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Acquisition of Third Person Personal Pronouns by L1 Malay Speakers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the acquisition of English third personal person pronouns (henceforth third person pronouns) by first language (L1) Malay learners. The theoretical framework adopted for the study is the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) which claims that second language (L2) learners who begin the task after a particular period of time will not be able to acquire the L2 property and its associated functional features if these have not been instantiated in the learners' L1. Specifically the aim of this study is to find out to what extent the learners of three different age groups and matched levels of proficiency are able to acquire the English third person pronouns and their associated features (gender, case and number). One hundred and fifty (50 elementary, 50 intermediate, 50 advanced) L1 Malay speakers participated in the study. Two instruments, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT), were administered to the respondents. The OPT was used to determine the proficiency level of the respondents. The main task, i.e. the GJT, comprised 72 items (both grammatical and ungrammatical) on third person pronouns, tests the respondents' knowledge on gender, case and number. The data obtained indicated that the learners in the elementary group had the most difficulty in the acquisition of the items tested, followed by the intermediate and the advanced groups, respectively. This indicates that the learners go through developmental stages of acquisition. Overall, the learners' performances for the grammatical items were better than the ungrammatical items even at the advanced level, implying that at ultimate attainment, they were not able to reach native-like competence. This could be due to the parametric differences between the two languages for the grammatical property being investigated.

Keywords: L1 Malay speakers, Malay, English third person personal pronouns, second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

There are two issues in second language acquisition (SLA) that have remained unresolved and they are; (i) determining second language learners' knowledge of

grammar, and (ii) explaining its development over time (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001). SLA researchers have tried to provide explanations by means of various hypotheses based on Universal Grammar (UG). One such hypothesis is the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH), proposed by Hawkins and Chan (1997), which argues that second language (L2) learners only have partial access to UG beyond a critical period of learning. The FFFH claims that while principles that are universal remain operative for L2 learning, parameters that differ from the learners' L1 setting may not be available. As such, learners are said to have to reanalyze their input to fit their L1 settings. In such circumstances, learners are most unlikely to be able to achieve a competence level that is at par with native speakers. Other researchers (see for e.g., Bley-Vroman, 1989; Leung, 2003) thus argue that in second language acquisition (SLA), there is no parameter resetting. In view of this, it will be interesting to test the FFFH by investigating the acquisition of third person pronouns by L1 Malay speakers. This would include examining the features associated with the pronouns. In so doing, we would be able to determine the extent to which principles and parameters are available for L2 acquisition. In his Government and Binding theory, Chomsky (1981, 1986a, 1986b, cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p.54) argues that principles are unvarying and apply to all natural languages while parameters have a limited number of open values which characterize differences between languages (parametric variation). In his Minimalist Programme, Chomsky (1995, 2000, cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 54) further explains that human languages are stored in the lexicon (word store) which consists of two categories; (1) lexical categories and (2) functional categories. Parametric variation is located in the functional categories within the lexicon. They are characterized by functional features that vary from language to language, causing differences in phenomena, such as word order and morphology.

So far, no studies as yet have been conducted in the acquisition of third person pronouns using the FFFH framework in the Malaysian context. However, there are a number of studies on the acquisition of third person pronouns in the field of SLA in general. Some studies have focused mainly on morphological aspects and the distinction between person, number, gender, and case (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Brown, 1973; Chiat, 1981; Deutsch & Pechman, 1978; Huxley, 1970; Kaper, 1976). Research has also been conducted on children's ability to master the deictic aspects of first and second person personal pronouns, which present special learning difficulties because of the unique way they are used for referring to speaker and listener (e.g. Bates, 1990; Budwig, 1989, 1995; Charney, 1980; Loveland, 1984; Smyth, 1995).

The definition of personal pronouns in the study is based Kaplan's view (1995). In defining personal pronouns, Kaplan (1995) argues that first and second person personal pronouns (henceforth second

person pronouns) do not fit the definition of pronouns as they do not replace nouns. For instance, if we were to construct a sentence where the person, 'Rose', were speaking and if we tried to replace 'Rose' with the first person personal pronoun 'I', it would be grammatically incorrect: *'Rose left early because I was anxious to get home before dark'. 'Rose' cannot be the antecedent for 'I'. Therefore, Kaplan (1995) claims that first and second person pronouns do not have antecedents and should not be considered as personal pronouns. Kaplan further explains that it is only because of their morphological similarity to third person pronouns that first and second person pronouns are considered as pronouns. Thus, based on this perspective, this study only investigates the acquisition of English third person pronouns by L1 Malay speakers.

According to Börjars and Burridge (2010, p.52), English third person pronouns have properties of person, number and case. These properties define the morphological and semantic aspects in English third person pronouns. The notion of gender in English today is related to biological sex. However, anecdorial observations have revealed that learners often have difficulty with this notion as well. As such, it is included in the study. Table 1 below summarises the English third person pronouns.

In Malay, personal pronouns are known as *kata gantinama diri*. Nik Safiah Karim *et al*. (2008, p. 102) claim that Malay personal pronouns are divided into first personal person pronouns (henceforth first person pronouns) (*kata ganti nama diri orang pertama*), second person pronouns (*kata ganti nama diri orang kedua*) and third person pronouns (*kata ganti nama diri orang ketiga*). Fig.1 summarises the subclasses of Malay pronouns (*kata gantinama)*.

