THE ACQUISITION OF FIVE ENGLISH SENTENTIAL STRUCTURES
BY NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ARABIC

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ABSTRACT

This cross-dimensional, exploratory study attempts at investigating the acquisition order of five sentential structures by native speakers of Arabic. A natural elicitation technique, in the form of a test written in English, was given to the 1177 subjects of the study. The questions of the test were about the familiar topic of the best friend. Each of these sentences was intended to test a certain number of rules. The subjects' responses were analysed by using modified forms of Burt and Dulay (1980) techniques for scoring the subjects' responses and for calculating the group scores. It was found out that structurally simpler sentences were acquired before the more complex ones. Also the sentences which had forms similar to Arabic forms were acquired before those that did not have forms similar to any of the Arabic forms. Moreover, it was also found that the study of English literature as well as extensive reading for pleasure had positive effects on the rate with which the subjects acquired these sentences.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Marina K. Burt and Heidi Dulay (1980: 266) make the point that 'over and above the provision of theoretical guidance, acquisition order studies could also provide practical guidance in the development of curricula and materials.' The same idea is emphasised by S. P. Corder (1981: 2) who observes that, 'if we could establish the natural order in which a knowledge of the second language is gradually built up by the learner, the materials, particularly the structural syllabus, could be graded upon more solid basis than the current one, which is a mixture of some concept of usefulness and some idea of linguistic dependency, but certainly not on any psycholinguistic evidence of language learning.' Presently, acquisition order studies (hereafter AOS) may not be able to fully assist in the development of materials and curricula. Firstly, AOS seem to be more concerned with the theoretical questions of second language acquisition, than with the practical applications of research findings. The question that seems to be foremost in the minds of many researchers is whether there is a universal path followed by all second language learners regardless of their linguistic background. Ervin Tripp (1978: 191) has observed that' writing on child language, particularly in the Chomskyan tradition has been more theoretical research, less applied.'.(See also Burt and

Dulay 1980 for a review of the literature). Secondly, most of the focus of AOS appears to be on the acquisition order of morphemes and more specifically on functors, 'because they are easily elicited, almost any verbal utterance contains several and it is also fairly easy to determine whether they are used correctly' (Dulay and Burt, 1978: 349). Even some of the few studies which investigated whole sentential structures, such as, Ravem, (1974), Ervin Tripp (1974), Cancino et al (1978) and Bailey et al (1978) among some others were mainly interested in the theoretical question of whether the errors made by second language learners are developmental or interference errors. One further point standing in the way of carrying out research to help us in the better understanding of the foreign language learning process, so as to write teaching materials and syllabi based on research findings, may be the need felt by some authorities in the field for carrying out longitudinal, rather than cross-dimensional research (Burt, M. and Dulay, H., 1980, Pit Corder, 1981). Undoubtedly, the results of longitudinal research can be more valid than the results of cross-dimensional research, but it must be pointed out that longitudinal research is very difficult, if not, in certain cases, impossible to carry out, especially for a large group of children following a formal school programme.(1)

In order that AOS could have a greater relevance to and a more direct impact on the develompment of materials and curricula, we need to focus more on the following. On the one hand, more attention needs to be devoted to the investigation of whole sentential structures, so that it might be possible to conclude that structure X is acquired earlier than structures Y and Z, and that structure Y is acquired earlier than stucture Z, etc. On the other hand, there is also a need to investigate the factors that influence the acquisition of these forms in a formal school programme. Then it might be possible to make more scientific decisions concerning the selection and grading of teaching materials (S.P. Corder, 1981). It is needless to emphasise that this is the kind of research that teachers and learners of English as a foreign language are crying for. Therefore, this exploratory study will respond to this long felt need by attempting to offer answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the acquisition order of the five sentential structures being investigated (see below)?

2. What progress do the subjects make in the acquisition of the five senten-
   tial structures?

3. Do learners who have the same linguistic background, but of different
   academic achievement exhibit the same or different acquisition orders?

4. What advice can be given to course and textbook writers for the Arab
   World?

M E T H O D

Subjects

The subjects of the study were one thousand one hundred and seventy-
seven male and female preparatory and secondary school Sudanese stu-
dents, who are all native speakers of Arabic. The schools were all in the Great-
er Khartoum Education District. In order to have a representative sample,
the subjects were drawn from schools representing three different levels of
academic achievement, i.e. high, average, and low. This was done after con-
sultation with the Education Officers of the Greater Khartoum Education Dis-
trict.The Education Officers did not seem to have difficulty in classifying the
schools into the three different levels of academic achievement. This was be-
cause in the Sudan students sit for a highly competetive entrance examina-
tion at the end of each of the three educational stages (i.e. primary 6 years,
preparatory 3 years and secondary 3 years). The promotion of the students
to the higher educational stage depends on their performance in the entrance
examinations. Moreover, The Greater Khartoum Education Authority
streamed the students mainly on their examination results.

One further point to add about the population is that in Sudanese schools
pupils are usually devided into science and literary sections from the second
year of secondary schools, i.e. from grade 11. Students who excel in science
subjects and måthematics opt for the science section, whereas students
who do not excel in these disciplines are enrolled in the literary sections.
Generally speaking students of lower academic achievement go to the liter-
ary section, while students of high academic achievement go to the science
section. The subjects in this study, who represent the low academic achieve-
ment, are from the literary sections.

