

THE RELEVANCE OF THE U-SHAPED LEARNING MODEL TO THE ACQUISITION OF
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *C'EST AND IL EST* IN THE ENGLISH LEARNERS OF
FRENCH CONTEXT

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Abstract

A U-shaped learning curve entails a three-step process: a good performance followed by a bad performance followed by a good performance again. U-shaped curves have been observed not only in language acquisition, but also in various fields such as temperature, face recognition, object permanence to name a few. Building on the curve, Child Language Acquisition and Second Language Acquisition, this empirical study seeks to investigate the relevance of the U-shaped learning model to the acquisition of the difference between *c'est* and *il est* in the English Learners of French (ELF) context. Rote-learned terms such as *c'est* are acquired before subject clitics such as *il est* in Child Language Acquisition. The present study was developed to assess whether older learners of French in the ELF context follow the same acquisition pattern. The empirical study was conducted on 15 English learners of French, which lasted six weeks. Simple sentences, written compositions and a questionnaire were collected from each subject at three time intervals (after one week, after three weeks, after six weeks), after which, students' work were graded as being either correct or incorrect. The data indicates that there is evidence of a U-shaped learning curve in the acquisition of *c'est* and *il est* and students did follow the same acquisition pattern as children in regards to rote-learned terms and subject clitics. This paper also discusses the need to introduce modules on U-shaped learning curve in teaching curriculum, as many teachers are unaware of the trajectory learners undertake while acquiring core components in grammar. In addition, this study also addresses the need to conduct more research on the acquisition of rote-learned terms and subject clitics in SLA, a topic that has been assessed only in Child Language Acquisition.

Key words: *U-shaped learning model, subject clitics, rote-learning, Child Language Acquisition*

One of the challenges English learners of French (ELFs) face is the acquisition of the difference between *c'est* 'that's' and *il est* 'he is' employed in descriptions. The use of these terms in English does not translate fully into French; hence direct translation from the native language does not infer correct usage in the target one. A number of studies have sought to explain the process of acquisition of French grammatical structures, but there is a lack of data pertaining to this core distinction in an additional language. The present study is a first approach to employ the U-shaped learning model to shed light on the acquisition process of the distinction between *c'est* and *il est* in learners of French as an additional language.

This paper is divided into six main sections: section one is the introduction of the empirical study, the literature review addressing the U-shaped model and the distinction topic presented in section two, section three describes the methods employed, section four reveals the results obtained in light of the study conducted, the discussion and analysis of data retrieved are presented in section five, and finally, the conclusion and the limitations are discussed in section six.

2. Literature Review

This section will demonstrate the importance of grammar in the context of Second Language Teaching, followed by the relevance of Child Language Acquisition in understanding the distinction between *c'est* and *il est* and lastly, a clear presentation and evaluation of the U-shaped learning model will be presented in relation to the study.

2.1 The importance of grammar in Second Language Teaching

Grammar is a useful tool in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourses in a language used as change in means rather than as an end in itself. Through the use of grammar, the learner is *sequentially* exposed to a plethora of rules and developmental phases s/he undertakes in order to attain proficiency. Some languages such as pidgin languages are assumed to have no grammatical

backbone due to their grammarless-like stance with the use of oral discourses only. However, although pidgin languages are thought to be grammarless in structure, all languages have grammatical rules despite the lack of rigid written rules, due to the fact that they serve a function, which is to communicate through meaning and context (Navarro, 2015).

Teaching grammar in second language courses is as impactful as acquiring grammar for a first language. Celce-Murcia (1991) demonstrates, “in spite of the intuitive appeal and the anecdotal evidence supporting proposals for exclusively communicative language teaching, there is equally appealing and convincing anecdotal evidence that a grammarless approach can lead to a development of a broken, ungrammatical form of the target language beyond which students rarely progress” (p. 462). Communicating in a language is as important as employing a grammar-like approach which enable learners to achieve high levels of proficiency and accuracy. Gao (2001) uses the term “catalyst” to describe grammar as a medium to attain fluency and accuracy in second languages (p. 326).