In Fig.1, *kata ganti nama diri orang* is categorized as a subclass of *kata ganti nama diri,* which in turn, is a subclass of *kata ganti nama*. Under the category of *kata ganti nama diri orang* are *kata ganti nama diri orang pertama* (i.e. first person pronouns), *kata ganti nama diri orang kedua* (i.e. second person pronouns) and *kata ganti nama diri orang ketiga* (i.e. third person pronouns).

TABLE 1
Properties of English Third person pronouns

THIRD PERSON PRONOUNS				
NUMBER	Singular			Plural
GENDER / CASE	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	All Genders
Nominative	He	she	It	they
Accusative	Him	her	It	them
Possessive: Attributive	his	her	its	their
Absolute	his	hers	its	theirs

(Adapted from Börjars & Burridge, 2010, pp. 52 – 54; Huddleston, 1989, p. 287)
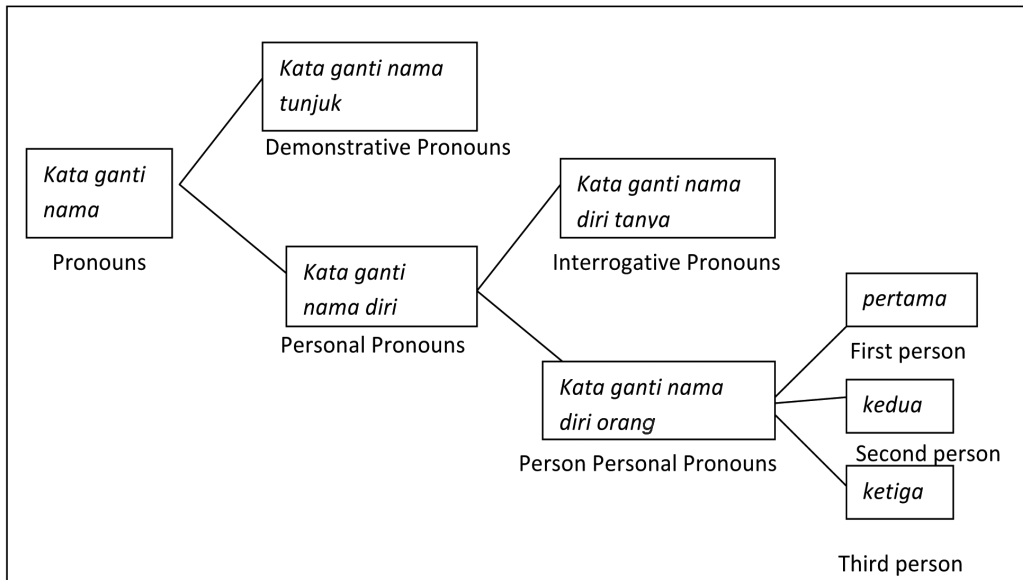
(Adapted from Nik Safiaah Karim *et al*., 2008: 102)

Fig.1: Subclasses of Malay Pronouns

TABLE 2
Properties of Malay Third person pronouns

THIRD PERSON PRONOUNS				
NUMBER	Singular			Plural
GENDER / CASE	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	All Genders
Nominative	*dia, ia* he	*dia, ia* she	*ia* it	*mereka* they
Accusative	*dia* him	*dia* her	*ia* it	*mereka* them
Possessive	*dia, -nya* his	*dia, -nya* her, hers	*ia, -nya* its	*mereka* their, theirs

For ease of comparison, Malay third person pronouns are mapped on to the gender, case and number features of personal pronouns in English, as presented in Table 2.

While English third person pronouns indicate number and case features overtly, only the number feature is obvious in the Malay language. The notion of gender is also overt in English singular third person pronouns (he, her, it). In the Malay language, gender takes on a more general form without differentiating between masculine and feminine gender. This can be seen in the example of the third person singular pronoun *dia/-nya*. The pronoun *dia/-nya* can refer to either 'he', 'she' or 'it' in English. Thus, *dia/-nya* poses ambiguity of gender.

Case is also not overtly shown in the Malay third person pronouns. As shown in Table 2, it is difficult, if not possible, to differentiate case in Malay third person pronouns when they occur in isolation. The following sentences exemplify this point:

i. Nominative case :
    Mereka bawa beg ke sekolah.

    3PP Nom[1] bring bag to school

    They brought their bags to school.

ii. Accusative case :
    Cikgu Ali selalu menasihati mereka supaya rajin belajar.

    Teacher Ali frequently advise 3PP Acc[2] so that industrious study

    Mr Ali frequently advises them to study hard.

iii. Possessive case :
    Jangan sentuh beg mereka!

    Don't touch bag 3PP Poss[3]

    Don't touch their bags!

Examples (i), (ii) and (iii) show that in Malay, the same pronoun *mereka* is used for the nominative, accusative and possessive case. This is also true for the third person singular pronouns *dia, ia* and *–nya*. Thus, the case feature is not manifested in the Malay language, including the personal pronouns, while the same is overtly manifested in the English personal pronouns.