Modes of data collection:

A natural elicitation technique was used. This was done by writing a test in English consisting of five open-ended, restricted questions(2). The focus of the questions was on the familiar topic of the best friend. The five questions were:

1. Who is your best friend?
2. Where did you meet?
3. For how long have you known her/him?
4. Where does she/he live?
5. Is your friend English?

Question 1 was mainly intended to test the subjects' ability to produce NP + Vbe + C structures and verb subject concord. Question 2 was intended to test the subjects' ability, a) to produce N + Ved + PO structures, b) to respond in the past to questions about past events, and c) to use correct prepositions of place. Question 3 was to test the subjects' ability, a) to produce, N + have + Ven + Np structures, b) to respond in the present perfect tense to questions using the present perfect tense, i.e. enquiring about present events that have started in the past, and c) subject verb concord. The purpose of question 4 was to test the subjects' ability, a) to produce NP – Vs + PO structures, b) to respond in the present tense to questions enquiring about present events, c) to produce correct subject-verb concord and d) to use correct prepositions of time. The purpose of question 5 was mainly to test the subjects' ability to use negative structures. It was assumed that very few of the subjects would have English friends and that therefore most of the subjects would reply in the negative to this question.

Since English is taught in the Sudan from first year preparatory school i.e. grade 7, to the end of the secondary school i.e. grade 12, the test was given to a representative sample of the students in grades 8 to 12. This means that the subjects in grade 8 had about one year and three months of English, the subjects in grade 9 had about two years and three months of English, while the subjects in grade 12 had about five years and three months of English.

Data analysis.

In order to answer the first three research questions, the percent of accuracy for each structure was computed. This was done by using modified versions of Marina K. Burt and Heidi Dulay(1980) techniques for scoring the subjects' responses as well as for calculating the group score. To answer question 1, for instance, the researcher checked and scored each of the subjects' five responses according to an elaborate marking scheme, details of which can be supplied on request. However, its basic features are as follows. First, each of the five sentences was assigned a certain value which will be referred to as the expected score or developed form value (Burt and Dulay, 1980). Second, one point was subtracted whenever a subject omitted a form. Third, 1/2 a point was subtracted every time a subject used a wrong form of a morpheme, etc. To compute the percent of accuracy in the acquisition of any of the five stuctures, for a certain group of subjects, the developed form value for that structure was multiplied by the number of subjects in the group, i.e. each school year.Then, the actual scores obtained by the subjects in each school year, for that structure was totalled to give the actual score for a particular group of subjects. Finally, the actual score for the particular sentential structure for a whole group of subjects was divided by the developed form value or the expected score, and the resulting quotient was multiplied by 100. This produced the percent of accuracy in using a certain structure by a particular group of subjects. In addition to this, each of the subjects' five scores, plus other personal data, such as the subject's sex, school year, academic level were all entered into the Prime 250 Computer. This made it possible to carry out a number of statistical operations, viz. frequency counts to find out the number and percent of subjects who produced correct responses etc., correlations, and the sum of the subjects' actual scores for each of the five structures.

