [47,48].

The total number of essays analyzed was 74, with 37 samples from the Experimental Group and 37 samples from the Control Group. These essays were of about 100 words each. The total amount of simple past tokens for the Experimental Group was 1587 forms, and the total amount of the simple past tokens for the Control Group was 1500 forms.

All the regular and irregular target-like and non-target-like simple past tense forms were carefully counted in all the stages, to cover all types of interlanguage behaviour which occur in the three stages of the experiment and to get an empirical evidence and consistent results for the study showing how the simple past form is acquired by ALEs and what interlanguage stages they may pass through to correctly acquire the simple past tense forms in English. It is worth mentioning that in the current study all verb forms were identified in the texts produced by all the students in the Experimental and the Control Groups. These were divided into target-like and non-target-like forms.

The analysis of the acquisition of the simple past forms in English using the students' written essays produced as part of the IWP was not a straightforward matter and the results must be interpreted with caution. In categorizing the learners' non-target-like forms, some non-target-like forms were repeated in different stages. So, it was difficult to make a clear dividing line between one stage and the next. Analyzing all the non-target-like forms produced by all the subjects of the study in both groups, and categorizing the interlanguage stages followed in acquiring the simple past tense, does not mean that these stages can be generalized to all second language learners in acquiring the simple past forms in English, but attempts to cover most of the variety of types of interlanguage behaviour adopted by ALEs while acquiring the simple past tense forms in English. The acquisition of simple past for this detailed study seems to be varied perhaps because Arabic L1 students may be in different stages from the stages investigated by other researchers in different contexts. E.g. using the verb to be with the root or with the simple past form or with the past perfect form (*was go*, *was went,* and *was caught*) can represent one of the characteristics of the interlanguage grammar development followed by ALEs in the acquisition of the simple past tense. I also think that explicit teaching/learning and metalinguistic feedback can help students - ALEs - go through the stages more quickly and this point will be investigated later on.

Another issue in categorizing the stages of interlanguage behaviour is that some second language learners produced some non-target-like forms which cannot be grouped into a recognizable category; this is because it is difficult to establish which verbs they are. For example: *stoke* (S 11 AB), *colle* (S 15 AB), *arer* (S 3 BB), *dicet* (S 14 BB), and *akrusnt* (S 27 BB). It was difficult to categorize these forms as performance non-target-like forms such as: *showted, brook, trayed, foneshed,* and *snated* which are categorized as stage two in the interlanguage grammar development stages proposed in the acquisition of the simple past tense in the current study. Producing these forms (*showted, trayed, snated, finished,* and *hapenned*) can be evidence that the student's internal grammar has taught him/her that you should add *–ed* to these verbs, and can be evidence that the learner has developed the regular "add *–ed"* rule. Learners who produced these forms at this stage need to learn the target-like form in learning the simple past tense in English in order to improve their written accuracy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In response to Research Question, participants' target-like and non-target-like regular and irregular simple past forms were noted. The learners' development in their use of the regular and irregular simple past tense forms was traced in three different written texts produced by the participants in the Experimental and Control Groups.

3.1 Tracing the Participants' Simple Past Forms during the Experiment

In the following paragraphs, a comparison is made between the Experimental Group and the Control Group at the three different stages. First, the development will be traced of the regular and irregular simple past tense forms used in the three different written texts collected from the participants in both Experimental and Control Groups stage by stage. This is followed by tracing the target-like and non-target-like regular and irregular simple past forms used in the three different written texts.

3.1.1 Tracing the Participants' Regular and Irregular Simple Past Forms during the Experiment

Table 1 shows the raw and relative percentages of regular and irregular simple past tense forms in the three chronological written texts produced by ALEs in the Experimental Group and the Control Group.

Table 1. Regular and Irregular Simple Past forms produced by the Experimental Group and the Control Group at the three stages

Group/Stage	Regular simple past	Irregular simple past
AB	221 (42.10%)	304 (57.09%)
AM	223 (39.47%)	342 (60.53%)
AF	226 (39.52%)	346 (60.48%)
Total	**670 (40.31%)**	**992 (59.69%)**
BB	207 (38.05%)	337 (61.95%)
BM	187 (37.40%)	313 (62.60%)
BF	194 (38.18%)	314 (61.82%)
Total	**588 (37.88%)**	**964 (62.12%)**

The first part of Table 1 represents the Experimental Group. It shows that the participants used a number of 221 (42.10%) regular simple past forms in the first writing text, and used a number of 304 (57.09%) irregular simple past forms in the first writing text. And the number of the regular simple past increased slightly in the second writing text. They used a number of 223 (39.47%) regular simple past forms compared with 342 (60.53%) irregular simple past forms. In the final piece of writing, the percentage of regular forms increased to 226 (39.52%) compared with 346 (60.48%) irregular simple past forms. A comparison between the regular simple past forms and the irregular simple past forms shows that the participants in the Experimental group used a total number of 670 (40.31%) regular simple past forms compared with 992 (59.69%) irregular simple past forms.

The second part of Table 1 represents the Control Group. It shows that the participants used 207 (38.05%) regular simple past forms in the first writing text, compared with a number of 337 (61.95%) irregular simple past forms. They used a number of 187 (37.40%) regular forms compared with 313 (61.82%) irregular simple past forms in the second writing text. The proportion of regular simple past forms increased in the third writing text to 194 (38.18%) compared with 314 (61.82%) irregular simple past forms. A comparison between the regular simple past forms and the irregular simple past forms shows that the participants in the Control group used a total number of 588 (37.88%) regular simple past forms compared with 964 (62.12%) irregular simple past forms.