Thus, there seems to be some morphological, semantic and syntactic differences and similarities in both the English and Malay languages with regard to this property. Firstly, both the English language and the Malay language differentiate the number feature in third person pronouns. Secondly, the gender feature is differentiated in the English singular third person pronouns (i.e. masculine, feminine) but it is not differentiated in the Malay third person singular pronouns. This means that in Malay, if the singular third person pronoun is used in a sentence without the presence of the proper noun as co-reference, it would be difficult to determine the gender feature. Thirdly, Malay third person pronouns do not overtly show the case feature compared to the English third person pronouns. While English differentiates the third person pronouns for subject (nominative) case, object (accusative) case and possessive case, Malay does not. Thus, the case feature for the Malay third person pronouns may be difficult to determine when the pronouns are used in isolated forms.

The differences in the third person pronouns in the English language and Malay language are important. Hawkins and Chan (1997) stated that when differences occur in the parameter setting of L1 and L2, there would be a considerable restrain to the extent to which an L2 learner can build a mental grammar like that of a native speaker. L2 learners would therefore not be able to reach a level at par with native speakers. It would be interesting to investigate the validity of such a claim in the present study.

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[1] 3PP Nom – Third Person Plural Pronoun Nominative Case

[2] 3PP Acc – Third Person Plural Pronoun Accusative Case

[3] 3PP Poss – Third Person Plural Possessive Case

THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to find out to what extent the L1 Malay learners of L2 English at different levels of proficiency are able to acquire the English third person pronouns. The participants for this study comprised L1 Malay learners who were grouped according to different age groups and matched levels of proficiency (elementary, intermediate, and advanced), based on a standardized general proficiency test, the *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT) (Allan, 1992). This method of selection was done following Hawkins and Chan (1997). Out of one hundred and fourteen (114) students in Form One who sat for the OPT, fifty (50) students who scored below 50 marks were randomly selected for the elementary level. Out of one hundred and thirty (130) students in Form Four who sat for the OPT, fifty (50) students who scored between 50 and 69 marks were randomly selected for the intermediate level. Out of two hundred (200) adult undergraduates and graduate lecturers who sat for the OPT, fifty (50) who scored above 70 marks were randomly selected for the advanced level. The age range for the Form One students was between 12 and 13 years. The age range for the Form Four students was between 16 and 17 years. The advanced comprised adults and their ages ranged from 19 to 40 years. This adult group represents learners who have reached ultimate attainment. In total, the number of the respondents selected for the research was 150.

Following other studies in SLA (e.g. Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Wong, 1999, 2002), a Grammatical Judgement Task (GJT) was used to collect data for the study. The GJT, which comprised 72 items (both grammatical and ungrammatical) on English third person pronouns, was administered to tap the learners' linguistic competence on their knowledge of gender, case and number (*see* Appendix 1 for the breakdown of items and Appendix 2 for examples of items). The items were formulated based on a cross linguistic analysis of third person pronouns of the two languages, English and Malay. The GJT was piloted with a small sample of L1 Malay students to ensure that the items were appropriately phrased. Based on the feedback of these students, the test was honed.

In the GJT, the learners were required to make judgments on the grammaticality and ungrammaticality of the third person personal pronoun items based on their intuition. Each correct judgment was scored with a mark and the respondents' scores were converted to percentages.

One-way ANOVAs and post-hoc tests were run to see if there were significant differences in the sets of data collected for the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups. Further, paired-sample T-Tests were run on the advanced group results to see if there were significant differences between the grammatical and ungrammatical items tested for this group that represents the ultimate attainment of the grammatical property being tested for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall results of the GJT testing English third person pronouns are summarized in Table 3.

The data in Table 3 indicate that the learners scored a mean of 61.73% for the items with the correct usage of English third person pronouns and 49.44% for the items with incorrect usage of English third person pronouns. The results showed that the learners were able to correctly judge the grammatical items (above chance level of 50%) better than the ungrammatical items (slightly below chance level).

The details of the data in Table 3 show that most of the items were problematic for the elementary group and most of their scores did not reach the 50% mark, except for the grammatical item 'he' (55.75%), 'she' (57.50%) and 'her' (50.25%). Even these scores were only slightly above 50%. Taken together, the results suggest that at the initial stages, the learners found acquisition of English third person pronouns problematic. White (1996) explained that learners would initially have strong influence from UG and their L1 and therefore, the acquisition of their L2 would be problematic. This is true in the case of our study on English third person pronoun items among learners at the elementary level.

Comparatively, the intermediate and advanced groups performed better for both the grammatical and ungrammatical items on English third person pronouns. At the intermediate group level, however, it was found that the results of some ungrammatical items did not reach the 50% chance level. These include the items 'them' (29.75%), 'theirs' (46.50%) and 'their' (49.25%).