For English learners of French, having a grammatical guidance as a consistent portion of the curriculum will greatly aid in acquiring core parts of the language rather than mere fossilization, in which case the learners acquire lessons prematurely. In addition to rules, Dickens & Woods argue that grammar needs to be taught to convey and interpret meanings (p. 630). In ELF's context, it is very tempting to teach by heavily relying on the textbook and translating from English, which can be perceived as meaningless and similar to a pattern drill to the learner.

As Navarro (2015) conveys, using a meaning-based approach to explain basic connotations such as the addition of the derivational suffix *-ed* to a verb in terms of having a beginning and an ending instead of using the traditional approach where learners are asked to merely add the suffix, leads to more retention and future successful application. Hence, it is imperial to teach second languages as an attempt to convey meaning, regardless of the nature of the lesson, whether it is as basic as preposition use or as advanced as the use of literary devices.

2.2 The relevance of Child Language Acquisition to understanding the distinction between *c'est* and *il est*

The distinction between *c'est* and *il est*. As briefly discussed in the introduction, the translation of *c'est* and *il est* to *that's* and *he is* is not interchangeable. While for some constructions, it is permissible to rely on translation, for most it will be fully uncommunicative if the learner employs the same criteria as in English.

Starting from the basics, where translation can be employed, *c'est* is used with adjectives for non-specific referents or for more general observations (see example 1a). *Il est* is used with adjectives *alone* to describe the masculine gender (see example 1b).

(1a) *C'est* chouette, Maria! *C'est* cool!
'That's neat, Maria! That's cool!'

(1b) *Il est* beau et gentil.
'He is handsome and nice.'

However, it is not synonymous in construction with the description of nouns. Both *c'est* and *il est* cannot be used interchangeably to describe a noun (see example 2). Here, both *c'est* and *il est* are describing *homme* (man), which is a noun. In French, for the sentence to be grammatically correct, description of nouns should be reserved to *c'est*, while use of adjectives *only* should be reserved to *il est* (refer to example 1b). It is important to note that the latter can be used in English to say *he is a young man*, but completely erroneous in French, a distinction that creates confusion in an ELF context.

(2) *C'est* un jeune *homme* (correct)
'**Il est* un jeune *homme* (incorrect)'

Teaching French as a second language for older learners in classrooms can seem mechanical due to its rule-driven nature. The curriculum presents the use of *c'est* first, and then distinguishes its use from *il est*. The use of *c'est* is not presented in a written discourse; it is rather used orally from the beginning of classes (*C'est clair? Is it clear? C'est compris? Understood?*). The learners *acquire* this construction, instead of *learning* it through the use of textbook or more controlled-like instruction, which is saved for the distinction instead. In this context, patterns of French language usage take on a major role. Learners process *C'est* constructions from the French language samples they hear from teacher talk or other sources of aural language.

2.3 The acquisition of the difference between *c'est* and *il est* in Child Language Acquisition.

Research has yet to explain the acquisition process that older learners in EFL context undertake to correctly situate *c'est* and *il est*. It is hoped that through this study, it will be a stepping-stone for more empirical research to be conducted for such developmental explanation.

While researchers have not yet provided explanation for this specific component in French, numerous studies have demonstrated how children under the age of five acquire subject clitics and rote-learned words. Subject clitics are subject pronouns, which “need a verbal host to attach to” (Gotowski, 2015, p.7). An example would be *il est beau*, where *il*, the subject clitic, is attached to *est*, the verbal host. This explanation is misleading partly because *c'est* is also attached to a verb, but it is not a subject clitic.

Myles et al. (1998) defines rote-learned terms as “imitated chunks of unanalyzed language, available for learner use without being derived from generative rules” (p.324). *C'est* is a rote-learned term because it is an unanalysed form, whereby the learner simply acquires the use of it through imitation and repetition during an actual communicative situation. Like explained earlier, one does not follow a rule-based approach for this lesson; it is acquired without the

controlled nature of explicit instruction with which most basic French lessons are presented.

Following the same process as the ELF's context, *c'est* is one of the earliest utterances found in children's speech as early as the age of two, while those of subject clitics do not occur until the age of three (Meisel, 1994). Meisel demonstrates that the acquisition of rote-learned terms occur earlier due to their imitated and non-formulaic nature (p.137). Equally important it is to consider the effect of frequency of this construction in actual usage. Children likely hear adults around them uttering thousands of examples of *C'est* as a multiple-purpose collocation. Subject clitics, by contrast, tend to be more productive and require more analysis on the part of the learner to be employed correctly.