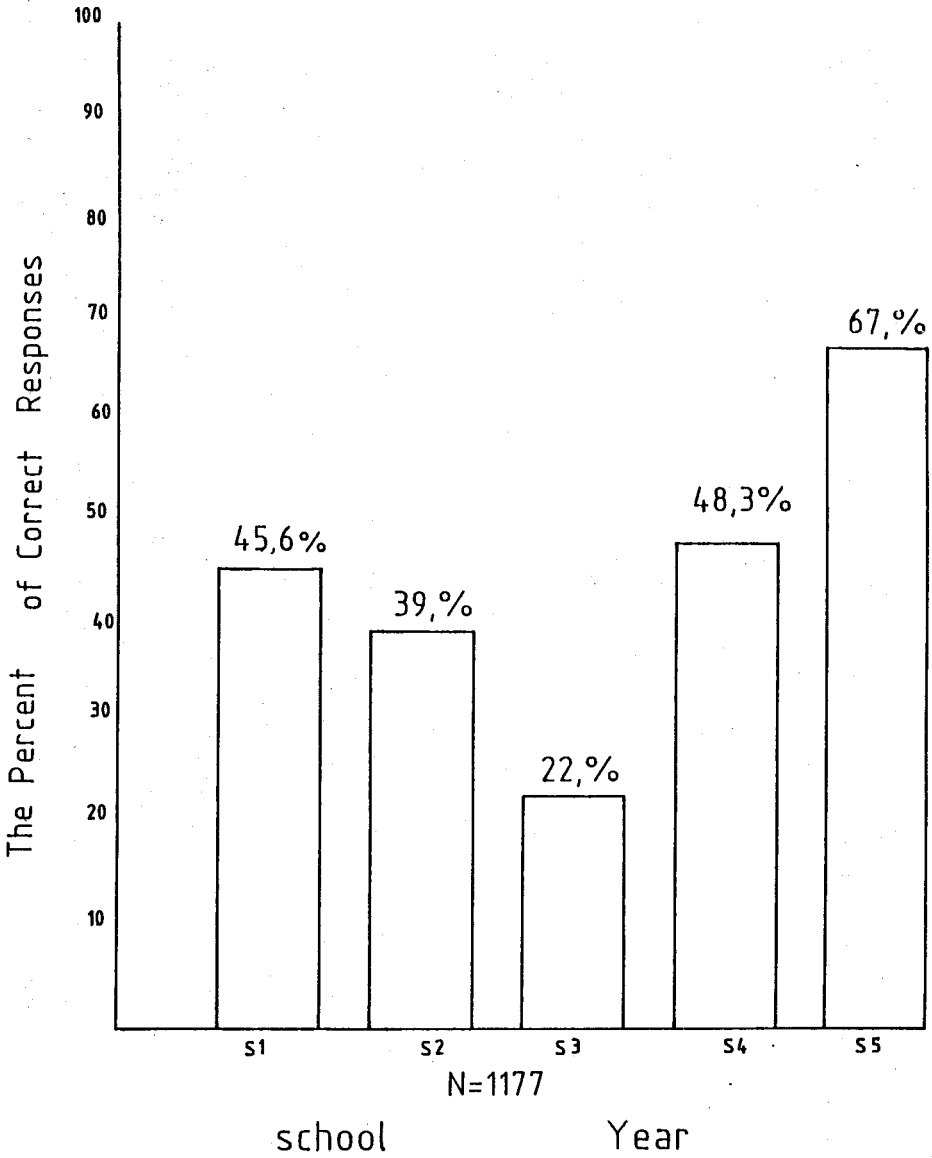**Fig. (1)** : The Percent of Subjects who formed correctly each of the five sentential structures.
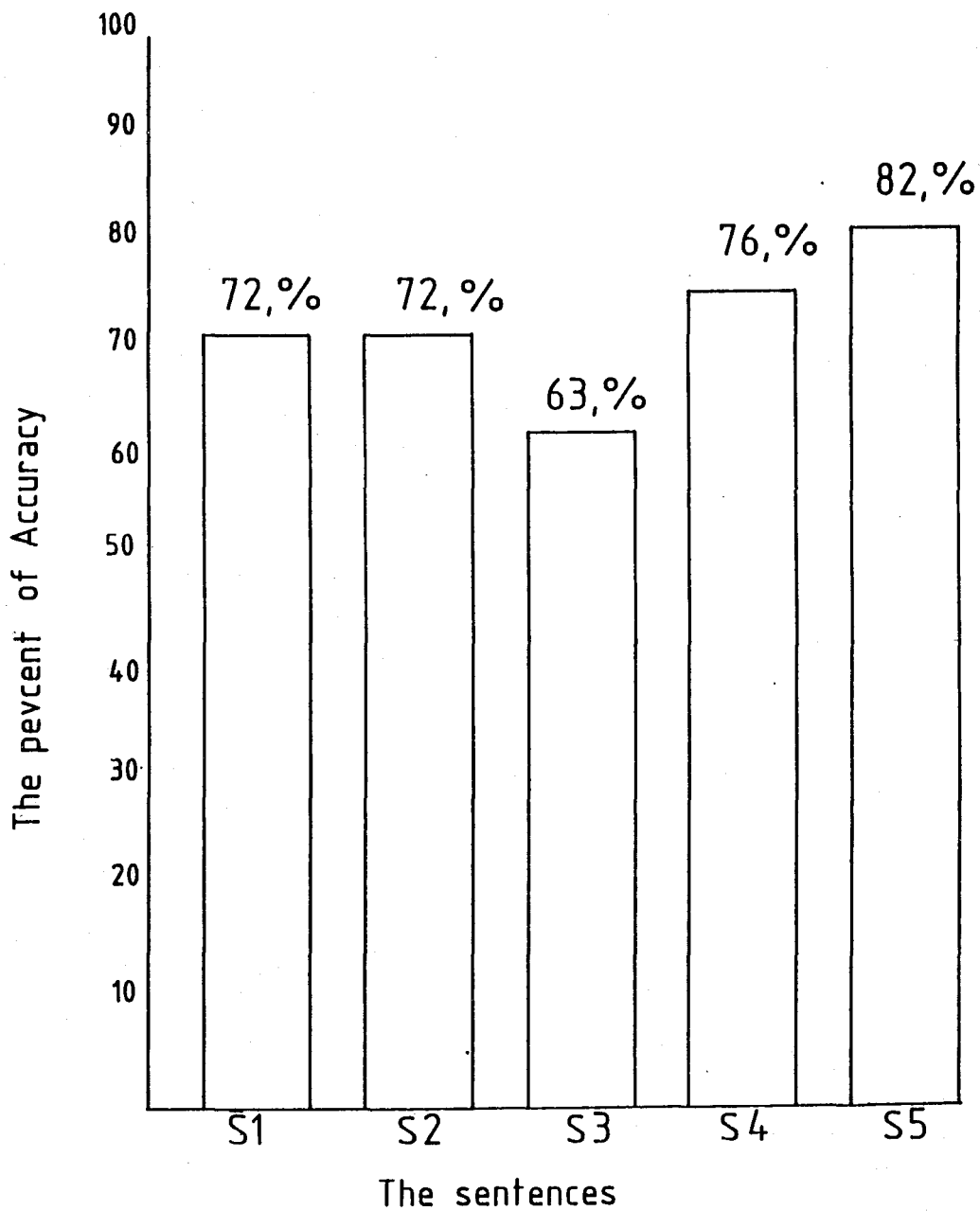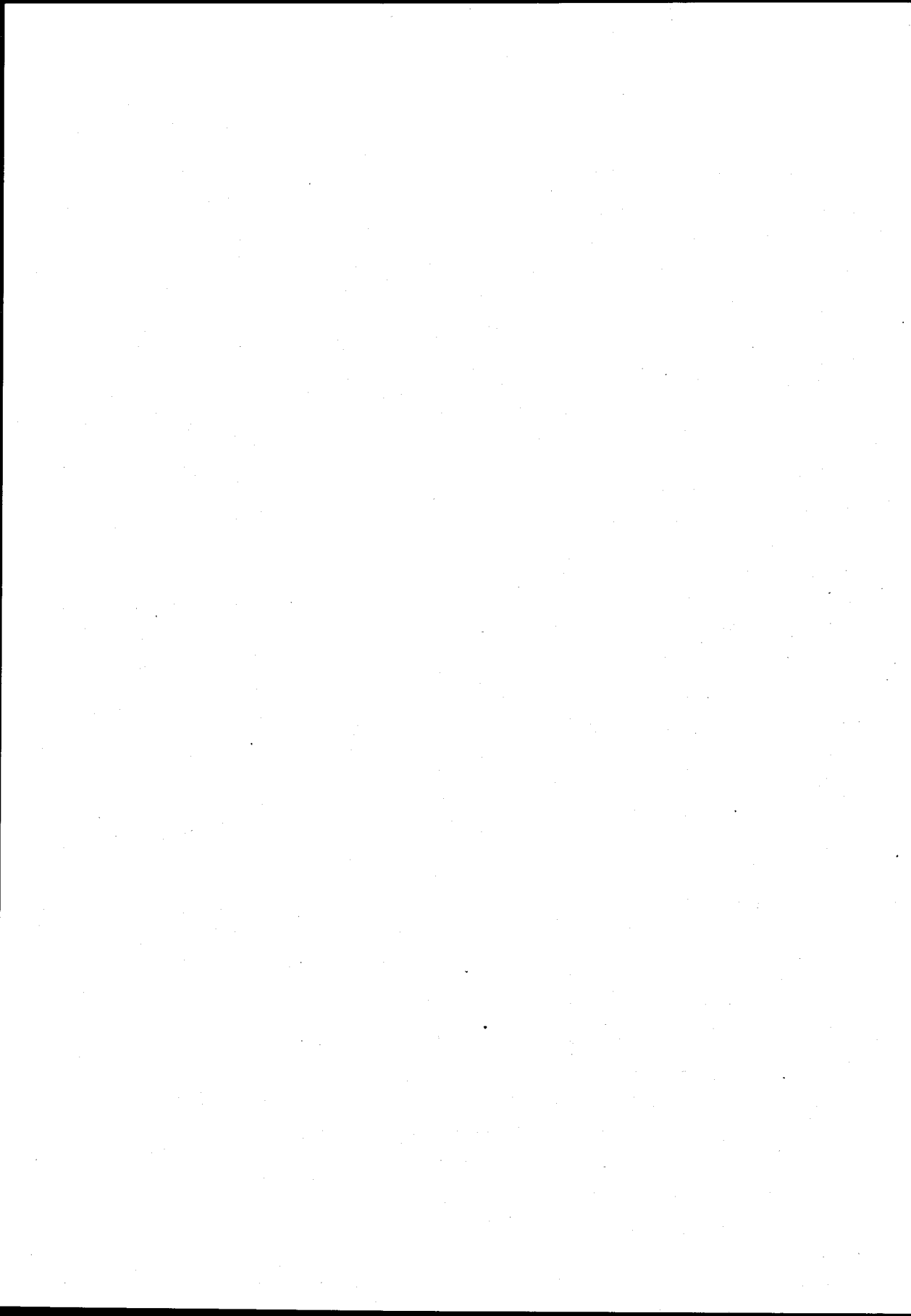
Fig. (2) : The Percent of accuracy for the acquisition of each of the five sentential structures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research question 1: What is the acquisition order of the five sentential structures?