TABLE 3
Mean Percentages for Correct Judgements of Items on English Third person pronouns

Items	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)
He	55.75	35.00	70.00	62.50	73.50	64.08
She	57.50	38.30	72.25	69.30	73.25	69.50
They	40.25	35.12	70.75	55.37	73.00	59.25
Him	40.50	32.75	68.50	54.50	71.50	62.75
Her	50.25	34.25	70.50	55.33	71.75	65.91
Them	43.75	33.12	67.75	29.75	71.25	51.50
His	48.25	28.91	67.75	63.33	72.25	60.83
Hers	41.50	31.41	61.25	56.16	67.25	61.41
Theirs	41.50	33.50	62.25	46.50	67.25	55.12
Their	41.75	31.62	67.50	49.25	71.50	57.25
Mean	46.10	33.39	67.85	54.19	71.25	60.76

Overall grammatical: 61.73%   Overall ungrammatical: 49.44%
ANOVA: $F=128.585$; $p<0.05$ ANOVA: $F=142.626$; $p<0.05$

T-Test: $p<0.05$ (Advanced group)

*Gr = Grammatical Items; Ugr = Ungrammatical Items

A comparison of the grammatical and ungrammatical items tested for English third person pronouns was made for the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups and the mean scores are summarised in a bar graph in Fig.2.

Gender

Table 4 shows the mean percentages of the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups for judgements of grammatical and ungrammatical items testing the property of gender in English third person pronouns.

The data in Table 4 show that the elementary group had difficulty with the items. Only the grammatical items 'he' (55.75%), 'she' (57.50%) and 'her' (50.25%) were scored above 50%. One reason for this could be due to input frequency where learners may have encountered more examples of the items mentioned compared to other items, resulting in them being more

familiar with and able to use these items correctly more often (Towell & Hawkins, 1994).

The data also show that there was not much difference in the acquisition of the masculine (grammatical=63.10%; ungrammatical=51.52%) and feminine (grammatical=62.83%; ungrammatical=56.27%) features tested. Both the grammatical and ungrammatical results for these features were not native-like. The reason for this could be because the Malay language, the learners' L1, does not overtly manifest the gender feature. Thus, no differentiation is made for the English feminine and masculine items as the same form is used for both genders in Malay. For example, the Malay third person personal pronoun *dia* may represent both the English masculine pronoun 'he' and the feminine pronoun 'she'. This being the case, the learners may not have fully acquired the property in the English setting.
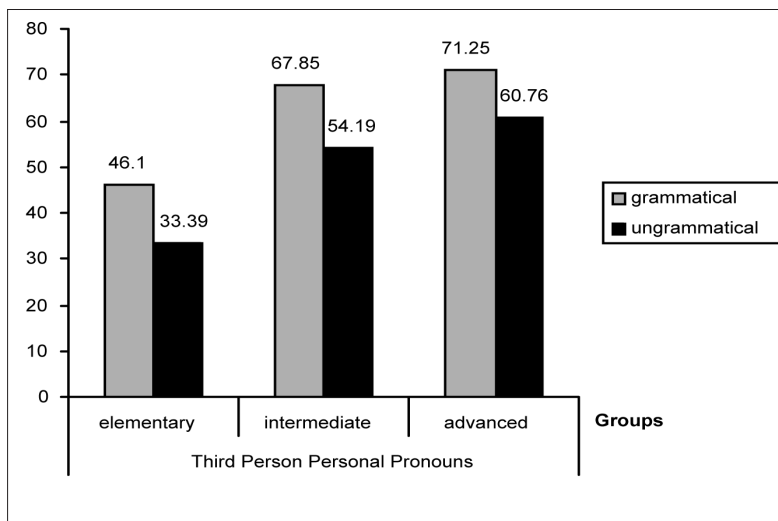

Fig.2: Judgements in percentages of the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing for English third person pronouns for the 3 groups.

TABLE 4
Judgements of Items with Gender Feature in Third person pronouns

Gender	Items	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
		Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)
Masculine	He	55.75	38.25	70.00	55.25	73.50	56.75
	Him	40.50	36.50	68.50	65.25	71.50	71.00
	His	48.25	25.00	67.75	58.25	72.25	57.50
Mean		48.16	33.25	68.75	59.58	72.41	61.75
Overall Masculine						63.10	51.52
ANOVA (Masculine)						F=88.366 p<0.05	F=56.362 p<0.05
T-Test (Masculine-advanced group)						p<0.05	
Feminine	She	57.50	34.00	72.25	73.50	73.25	70.50
	Her	50.25	35.75	70.50	63.50	71.75	69.75
	Hers	41.50	32.50	61.25	60.25	67.25	66.75
Mean		49.75	34.08	68.00	65.75	70.75	69.00
Overall Feminine						62.83	56.27
ANOVA (Feminine)						F=68.031 p<0.05	F=125.792 p<0.05
T-Test (Feminine-advanced group)						p>0.05	
Overall Mean		48.95	33.66	68.37	62.66	71.58	65.37

* Gr = Grammatical Items; Ugr = Ungrammatical Items

A one-way ANOVA showed that there was an overall significant difference in the performance of the 3 groups (elementary, intermediate and advanced) for the grammatical (F=88.366; p<0.05) and ungrammatical (F=56.362; p<0.05) items with masculine gender feature in third person pronouns. A one-way ANOVA was also run for feminine gender feature items in third person pronouns to see if there was a significant difference in the performance of the 3 groups. The result also indicated that there was an overall significant difference in the performance of the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups for the grammatical (F=68.031; p<0.05) and ungrammatical (F=125.792; p<0.05) items.

