

## 2. THE NATURAL ORDER HYPOTHESIS

One of the most exciting discoveries in language acquisition research in recent years has been the finding that the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order. Acquirers of a given language tend to acquire certain grammatical structures early, and others later. The agreement among individual acquirers is not always 100%, but there are clear, statistically significant, similarities.

English is perhaps the most studied language as far as the natural order hypothesis is concerned, and of all structures of English, morphology is the most studied. Brown (1973) reported that children acquiring English as a first language tended to acquire certain grammatical morphemes, or function words, earlier than others. For example, the progressive marker *ing* (as in "He is playing baseball".) and the plural marker */s/* ("two dogs") were among the first morphemes acquired, while the third person singular marker */s/* (as in "He lives in New York") and the possessive *'s* ("John's hat") were typically acquired much later, coming anywhere from six months to one year later. de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) confirmed Brown's longitudinal results cross-sectionally, showing that items that Brown found to be acquired earliest in time were also the ones that children tended to get right more often. In other words, for those morphemes studied, the difficulty order was similar to the acquisition order.

Shortly after Brown's results were published, Dulay and Burt (1974, 1975) reported that children acquiring English as a second language also show a "natural order" for grammatical morphemes, regardless of their first language. The child second language order of acquisition was different from the first language order, but different groups of second language acquirers showed striking similarities. Dulay and Burt's results have been confirmed by a number of investigators (Kessler and Idar, 1977; Fabris, 1978; Makino, 1980). Dulay and Burt used a subset of the 14 morphemes Brown originally investigated. Fathman (1975) confirmed the reality of the natural order in child second language acquisition with her test of oral production, the SLOPE test, which probed 20 different structures. (p. 19)

We will deal with the pedagogical implications of the natural order hypothesis later, I should point out here, however, that the implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that our syllabi should be based on the order found in the studies discussed here, that is, I do not recommend teaching *ing* early and the third person singular */s/* late. We will, in fact, find reason to reject grammatical sequencing in all cases where our goal is language acquisition. We will deal with this later, however, after we have finished laying the theoretical groundwork. (p. 21)

Source: Krashen, Stephen D. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press. Excerpt from (2009) First Internet edition, pp. 19 & 21.