The same acquisition pattern among older learners of French is yet to be studied. The current study seeks to answer the same question: Do older learners of French in ELF contexts acquire rote-learned terms earlier than subject clitics?

2.4 Evaluation of the U-shaped learning model in relation to the acquisition of *c'est* and *il est*

The U-shaped learning model. U-shaped learning occurs when a component that was once correctly used by the learner at a given point, becomes destabilized and is used erroneously but is later used correctly again (Navarro, 2015). Carlucci and Case (2013) explain that the U-shaped learning model has been observed not only in the classroom, but also in "a variety of child development phenomena: understanding of temperature, understanding of weight conservation, object permanence, and face recognition" (p.1).

Teachers may perceive this sudden and unexpected drop in performance as discouraging. However, as Navarro clearly advocates, "after more use and exposure, the learner may figure out the correct form/function relationship, yielding a *restructuring* of the learner language" (2015). Hence, teachers should expect students to experience a U-shaped-like figure in learning since this entails that the learners are becoming more proficient due to the plethora of syntactic patterns made available to them.

Numerous studies have sought to explain the acquisition of structures in language acquisition. However, as Mourssi (2013) advocates, most of the studies conducted are devoted to first language acquisition and that there is still a lack of investigation of the existence of the U-shaped learning model in SLA (p. 110). It is deemed beneficial to rely on Child Language Acquisition to understand developmental phases, which may or may not be transferrable to older learners' acquisition.

A classic study, which supports the U-shaped learning model, is the acquisition of past tense in English. Early in language acquisition, Lorenzo (2013) claims that children "learn correct syntactic forms (call/called, go/went), then undergo a period of ostensible over-regularization in which they attach regular verbs (break/breaked, speak/speaked), and eventually reach a final phase in which they correctly handle both the rule-governed regular past-tense formation and the finitely many exceptions represented by the irregular verbs" (p. 57). This evidence has been supported across many studies (e.g., Hakuta study on a Japanese child learning English; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

The studies conducted appear to speak more to controlled aspects of learning in reference to the U-shaped learning model (e.g., past tense). Lightbrown (2000) sheds light on rote-learned terms (implicit learning based on repetition) in that they can also be perceived as difficult to learners even though they have frequently been exposed to those chunks (p. 444). She cites Harley's (1993) study to demonstrate the difficulty faced by French immersion students in understanding the difference between *je* (the first person singular pronoun) and *j'ai* (have). The rote-learned term *j'ai* and the subject clitic *je* are used interchangeably, which renders more confusion on the part of the learner. Lightbrown explains that Harley's participants are not moving toward successful acquisition of this difference, because "they will have to unlearn, or at least reanalyze, these sentences" (p. 444). After this "reanalysis", the students then will be apt to correctly use *je* and *j'ai* based on the array of syntactic resources available.

It is hypothesized that learners in the ELF's context, like the immersion students in Harvey's study, will utilize the same U-shaped learning model to fully

master the distinction between *c'est* and *il est*. Hence, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How relevant is the U-shaped learning model in the acquisition of the difference between *c'est* and *il est*? (2) Is the *C'est* rote-learned construction acquired before the subject clitic *Il est*?

Evaluation of the U-shaped learning model. O'Reily and Hoeffner (2003) assert that for at least a number of children, a U-shaped curve does exist (as cited in Mourssi, 2013). However, Hoeffner (1997) argues that not all learners demonstrate a U-shaped developmental curve. Even though the U-shaped curve is necessary for full learning power, Carlucci et al (2006), argue that for some aspects of language learning, there was “no return to previously abandoned wrong hypotheses [and] no return to overgeneralizing hypotheses” (as cited in Carlucci and Case, 2013). This is due to the fact that learners who employ non-U-shaped developmental pathways impose *decisiveness*, where they refuse to return to any previously abandoned hypotheses implicitly, in part because the learner continues to output correct hypotheses since the beginning.