An attempt was made to answer this question by using two different kinds of techniques, namely the Percent of Accuracy Method (see data analysis above) and the percent of subjects who actually formed each sentence correctly i.e. the Percent of Correct Responses Method. Fig. 1 presents the percent of correct responses achieved by the whole population for each of the five sentential structures, while Fig 2 presents the percent of accuracy for the acquisition of the same structures. The following findings may be suggested by these two figures. Firstly, there seems to be a large degree of congruence between the two results. There is agreement between the two results on the acquisition order of sentences 3, 4 and 5. Both figures suggest that sentence 5 was the easiest to acquire, sentence 4 the second in order of acquisition, and that sentence 3 was the most difficult to acquire. However, the two figures slightly differ as to the acquisition order of sentences 1 and 2. Fig. 1 suggests that sentence 1 is third in order of acquisition and sentence 2 is fourth in order of acquisition. Fig. 2, however, suggests that both sentences 1 and 2 have the same order of acquisition, i.e. they come third in order of acquisition. Moreover, a Spearman rank order coefficient of .97 was computed (p .01.).

Secondly, by and large the degree of acquiring the five sentential structures seems to be quite low. This is specially true of the results presented in Fig. 1. Here the percent of subjects who actually formed grammatically acceptable sentences does not excede 67.5%, for the easiest of the sentences, and falls down to 22.1%, for the most difficult of the sentences (see Research Question 2 for further discussion of this point). Thirdly, the results presented in Fig. 2 seem to be higher than those in Fig. 1, because the former gives some credit to an even faulty attempt, whereas the percent of correct responses method gives credit to the absolutely grammatically correct answers only.

We may now attempt to make sense of these results. First, why does sentence 5, which is a negative transformation, seem to be the easiest sentence

to acquire? It is even easier to acquire than sentence 1, which does not only have the same surface structure, but is an affirmative sentence and not a negative one. How then can we explain the observation that a negative transformation is acquired earlier than the kernel sentence? The researcher would like to argue that sentences 1 and 5 are not so much testing the acquisition of affirmative and negative sentences, as testing the acquisition of simple and complex NP stuctures. To answer question 1: 'Who is your best friend?', one needs to use a relatively complex NP, e.g., 'My best friend...,' either as the subject or complement of the sentence. But one needs to use a simple pronoun, 'she'/'he', when answering the other questions, including question 5 (Is your friend English?) Tables 1 and 2 below provide strong evidence in support of this claim. It may be observed from Tables 1 and 2 that there does not seem to be a marked difference between the two results in the subjects' use of the Cop (56.4 c/f 54.2). There is a marked difference, however, between the two results in the percent of accuracy for the NP (59.7 c/f 81.2). This suggests that the subjects seem to have some difficulty in using a complex NP. Furthermore, the subjects do not seem to have great difficulty in the acquistion of the English negation markers, i.e. 'no' and 'not'. (see Table 2). This may be due to the fact English negative transformations are not very different from Arabic negative transformations. Both Arabic (colloguial Sudanese) and English use two negative markers, one of them intially and the second medially. Evidence in support of the observation that simple structures are acquired before complex structures can be obtained from the studies of R. Brown (1973) and Fathman (1975).

Table (1)
The percent of accuracy for the acquisition of
the linguistic forms in sentence 1.

NP	COP	C	Word Order
59.7	56.4	87.2	84.7

Table (2)
The percent of accuracy for the acquisition of
the linguistic forms in sentence 5.

NO	NP	COP	NOT	C	W.Order
94.3	81.2	54.2	83.6	95.7	86.2

A second reason why the subjects seem to do better in answering Q. 5 than in answering Q. 1, could be the fact that there were more alternatives for answering Q. 5, than there were for answering Q 1 (see Table 3). It may be observed from Table 3 that 25% of the subjects used: 'No, she/he is Sudanese.' Had they used 'English' instead of 'Sudanese', as the complement of the sentence, they would have had to use a full negative sentence. It is very possible that these subjects have deliberately done this in order to avoid using a full negative sentence (see Schachter 1974 for discussion of avoidance strategies). It will be argued later that this avoidance strategy was used more by the high achievers than by the low achievers. It is, therefore, possible to surmise that some of the subjects have deliberately avoided to give a full negative answer to question 5. If this is accepted, then it may be necessary to exclude the 21 subjects, who gave a positive answer to Q. 5 as well as the 295 subjects who used: No, she/he is Sudanese. Then it may be possible to have a 'purer' measure of the subjects' ability to form negative sentences. This reanalysis reduced the percent of accuracy for the acquisition of sentence 5 from 82.6% (see Fig. 2) to 76.3%. It would, therefore, no longer be the easiest sentence to acquire, but it is still easier to acquire than sentence 1 (72.0%). This suggests that the thesis we put forward earlier that the difference in the acquisition order of sentences 1 and 5 is due to the fact that sentence 1 requires the use of a coplex NP, while sentence 5 does not require the use of a complex NP might be correct.

Table (3)
A summary of the answers given in
response to Q:5 'Is your friend English?

ANSWERS	FREQUENCIES	%
Yes, she/he is English.	21	1.8
No, She/he is Sudanese.	295	25.1
No, She/he isn't English.	284	24.1
No, She/he isn't.	83	7.1
No, She/he is not.	53	4.5
No, She / he is not English.	17	1.4
No, She/he not English.	112	9.5
No, She/he Sudanese.	27	2.3
No, She/he English.	21	1.8
not English.	12	1.0
is not English	11	.9
NO	85	7.3
Yes	12	1.0
Sudanese	36	3.1
NO response	108	9.1
TOTAL	1177	100