3.1.2 Tracing the Participants' Target-like and Non-target-like Regular and Irregular Simple Past Forms during the Experiment

Table 2 shows the raw and relative percentages of the target-like and non-target-like regular and irregular simple past tense forms in the three written texts produced by ALEs in the Experimental and the Control Groups.

Table 2. Target-like and non-target-like forms produced by the Experimental Group and the Control Group at the three stages

Group/Stage	Regular simple past		Irregular simple past	
	Target-like	Non-target-like	Target-like	Non-target-like
AB	123 (56%)	98 (44%)	173 (57%)	131 (43%)
AM	130 (58%)	93 (42%)	212 (62%)	130 (38%)
AF	209 (92%)	17 (8%)	320 (92%)	26 (8%)
Total	**462 (68.95%)**	**208 (31.05%)**	**705 (71.05%)**	**287 (28.95%)**
BB	66 (32%)	141 (68%)	138 (41%)	199 (59%)
BM	80 (43%)	107 (57%)	159 (51%)	154 (49%)
BF	147 (76%)	47 (24%)	218 (69%)	96 (31%)
Total	**293 (49.83%)**	**295 (50.17%)**	**515 (53.42%)**	**449 (46.58%)**

The first part of Table 2 represents the Experimental Group. It shows that the participants used a number of 123 (56%) target-like regular simple past forms in the first writing text. And the number of the target-like regular simple past increased in the second writing text. They used a number of 130 (58%) target-like regular simple past forms while the number increased to 209 (92%) target-like regular simple past forms. In the final piece of writing, the percentage of non-target-like forms reduced from 44% to 8% over the end of the course.

Table 2 also shows that the participants in the Experimental Group used a number of 173 (57%) target-like irregular simple past forms in the first writing text. And the number of the target-like irregular simple past increased in the second writing text. They used a number of 212 (62%) target-like irregular simple past forms while the number increased to 320 (92%) target-like irregular simple past forms. The participants in the Experimental Group produced 131 (43%) non-target-like irregular simple past forms in the first writing text and the number reduced to 130 (38%) non-target-like irregular simple past forms while the number reduced to 26 (8%) non-target-like irregular simple past forms.

The second part of Table 2 represents the Control Group. It shows that the participants used 66 (32%) target-like regular simple past forms in the first writing text. The proportion of target-like regular simple past forms increased in the second writing text to 80 (43%) and to 147 (76%) in the third piece of writing. The participants produced 141 (68%) non-target-like regular simple past forms in the first writing text but the number reduced in the second piece to 107 (57%) non-target-like regular simple past forms and to 47 (24%) non-target-like regular simple past forms in the final piece of writing.

Table 2 also indicates that the participants in the Control Group used a proportion of 138 (41%) target-like irregular simple past forms in the first writing text, but the number of target-like irregular simple past forms increased in the second writing text to 159 (51%) and to 218 (69%) in the final piece of writing. The participants in the Control Group produced 199 (59%) non-target-like irregular simple past forms in the first writing text reducing to 154 (49%) in the second piece of writing and to 96 (31%) in the final piece of writing. The results of the experiment for both Experimental and Control Groups show an increase in production of target-like simple past forms usage. The table indicates: the Experimental Group's target-like regular simple past forms usage increases from 123 (56%) to 130 (58%) to 209 (92%), while the target-like irregular simple past forms usage grows from 173 (57%) to 212 (62%) to 320 (92%). The table indicates also: the Control Group's target-like regular simple past forms usage increases from 66 (32%) to 80 (43%) to 147 (76%), while the target-like irregular simple past forms usage grows from 138 (41%) to 159 (51%) to 218 (69%).

The numbers of the verbs used by the two groups whether they are target-like or non-target-like, regular or irregular verbs, refer to the differences which are significant, these results and the differences reflect and support the results the Words and Rules model and Brown [29]'s study, and indicate that ALEs follow the same sequence of first language learners in learning the irregular simple past forms before the regular simple past forms.

4. CONCLUSION

Comparing the number of target-like regular and irregular simple past forms between the Experimental Group and the Control Group reveals that both groups have achieved a remarkable increase in the number of target-like regular and irregular simple past forms, but the Experimental Group achieved a higher percentage than the Control Group. There are many reasons behind these results. The most important two are: the Experimental Group practised the IWP and the CGLTA, and followed the techniques of revising and redrafting based on focus-on-form in a communicative way through interaction.

What is also noticed during the experiment is that Arab learners of English have a group of integrated resources and different strategies-primary linguistic data as well as cognitive strategies for grammatical rule formation- in order to perform the different tasks related to L2 learning. Some of them depend on the L1 and try to transfer or borrow using cognitive strategies-practising, receiving and sending messages between each other, analyzing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output- which enable them to understand and produce new language by different means.

To sum up, ALEs acquire the irregular simple past forms before the regular simple past forms, although each group was under different teaching method of writing. It is concluded that ALEs follow the same the same sequence of first language learners in learning the irregular simple past forms before the regular simple past forms. However, textbooks and teachers start presenting the regular simple past forms before the irregular ones.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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