Follow-up Post hoc Scheffé tests showed that for performance on items with the masculine gender feature, there were significant differences between the elementary and intermediate groups (p<0.05) and between the elementary and advanced groups (p<0.05). However, there was no significant difference in the performance between the advanced and the intermediate groups (p>0.05). For the ungrammatical items, the tests also showed that there was a significant difference in the performances of the elementary and intermediate (p<0.05), as well as the elementary and advanced (p<0.05) groups. No significant differences were registered between the intermediate group and the advanced group (p>0.05).

This means that for the masculine gender feature, the results for the intermediate and advanced groups were significantly different from the elementary group. For the feminine gender feature, the results showed that there were significant differences in the performance between the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and between the elementary and advanced groups ($p<0.05$) for the grammatical items. Nonetheless, no significant difference was registered between the level of performance of the intermediate and advanced groups ($p>0.05$). For the ungrammatical items, there were significant differences in the performance between the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and between the elementary and advanced groups ($p<0.05$). Once again, there was no significant difference between the intermediate and advanced groups ($p>0.05$). This shows that there were significant differences in the results of the elementary group compared to the intermediate and advanced groups. The results for the intermediate and advanced groups, however, did not show any significant difference.

Taken together, the results for both the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing masculine and feminine gender in third person pronouns indicate that learners go through developmental stages from the elementary level to the advanced level. Thus, the details of the data indicate that the learners' performance was not native-like and even at the ultimate attainment level, the results suggest that although the learners seemed to have acquired L2 surface forms to about 70% level, their underlying representations of these items are not native-like. To confirm this, a paired-sample T-Test was also run to see if there was a significant difference between the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing both the masculine and feminine gender features in English third person pronouns for the advanced group. The data indicate a significant difference between the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing masculine gender feature ($p<0.05$). However, the difference between the scores for the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing feminine gender feature is not significant ($p>0.05$). The differences found in the T-Test for masculine gender feature suggests that the advanced learners may have restructured the L2 to acceptable forms to the level of about 72% for masculine gender items but these have been mapped on to their L1 underlying features and therefore, they were not at par with native speaker competence level. On the other hand, the T-Test result for feminine gender feature suggests that the advanced learners have been able to acquire the feminine gender feature items to a level of around 70% (70.75% grammatical; 69% ungrammatical). However, the ultimate attainment score is far from native speakers' competence level (which is assumed to be 80% and above, see e.g. Wong, 1999, 2002), and the underlying representations of these items may be more L1-like.

Case

Table 5 shows the mean percentages for the correct judgements of the grammatical and ungrammatical items for the case feature by the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups.

The data in Table 5 show that the learners in the elementary group found the acquisition of most of the items problematic. Only the grammatical nominative case items 'he' (55.75%) and 'she' (57.50%) and the grammatical accusative case item 'her' (50.25%) were scored above chance level, albeit only slightly. This suggests that at the initial stages of acquisition, the learners found acquisition problematic for most of the items. As mentioned earlier, the learners, at the initial stages of learning have strong influence from both their L1 and UG (White, 1996, 2003). As we can see in the data, this seems to be born out.

At the intermediate level, the learners seemed to have more difficulty with the acquisition of the accusative and possessive case items compared to the nominative

TABLE 5
Judgements of Items with Case Feature in Third person pronouns

Case	Items	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
		Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)
Nominative	He	55.75	25.50	70.00	60.00	73.50	62.25
	She	57.50	40.50	72.25	64.50	73.25	66.75
	They	40.25	37.25	70.75	61.00	73.00	65.00
Mean		51.16	34.41	71.00	61.83	73.25	64.66
Overall nominative case						65.13	53.63
ANOVA (nominative)						F=117.928; p<0.05	F=84.478; p<0.05
T-Test (nominative-advanced group)						p<0.05	
Accusative	Him	40.50	30.50	68.50	46.25	71.50	56.25
	Her	50.25	41.75	70.50	31.75	71.75	56.75
	Them	43.75	32.50	67.75	31.75	71.25	58.50
Mean		44.83	34.91	68.91	36.58	71.50	57.16
Overall accusative case						61.74	42.88
ANOVA (accusative)						F=78.924; p<0.05	F=25.296; p<0.05
T-Test (accusative-advanced group)						p<0.05	
Possessive	His	48.25	31.25	67.75	62.50	72.25	63.25
	Hers	41.50	28.50	61.25	48.75	67.25	58.50
	Theirs	41.50	30.50	62.25	38.75	67.25	57.00
Mean		43.75	30.08	63.75	50.00	68.91	59.58
Overall possessive case						58.80	46.55
ANOVA (possessive)						F=52.770; p<0.05	F=37.290; p<0.05
T-Test (possessive-advanced group)						p<0.05	
Overall mean		46.58	33.13	67.88	49.47	71.22	60.47