Secondly, how are we to explain the finding that sentence 4 (Pro + Vs + Perp + O) is second in order of acquisition by the two methods of analysis? And why does sentence 2 (Pro + Ved + PP + Pr + e + O) seem to be acquired later than sentence 4 (see Figs. 1 and 2), though both sentences have more or less a similar surface structure? Is the observed difference due to the fact that each of the two sentences uses a different verb tense? The researcher would like to argue that the observed difference in the acquisiton of sentences 2 and 4 provides us with further evidence that of any two sentenctial structures the simpler structure is acquired first. Therefore, the researcher would like to argue that sentence 4 is acquired earlier than sentence 2, because it has a simpler structure, i.e. it contains less functors. And that the difference in their acquisition order is not altogether due to the difference in the tense being used in each of the two sentences. In order to verify this claim, we had to calculate the percent of accuracy for the acquisition of the linguistic forms in each of sentences 2 and 4. Tables 4 and 5 present the result of this analysis. It may be interesting to point out that the difference in the acquisition order of sentences 2 and 4 is not so much due to the difference in the tenses used in each sentence, but to the fact that sentence 2 uses a personal pronoun (pp) 'him/her', while sentence 4 does not. It may be observed that the item which has the lowest percent of accuracy is the personal pronoun 'him'/'her' (52.4%) and not the two tense markers, i.e. 'ed' (73.6%) and 's' (68.3%). Hamed el Nil el Fadil (1986) has found that Arab learners find great difficulty with English personal pronouns. It may also be interesting to observe that the subjects do not seem to have difficulty in the acquisition of 'in' as a preposition of time, because its use in English is very similar to its use in Arabic.

Table (4)
The percent of accuracy for the acquisition of
the morhpemes in sentence 2:

Pro	MV	ed	PP	Pre	O	W.O.
92.	76.3	73.6	52.4	87.6	93.7	83.5

Table (5)
The percent of accuracy for the acquisition of
the morhpemes in sentence 4.

Pro	MV	s	Pre	O	W.Order
90.3	78.7	68.3	89.4	94.6	85.7

Thirdly, why does sentence 3 seem to be the most difficult sentence to acquire? There is a simple answer to this question. Sentence 3 is the most complex of the five sentences. Not only does it consist of more linguistic forms, but it reqires a larger number of transformations, which are not used in Arabic, because the present perfect tense does not exist in Arabic.

Table (6)
The percent of accuracy for the acquisition of
the morhpemes in sentence 3.

Pro	have	MV	en	PP	Pre	D	Adv	s	W.O.
94.6	68.4	76.3	56.7	49.8	84.7	89.2	92.6	39.4	63.8

