

A Learnability Approach to the Syntactic Properties of the English Passive Constructions

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Abstract:

The current study investigated the processes by which Dholuo speaking pupils acquire the English language passive constructions. A theoretical approach of the Learnability theory was used. The study adopted the descriptive cross-sectional design which involves classifying respondents in different groups according to their respective levels of development. The cohorts were pupils aged 6-8; 9-11 and 12-14 years. The design enabled the study to compare peers or cohorts as they successively reached a given age or points of development. It also allowed for child cohort comparison. Data was collected using research instruments that consisted of receptive and production tasks which were administered to the pupils. Data was analysed and interpreted qualitatively in terms of percentage scores in pie-charts and quantitatively in prose form. The study found out that pupils use a number of strategies as they come to terms with the target English passive structures. The pupils displayed adult like behaviour in their construction of the English passives and had problems only with the by-constructions. The findings of this study have implications not only on the acquisition of English grammatical structures, but also on the cross-linguistic influence in Second Language Acquisition and recommends as follows; syllabus designers and material developers should take due cognisance of the cross linguistic influence while designing syllabi and developing instructional materials for lower primary classes, and teachers handling English language in the corresponding grades to be made aware of the potential effects of the L1 on the acquisition of English target structures. The study also creates an opportunity for further research in other aspects namely: the interaction of Dholuo with the acquisition of other aspects of English grammar; interaction of other languages with English during the acquisition process; focus on adult learners so that any differences attributable to age of the learners could be noted and lastly, focus on child language acquisition within the African background so that inherent differences can be noted and accounted for.

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