*Gr = Grammatical Items; Ugr = Ungrammatical Items

case items. In particular, they seemed to have problems with the ungrammatical accusative case items 'him' (46.25%), 'her' (31.75%) and 'them' (31.75%). They also had problems with the ungrammatical possessive case items 'hers' (38.75%) and 'theirs' (48.75%). The reason for this could be because the learners' L1 does not specify for case. In English, the items 'he', 'she' and 'they' are specified for nominative case. Meanwhile, the pronouns 'him', her' and 'them' are specified for accusative case and the pronouns 'his', 'hers' and 'theirs' are specified for absolute possessive case. In Malay, the third person personal pronoun *dia* is used as the subject, object and even to refer to possession while the pronoun *mereka* is the plural counterpart. These Malay pronouns are unspecified for case in a way similar to the English language. As a result, it can be seen that the learners have difficulty in acquiring the case feature in their L2 setting.

The advanced group seemed to have acquired the case feature to above chance level for all the items tested. However, the results were still far from native speakers' competence level. Hawkins and Chan (1997), in the FFFH, explained that L2 learners would have to deal with reanalyzing their input to other acceptable forms other than that of the native speaker representations. In other words, their IL grammar state at ultimate attainment is a state where they behave as if their L2 were their L1 or they find solutions different from their L1 and the L2 (see for example, Bley-Vroman *et al.*, 1988).

Overall, the learners performed better in the nominative case items (grammatical = 65.13%; ungrammatical = 53.63%) compared to the possessive case (grammatical = 58.80%; ungrammatical = 46.55%) and accusative case (grammatical = 61.74%; ungrammatical = 42.88%) case items. In order to find out if the results were significantly different for the 3 groups (elementary, intermediate and advanced) in the nominative, accusative and possessive case items tested for grammaticality in English third person pronouns, a one-way ANOVA was run. For the items with the nominative case, the difference was significant at a level of F=117.928 and p<0.05 for grammatical items and at a level of F=84.479 and p<0.05 for the ungrammatical items. With regard to the items with the accusative case, the difference was significant at a level of F=78.924 and p<0.05 for the grammatical items and at a level of F=25.296 and p<0.05 for the ungrammatical items. In the case of items with possessive case, the difference was significant at a level of F=52.770 and p<0.05 for the grammatical items and at a level of F=37.290 and p<0.05 for the ungrammatical items.

Post hoc Scheffé tests on the nominative case items, showed significant difference in the performance of the elementary and intermediate groups for the grammatical (p<0.05) and ungrammatical (p<0.05) items. A significant difference was also registered in the performance of the elementary and advanced groups for the grammatical (p<0.05) and ungrammatical (p<0.05) items.

However, there was no significant difference in the performance of the intermediate and advanced groups (p>0.05) for both sets of items.

For the test of accusative case, there was a significant difference in the performance of the elementary and intermediate groups for grammatical items (p<0.05) but no significant difference for ungrammatical items (p>0.05). This suggests that the elementary and intermediate groups were not different in terms of their interlanguage competence and their underlying representation was not that of the native speakers' competence. There was a significant difference in the performance of the elementary and advanced groups for the grammatical (p<0.05) and ungrammatical (p<0.05) items. However, there was no significant difference in the performance of the intermediate and advanced groups for the grammatical items (p>0.05) but there was a significant difference between the groups for the ungrammatical items (p<0.05). This indicates that the intermediate and advanced groups were different in terms of their competence for these items.

With regard to the test on possessive case, there was a significant difference in the performance of the elementary and intermediate groups for both the grammatical (p<0.05) and ungrammatical (p<0.05) items. There was also a significant difference in the performance of the elementary and advanced groups for both the grammatical (p<0.05) and ungrammatical (p<0.05) items. However, no significant difference was registered between the intermediate and advanced groups (p>0.05) for both sets of items.

A paired-sample T-Test was run to see if there was a significant difference between the grammatical and ungrammatical items testing case feature in English third person pronouns for the advanced group. The result indicate that there was a significant difference at p<0.05 between the grammatical and ungrammatical items for the nominative, accusative and possessive case. The learners seemed to have performed better for the grammatical items compared to the ungrammatical items. Again, the results suggest that learners, even at the advanced level, do not have native speakers' competence for the notion of case.

Taken together, the results for the items focussing on the case feature indicate that the L1 Malay speakers have not acquired case to native speakers' competence level. The reason put forth here is that the case feature is not specified in the Malay third person pronouns and therefore not overtly manifested as is the case for their English counterparts. This difference in the two languages seems to be the reason why learners have found the third person pronouns difficult to acquire as they are not able to reset their L1 parameter, in this case from a language with no overt case to one that manifests case in the pronouns, as propounded by the FFFH (Hawkins & Chan, 1997). White (1996, 2003) argues that learners eventually develop interlanguage (IL) grammars because of the L2 property interacting with their L1 and UG. Thus, we find that even though the three groups

are at different levels of IL grammars, what the advanced group had stabilised at is a level that is not native-like. Generally, the learners had more difficulty with the non-subjective (accusative and possessive) third person plural pronouns (e.g. 'them', 'theirs', 'their') than the subjective (nominative) third person plural pronoun (e.g. 'they'). From the acquisition point of view, it follows that learners generally encounter the subjective pronouns with the nominative case earlier and more frequently in their input. In fact, Towell and Hawkins (1994)

claim that when learners encounter more examples of an item, they are better able to acquire them. Thus, input frequency could account for the learners being better able to acquire the subjective (nominative) pronouns, such as 'they', better than the accusative and possessive case pronouns in English. Another reason for this could also be that the nominative case is the default case in Malay. Thus, the L1 Malay learners have found the accusative case and possessive case items more difficult than the nominative case items.