Carlucci and Case also advocate that the necessity of U-shaped learning vanishes when learning is confined to infinite languages only (in the context of *Memoryless Feedback Learning*). Overall, it can be inferred that humans exhibit U-shaped developmental phase in order to acquire core parts of the language due to the *cognitive* stance required on the learner's part.

3. Method

This section discusses the subjects of the study, followed by an explanation of the procedure and instrument used.

3.1 Participants

The participants were students from a French beginner course taught at a major institution of tertiary education in Canada. A total of fifteen students participated (age range 18-24). From these, 53.33% (N=8) spoke English as their first language

and the remainder learned English at the age of five to seven, which falls in the critical period of language learning. Moreover, 40% (N=6) of the participants were bilingual speakers of English and Mandarin/Farsi/Cantonese/ Spanish as first language. As to gender, 87% (N=13) were females and 13% (N=2) were males.

It is important to mention that three of the participants had more exposure to the French language than the rest of the group. These students traveled to France. However, they were still considered beginner learners due to low scores in the placement tests written prior to taking the course.

3.2 Instrument

Pen and paper were used for the simple sentences written compositions in Week 1 and 3. In Week 1, students were asked to write simple sentences to describe the university campus. In Week 3, a composition of around 100 words was assigned in class and students were asked to describe the campus and student community. This was a relevant topic considering the rich ethnocultural composition of the community that studies at this university. The participants were not allowed any dictionary or additional resources during the time they wrote the compositions.

In Week 6, participants were given a questionnaire with one closed question in French, which was completed in class. The questionnaire was prepared by the teacher and it tested for whether students understood when to use *c'est* and *il est* - general description or describing a male gender (see figure 3 for question).

3.3 Procedure

Participants' understanding of the distinction between *c'est* and *il est* was tested thrice using the pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test method. At the beginning of the semester (week 1), students were asked to write simple sentences by using the *c'est* construction only after constant repetition of the term from the teacher. Only written sentences were collected (no oral data). Following the course

curriculum, *C'est* was introduced first (i.e., without *il est*). The latter construction was only presented in Week (3).

During the third week, immediately after being taught the difference between *c'est* and *il est*, students produced compositions with both *c'est* and *il est* occurrences. Finally, in week six, a questionnaire was given to them where one question was asked to test for acquisition of these two core terms in French grammar (see 3 for sample question). They were informed that the question was not for marks and that it was merely a comprehension exercise. This disclaimer was intentional so as to maintain anxiety levels under control during the task.

- (3) *Le café à UCB est très cher! ____ (C'est/Il est) incroyable!*
'Coffee at UBC is very expensive! ____ (That's/He is)
unbelievable!'

3.1 Marking procedure

In Week 1, simple sentences comprised of the *c'est* construction were marked as either right or wrong. For instance, if students used "*est beau*" instead of "*c'est beau*" to describe the campus, the sentence would be changed to the correct form with an explanation of why *c'est* is needed.

In Week 3, a composition was assigned as an in-class assignment to describe not only the campus but also the students on it. If the student used "*c'est un homme*" instead of "*il est un homme*" to describe a male figure, the sentence will be changed and a explanation such as "Use *il est* to describe a male figure" would be added to the composition.

Lastly, for the question on the questionnaire administered in Week 6, if students used "*Il est incroyable*" instead of "*C'est incroyable*", an explanation such as "If you are describing the coffee at UBC, use *c'est*. *Il est* is only used for male gender descriptions).

4. Results

This section will present the findings of the tasks administered at the three different time intervals mentioned in the following order: the introduction of the rote-learned term, *c'est*; instruction of the difference between *c'est* and *il est*; final acquisition test on the distinct application of *c'est* and *il est*.

4.1 The introduction of the rote-learned term, *c'est*?

In Week 1, after repetition and in-class activities of the construction, *c'est*, students were asked to produce sentences by employing the learned term. Out of 15 randomly selected students, 87% (N=13) delivered correct sentences (see Figure 1). The teacher constantly used the term in most of her sentences at the very beginning of the course (i.e., positive evidence). In turn, students were able to use *c'est* correctly while conversing with their peers and the teacher during in-class activities (i.e., input flooding). They were also able to correctly employ the term in short sentences given to test for their acquisition in class. As mentioned, only the short sentences were used as data for the study.