Fig. (3) : The acquisition sequence of five English sentences by native speakers of Arabic (using Burt and Dulay's Group score Method).
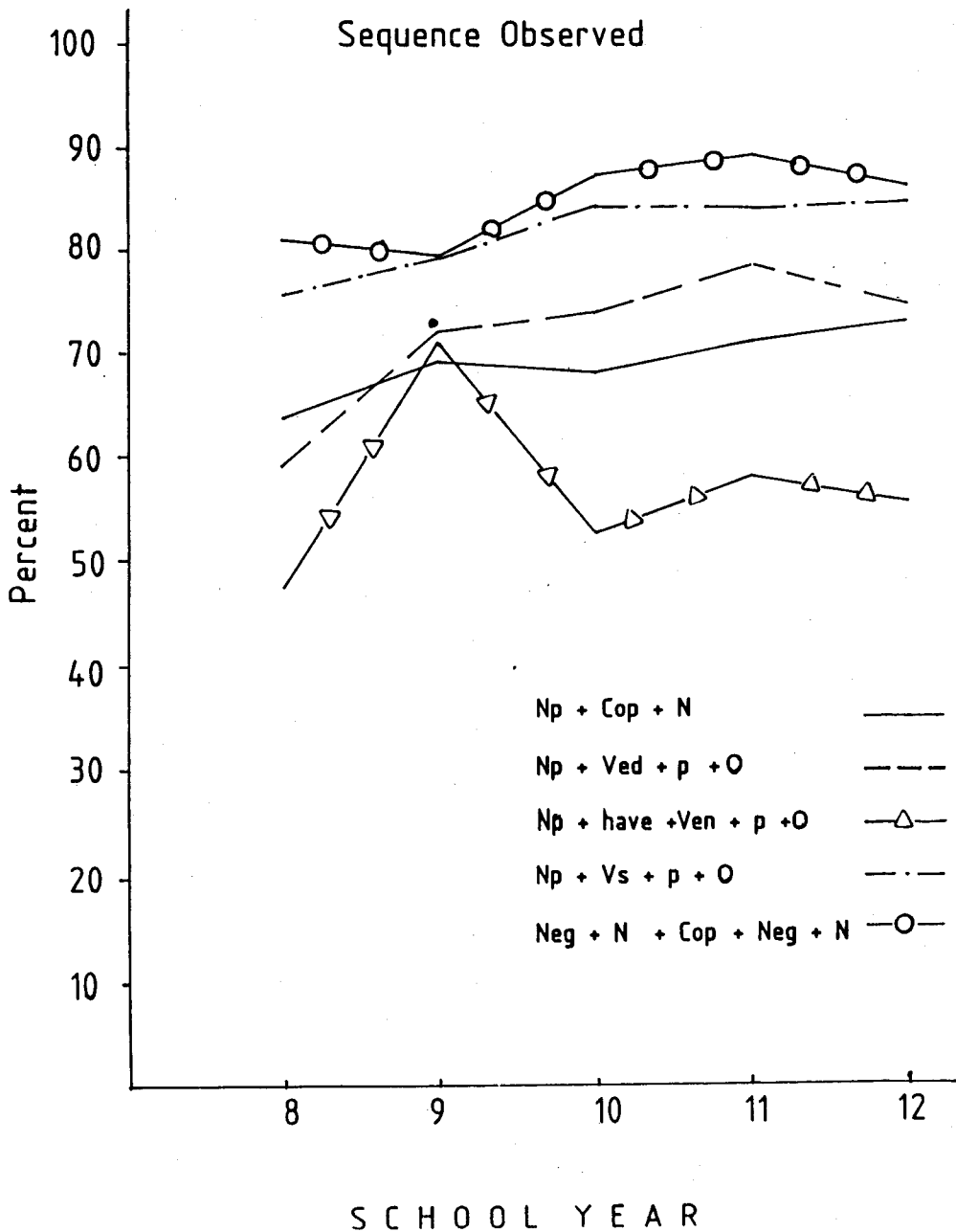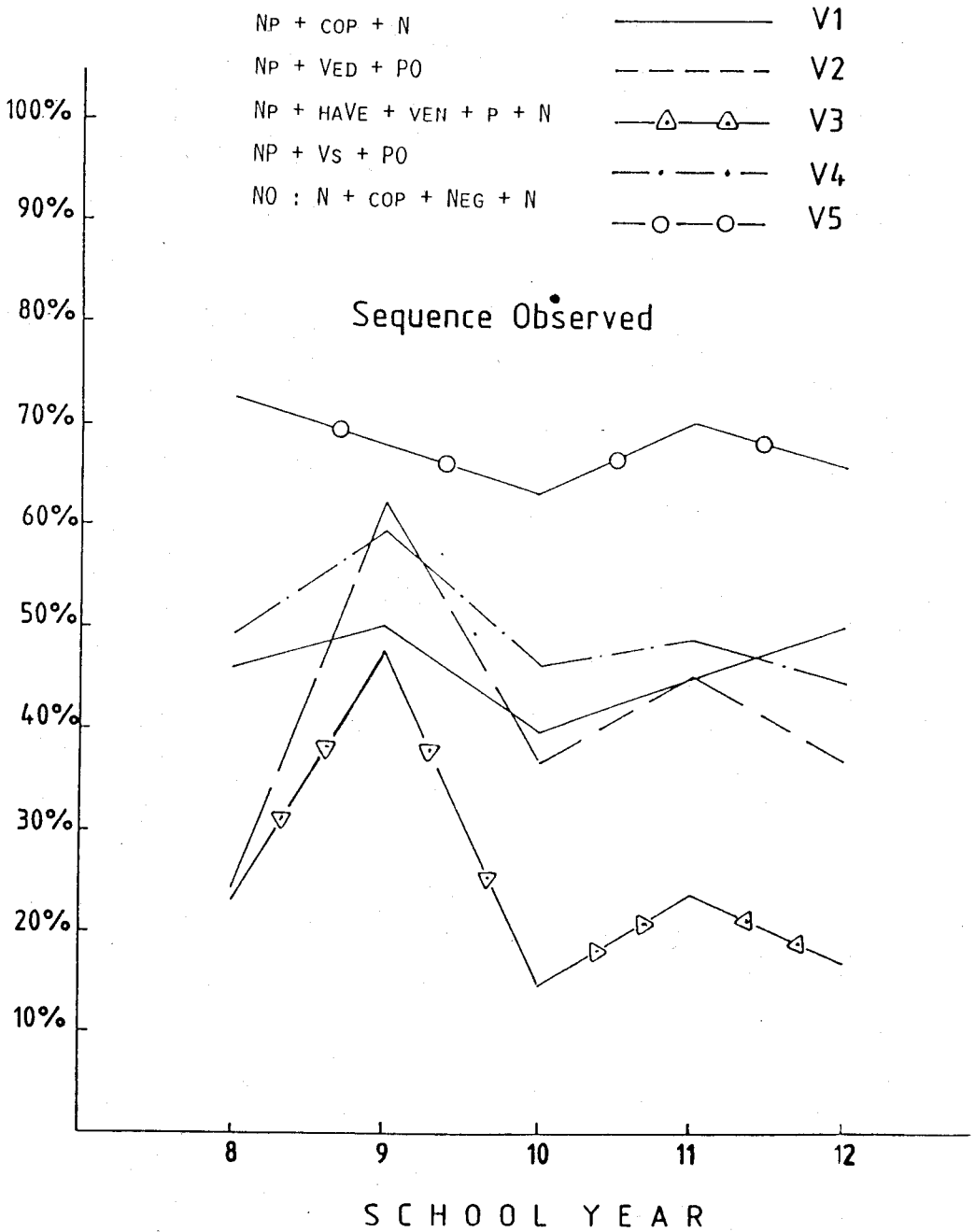

Sequence Observed

Np + Cop + N	——————
Np + Ved + p + O	— — —
Np + have + Ven + p + O	—△—
Np + Vs + p + O	— · —
Neg + N + Cop + Neg + N	—O—

Percent

SCHOOL YEAR

Fig. (4) : Percentage of students who formed the sentences below correctly.

NP + COP + N   —————————— V1

NP + VED + PO   — — — — —   V2

NP + HAVE + VEN + P + N   —△——△—   V3

NP + VS + PO   —·——·—   V4

NO : N + COP + NEG + N   —○——○—   V5

Sequence Observed

S C H O O L   Y E A R

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It may be observed from Table 5, that the most difficult morphemes to acquire are the small functors, i.e. the plural marker 's', the PP 'him' and the tense marker 'en', all of which are not used in Arabic.