TABLE 6
Judgements of Items with Number Feature in English Third person pronouns

Number	Items	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
		Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)	Gr* (%)	Ugr* (%)
Singular	He	55.75	41.50	70.00	72.25	73.50	73.25
	She	57.50	40.50	72.25	70.00	73.25	71.25
	Him	40.50	31.25	68.50	52.00	71.50	60.50
	Her	50.25	25.25	70.50	70.75	71.75	71.75
	His	48.25	30.50	67.75	69.25	72.25	61.75
	Hers	41.50	33.25	61.25	59.50	67.25	59.00
Mean		48.95	33.70	68.37	65.62	71.58	66.25
Overall Singular						62.96	55.19
ANOVA (singular)						F=111.732 p<0.05	F=183.979 p<0.05
T-Test (singular – advanced group)						p<0.05	
Plural	They	40.25	33.00	70.75	49.75	73.00	53.50
	Them	43.75	33.75	67.75	27.75	71.25	44.50
	Theirs	41.50	36.50	62.25	54.25	67.25	53.25
Mean		41.83	34.41	66.91	43.91	70.50	50.41
Overall Plural						59.74	42.91
ANOVA (plural)						F=87.796 p<0.05	F=13.188 p<0.05
T-Test (plural – advanced group)						p<0.05	
Overall Mean		46.58	33.94	67.88	58.38	71.22	60.97

*Gr = Grammatical Items; Ugr = Ungrammatical Items

Number

Table 6 shows the mean percentages for the correct judgements of grammatical and ungrammatical number items scored by the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups.

The data presented in Table 6 indicate that the learners in the elementary group have also performed poorly on this set of items. Only the grammatical singular number items 'he' (55.75%), 'she' (57.50%) and 'her' (50.25%) were scored above chance level. In comparison, the learners in the intermediate group had performed better, scoring above chance level for most of the items, except for the ungrammatical plural number items 'they' (49.75%) and 'them' (27.75%). As for the ungrammatical plural number item 'them', the advanced group also scored it below chance level (44.50%). However, all the other items were scored above the chance level by the advanced group.

The analysis further shows that overall the learners seemed to have performed better for the singular number items (grammatical = 62.96%; ungrammatical = 55.19%) than the plural number items (grammatical = 59.74%; ungrammatical = 42.91%). A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences in the performance of the 3 groups (elementary, intermediate and advanced) for the grammatical and ungrammatical items tested for the singular and plural number feature. For the singular number feature, there were significant differences of $F=111.732$ and $p<0.05$ for grammatical items, and $F=183.979$ and $p<0.05$ for the ungrammatical items. For the plural number feature, there were significant differences of $F=87.796$ and $p<0.05$ for the grammatical items and $F=13.188$ and $p<0.05$ for the ungrammatical items. Post hoc Scheffé tests showed that for the items with the singular number feature, there were significant differences between the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and between the elementary and advanced groups ($p<0.05$) for the grammatical items. However, no significant difference was registered between the intermediate and advanced groups ($p>0.05$). For the ungrammatical items, there were also significant differences between the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and between the elementary and advanced groups ($p<0.05$). But, no significant difference was registered for the performance in the intermediate and advanced groups ($p>0.05$). This means that there was no difference in terms of acquisition between the results of the intermediate and advanced group for this particular set of items.

For the plural number feature, there were significant differences in the performance of the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and in the performance of the elementary and advanced groups ($p<0.05$) for the grammatical items. No significant difference was registered for the performance of the intermediate and advanced groups ($p>0.05$). For the ungrammatical items, significant differences were registered between the elementary and intermediate groups ($p<0.05$) and between the elementary

and advanced groups (p<0.05), although no significant difference was registered between the intermediate and advanced groups (p>0.05).

A paired-sample T-Test was further run to find out if there were significant differences between the advanced scores for the grammatical and ungrammatical items with the singular and plural number features. The results showed that both sets of items with singular and plural number features had a value of p<0.05 each. This means that there were significant differences between the scores of the singular and plural grammatical and ungrammatical items. The results indicate that the learners' underlying representation for the items testing number in third person pronouns is non-native like.