4.2 The instruction of the difference between *c'est* and *il est*

In Week 3, students were introduced to the use of the subject clitic, *il est*. As mentioned above, the challenging aspect for French language learners is that they can perceive the clitic pronoun as being similar to the *c'est* construction. Immediately after an in-class lesson with explicit instruction on the core differences between both target constructions (*c'est* and *il est*), students were asked to write a short composition employing both terms. Out of the same 15 students who participated in the first task (producing sentences with *c'est*), only 40% (N=6) used both correctly (see Figure 1). In other words, less than fifty per cent of the students were able to associate adjectives with *c'est* and nouns with *il est*.

The remainder of the students (N=9) used both terms interchangeably, where *il est* was used for general observation and *c'est* was used for describing a

male figure. Overall, students' performance dropped significantly compared to Week 1.

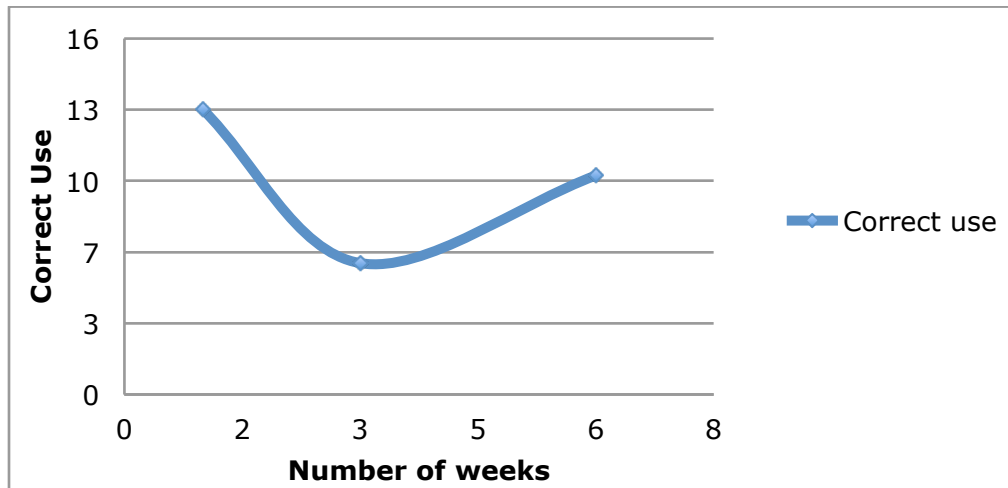


Figure 1. Learners' written use of *C'est* and *Il est* during Week 1, Week 3, Week

6.

See Figure 2 below as an example of inaccurate uses of the target constructions. One student used the word *c'il*, a neologism of *c'est* and *il est* and a non-existent construction in French, indicating confusion on the part of that learner.

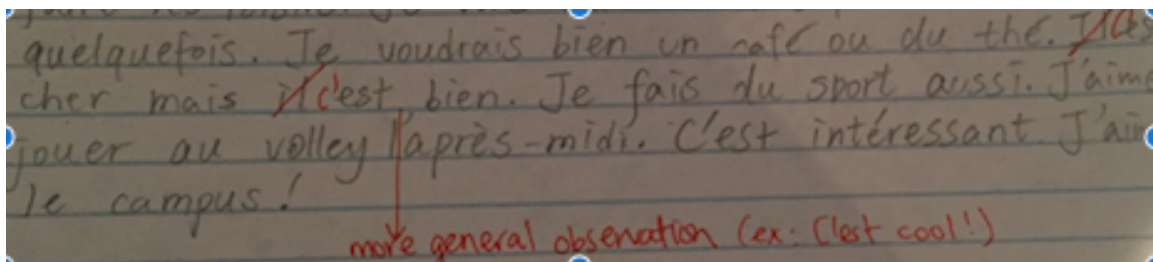


Figure 2. A sample of a student's composition written in Week 3. The student used *il est* instead of *c'est*.

4.3 Final acquisition test on the distinct application of *c'est* and *il est*.

In Week 6, during the first day of class, students were told to respond to one question (*Le café à UCB est très cher! __ (C'est/Il est) incroyable*). Out of 15 students, 67% (N=10) did not use the two constructions interchangeably. Instead, they apply both constructions correctly. These results suggested that students could identify the difference between *c'est* and *il est* at least for replying to an oral instruction. This was further validated by their correct response on the written questionnaire.

The analysis of a comparison at all intervals of the *same* 15 students' work was conducted to ensure consistency and validity of the results. Students' written sentences in Week 1 and compositions in Week 3 were compared, where there was clear evidence of a drop in performance on the use of *C'est*. In Week 6, the written questionnaire demonstrated a rise in performance in the acquisition of both terms, whereby students correctly used *c'est* for describing the coffee at UBC. All data were collected in a grade book, created in *Microsoft Excel*. Figure 3 below shows a sample of the spread sheet containing the number of students' correct responses across the three weeks of data collection. Notice the sudden drop in performance in Week 3.

Weeks	Correct use
1	13
3	6
6	10

Figure 3. Data comparing the correct usage of terms in Week 1, Week 3, and Week 6.

5. Discussion

This section discusses this study's findings in the following order: The relevance of the U-shaped model in the acquisition of the difference between *c'est* and *il est* and the acquisition of rote-learned terms before subject clitics among older learners of French in the ELF context.

5.1 The relevance of the U-shaped model in the acquisition of the difference between *c'est* and *il est*.

As Figure 1 shows, the data on how many correct written productions of the target constructions were made at three different time intervals by students. The shape of the line joining the three intervals shows in fact a U-shaped curve. Drawing on the definition by Carlucci and Case (2013), the participants retained 87% of *c'est* correctly in order to produce written statements; failed to correctly distinguish between *il est* and *c'est* after a lesson on that topic (40% correct); to show signs of mastering the difference of both constructions in the third time interval (67% correct).

Figure 2 shows the usage of *il est* instead of *c'est* to connote a general observation. After the introduction of *il est* in Week 3, the student appeared to have discarded the lesson from the first week and employed a subject clitic instead. In other words, the student failed to account for the first grammatical rule acquired regarding the use of *c'est* for general declarations. Of course, this was not a rule that received explicit instruction as we mentioned earlier. Students were expected to learn it implicitly from input. Encouraging though it was to realize that this same student answered the question correctly in Week 6!

As teachers, it is very typical to be disheartened by students' sudden drop in performance. This drop can be erroneously allocated to failure of the teacher as a professional or to the learners as not being able to perform in the target language as expected. However, as my results suggested, learners eventually return to the previously abandoned correct conjecture. Performance in Week 3 was perhaps necessary in order for learners to restructure their in-depth knowledge of the rules (i.e., *intake*) that define the usage of *c'est* and *il est*. This restructuring will eventually aid in acquiring a certain level of expertise (Baylor, 2001).

Bowerman (1982, p. 84) presents a learning strategic-based explanation on the results obtained in this study. She argues that U-shaped learning curves “occur in situations where there is a general rule that applies to most cases, but in which there are also a limited number of irregular instances that violate the rule”. In Week 1, the material of the rote-learned term was presented as a “general rule” without

“exceptions”, which may explain as to why 87% of the students grasped the lesson successfully. However, in Week 3, the introduction of *il est* was perhaps perceived by students as an *exception* to the rule. That is, one uses *il est* instead of *c’est* to describe adjectives only. As seen earlier, students need to be wary of whether adjectives are being employed or observations are being described.

Bowerman (1982) concludes by advocating that the solution to grasping the general rule with its exceptions is to adhere closely to the rule and to memorize the exceptions (p.86). After a three week period of exposure to the regularities and exceptions in the form of homework exercises and frequent oral discourses reinforced by the teacher, students eventually acquired the difference between *c’est* and *il est* (in Week 6).

Mourssi (2013) argues, “It cannot be claimed that the U-shaped learning model is relevant to Second Language Acquisition” (p.116). He conducted a study to test the relevance of the U-shaped learning model to the acquisition of the simple past tense in the Arab learners of English context. He asserts that while a U-shaped curve can be seen in child language and first language acquisition, it cannot be extended to second language classrooms. In his study, although the majority of students showed substantial knowledge of the simple past tense forms “left, went, came, gave, took” at the first stage, there was little evidence of the U-shaped learning model on the beginning, middle and end phases of this investigation. He explains that the invalidation of the U-shaped curve can be explained due to a rather short experimental procedure (four months) on a difficult topic, which cannot be categorized as comprehensive by learners (p.114).