The results for the number items again indicate that the L1 Malay speakers have difficulty with the number feature in English third person pronouns. Although Malay does manifest overtly number in *dia* and *mereka*, they represent only 'third person singular' and 'third person plural' features, respectively. On the other hand, in the equivalent English pronouns, the other features of gender and case are present together and manifested as a single overt form, for example, 'she' has the feature 'third person singular feminine nominative' while 'them' is specified as 'third person plural accusative'. The fact that these bundles of features are represented as single overt forms respectively seemed to have spilled over to the items testing the feature number as well, up to the ultimate attainment level. In other words, the difference in the learners'

L1 and L2 settings has made it difficult for the L1 speakers to acquire the English third personal pronouns to a native-like level as they are unable to reset their L1 settings.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

From our discussion of the results thus far, we can conclude that the learners at different age groups and matched levels of proficiency performed differently. Overall, the learners in the advanced group (aged 19 to 40) performed better than the intermediate (aged 16 to 17) and elementary (aged 12 to 13) groups. The learners in the intermediate group performed better than the learners in the elementary group. In general, however, the statistical analyses showed that there was no significant difference between the results of the intermediate and advanced groups compared to the elementary group for most of the items tested. Thus, taken together, the results suggest that in the initial stages, the learners had difficulty due to the strong influence from their L1 and UG (White, 1996, 2003). At the later stages, however, they were able to acquire the items although not to the level of native speaker competence.

Further, the evidence showing the predictions of the FFFH (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) could be true. The FFFH predicts that parameters not instantiated in the learners' L1 are not available to them after the critical period, while principles which are universal remain operative even after this period. When there are parametric differences between the L1 and L2 settings, the acquisition of the L2 is predicted to be

problematic. The findings in our study showed that parametric differences in the L1 and L2 setting seemed to have influenced the results as the learners were unable reset their L1 settings, as proposed by Hawkins and Chan (1997). The differences in the features associated with the third person pronouns between the L1 and L2 seemed to have caused this difficulty in acquisition.

Some implications can be drawn from the findings of the current study. Firstly, the FFFH (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) predicts that when there are parametric variations between the learners' L1 and L2, parameter resetting is impossible. Within the critical period of learning, learners would still have principles and parameters available. Beyond that time frame, however, only principles are available for acquisition. In order to acquire the L2 items, learners would therefore have to reanalyse their input to fit their L1 settings. This means that they would have to resort to other mechanisms other than their L1 but within the constraints of UG in order for acquisition to occur. Even then, their acquisition would not be at par with that of the native speakers and as Bley-Vroman et *al*. (1988) explain, the learners' knowledge are their IL grammars. In our study, the learners at the elementary level found acquisition of English third person pronouns and their related features problematic and this is probably due to the lack of exposure to the L2. White (2003) explained that in the initial stages, learners would have strong influence from their L1 and UG. However, with longer exposure to the L2, the learners at the intermediate

and advanced levels were able to perform better. Their performances, nevertheless, were seen to be far from that of the native speakers' competence level. Thus, this implies that the learners have only partial access to UG for L2 acquisition. As the FFFH predicts, they would have used other mechanisms by reanalyzing their input to fit their L1 setting within the constraints of UG. Towell and Hawkins (1994) suggest that input frequency play a role here. They claim that exposure to more examples of an item would enable the L2 learners to better acquire the item compared to other items. Meanwhile, Ellis (1998) suggests that learners could resort to rote learning or memorizing in their L2 endeavour. These mechanisms build settings that are different from the learners' L1 and L2, resulting in IL grammars.

The findings also have implications for the classroom. The difference in the learners' L1 and L2 acquisition processes would imply that learning strategies applied to them should also be different. In first language acquisition, learners have full access to UG for acquisition. However, the findings of the current study show that L2 learners may only have partial access to it. Thus, L2 instructors would need to know and comprehend that learners may never fully be able to perform at par with native speakers. The overall results for the acquisition of the third person pronouns show in the initial stages, the learners found acquisition to be problematic but through progressive stages of development they were able to improve. However, their level of performance was

not at par with the native speakers. Hence, instructors and learners need to be able to cope with this in order to be comfortable and satisfied with their achievement of set objectives for their lessons.

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APPENDIX 1

Breakdown of the Items Tested in the GJT

TYPE	Grammatical items (Correct Usage)	Ungrammatical items			Total Number of Items
		Gender	Case	Number	
he	2	2	2	2	8
she	2	2	2	2	8
they	2	-	2	2	6
him	2	2	2	2	8
her	2	2	2	2	8
them	2	-	2	2	6
his	2	2	2	2	8
hers	2	2	2	2	8
theirs	2	-	2	2	6
their	2	-	2	2	6
Total Number of Items					72

Appendix 2

Examples of the grammatical and ungrammatical items tested in the GJT

1(a):	**Grammatically correct item (Gender)**
	Muthu says <u>he</u> loves to eat the tosai from Ramu's Restaurant.
1(b):	**Ungrammatical item (Gender)**
	Melissa confronted him because <u>she</u> had lied to her about the matter.
2(a):	**Grammatically correct item (Case)**
	Salmah is a good cook. <u>She</u> can cook many delicious dishes.
2(b):	**Ungrammatical item (Case)**
	<u>Her</u> was the person Badrul was speaking to on the phone.
3(a):	**Grammatically correct item (Number)**
	Anita and Aminah are twins but <u>they</u> do not look alike.
3(b):	**Ungrammatical item (Number)**
	The boys are having an examination tomorrow so <u>he</u> stayed up late.