Mourssi’s argument could explain the reason as to why five out of 15 students in the current study failed to respond correctly to the last question in Week 6. However, five as a number is negligible to extend such a powerful statement to the whole study. Other factors such as motivation and the controlled environment might also be considered as explanations.

The results by Mourssi’s were displayed as three writings completed by the participants. However, it was unclear whether the U-shaped model was disproved in the first, middle or final stage. Having some clarity on that aspect would have been

more enlightening as to why the U-shaped learning model was irrelevant to the acquisition of the simple past in the Arab learners of English. Such clarification would have aided to shed light on the limitations of the study, where decisiveness or time could have been confounding variables.

The present study contains French beginner students who have not been entirely exposed to the French language – some who claimed that they have been were tested at the beginning of the course. The placement tests reported a poor score, which indicate that they were not proficient in the language. Hence all learners were at the same proficiency level prior to starting the course. Moreover, this study demonstrates clearly when participants experienced confusion – when another term, *il est*, which can be perceived as ‘similar’ to *c’est*, was introduced in the syllabus.

5.2 The acquisition of rote-learned terms before subject clitics among older learners of French in the ELF context.

As expounded by previous research, children under the age of five, acquire rote-learned terms before subject clitics due to the repetition and less productive nature of the former (Meisel, 1994). The field of language acquisition suffered from a lack of studies on the same aspect with respect to older learners. The current study provided suggestive evidence that adult ELF students learned a rote-learned term first. Despite preliminary, findings from the present study suggested that the fifteen students could use the *c’est* construction before mastering the core difference between *c’est* and *il est*.

Through the short composition in the second phase of the study (Week 3), it can be inferred that *c’est* was used more than *il est* (even though it was a wrong usage), denoting that participants conformed more to the general rule than the exception. At that time, *il est* was still fairly new to their grammatical repertoire, hence they were more prone to confounding with *c’est*. This finding explains the reason why French language curriculum presents the syllabus in such a fashion: *c’est* followed by *il est* followed by the distinction between both. Drawing on child

language acquisition, it recognizes that learners will in fact fare better if the material is taught in that manner, even if they are confronted with a U-shaped learning curve, which as argued in this paper, is necessary.

6. Conclusion

This study has explained the importance of the curve to understanding the plethora of conjectures undertaken by English learners of French to acquire the difference between *c'est* and *il est*. Moreover, it has also yielded suggestive evidence with respect to the acquisition of rote-learned terms before subject clitics among older learners, a validation that was once posited in child language acquisition only. The evidence however should not be generalized to all rote-learned and subject clitics of the French language. More realistically, these findings should be taken as a stepping-stone to provide a stronger empirical backbone to the French language curriculum. And further investigation is indeed in order.

As discussed, language teachers often feel discouraged when they suddenly see that students appear to regress in performance. It may be beneficial to inform teachers that after the addition of a grammatical concept, learners may experience confusion. Hence, teachers will be prepared to understand that this cognitive-developmental trajectory is expected for acquisition. Whether students will follow a similar sequence for all new constructions they learn is a topic we would like to further investigate (cf. Mourssi, 2013).

6.1 Limitations

This study bears some limitations in regard to the length of time and the number of questions asked in the questionnaire administered in Week 6. Having a longer period of data collection (e.g., Week 1, Week 6, Week 12) would have yielded a more consistent and valid result. The students would be expected to have had more time to work on the retention and acquisition between the difference of *c'est* and *il est*. In addition, participants should be asked more questions to better test for that

acquisition – merely asking one question in a questionnaire does not necessarily imply that learners have acquired a distinct lesson. Further research should address these limitations.

In sum, the present study shed light on the developmental order that older learners undertake to acquire rote-learned terms and subject clitics. This is a topic that demands more rigorous empirical scrutiny. Whatever the future approach, the field of SLA should consider enlightening second language teachers on how influential the U-shaped model is to human learning through brief reminders of its impact during training. Reminder of this developmental process should also be included in instructional materials.

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