Research Question 2: what progress do the subjects make in the acquisition of the five sentential structures?

To answer this question, it was neccessary to calculate the percent of accuracy as well as the percent of correct responses for each of the five school years, i.e. from grade 8 to grade 12. The result of this analysis is shown in figures 3 and 4. The following results may be observed from these two figures. First these two results lend strong support to our previous findings concerning the ecquisition order of the five sentential structures. Both figures. 3 and 4 suggest that senetence 5 is the easiest to acquire, that sentence 4 is the second in order of acquisiton and that sentence 3 is the most difficult to acquire. As we have already mentioned the two analyses differ as to the acquisition order of sentences 1 and 2. But perhaps the more striking finding presented by figures 3 and 4 is the large degree of fluctuations or regression in the acquisition of the five structures. There does not seem to be a steady gradual progress in the acquisiton of the sentences. It may also be interesting to observe that the subjects' best performance is in grade 9. The subjects seem to reach their peak in this grade and then drop down. An attempt will be made later to explain this interesting finding.

Fig. (5) : The acquisition sequence of five sentential structures by high-achievement students, using percent of accuracy.
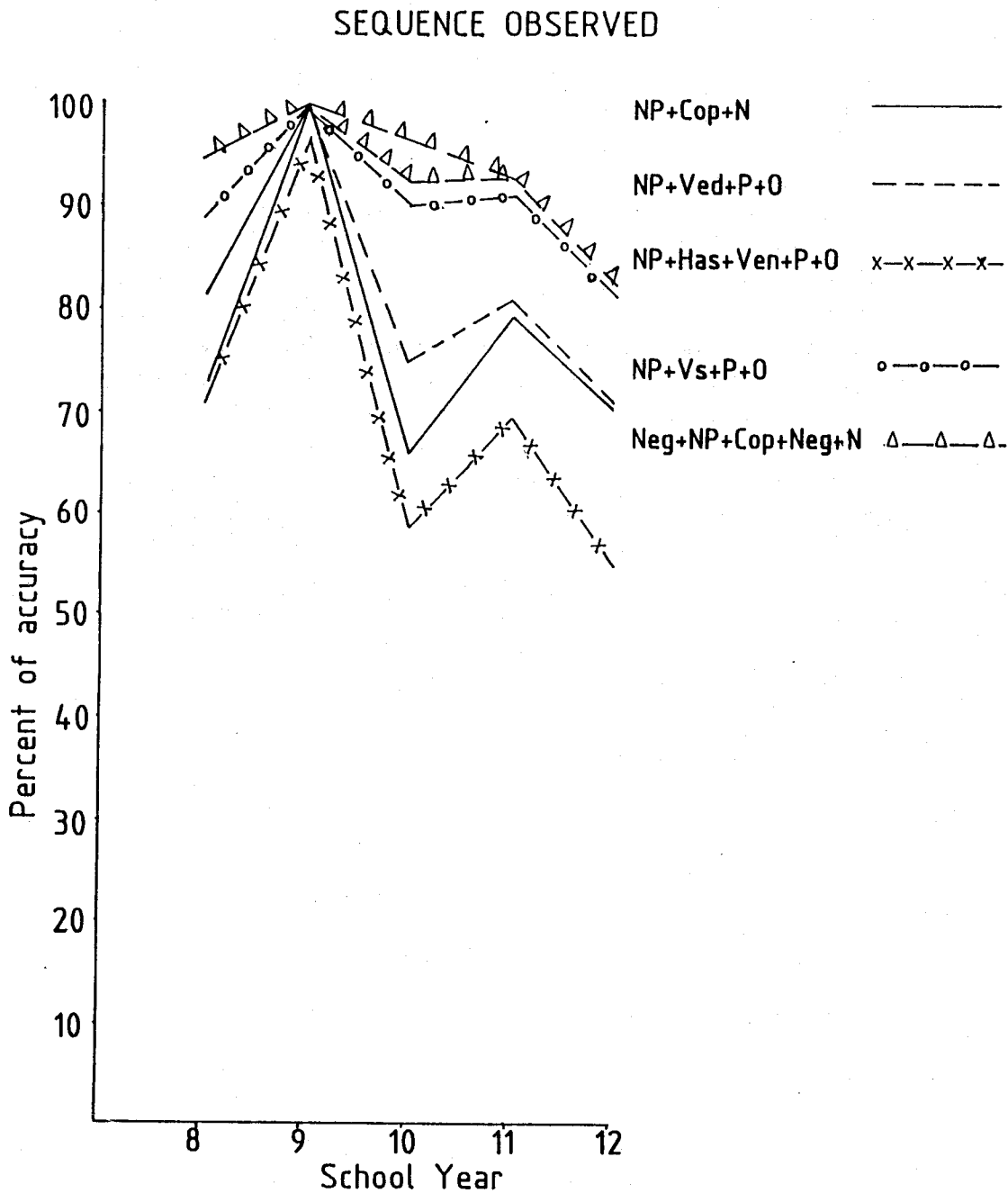
SEQUENCE OBSERVED

Fig. (6) : The acquisition sequence of five sentential structures by students of average academic achievement, using the percent of accuracy.
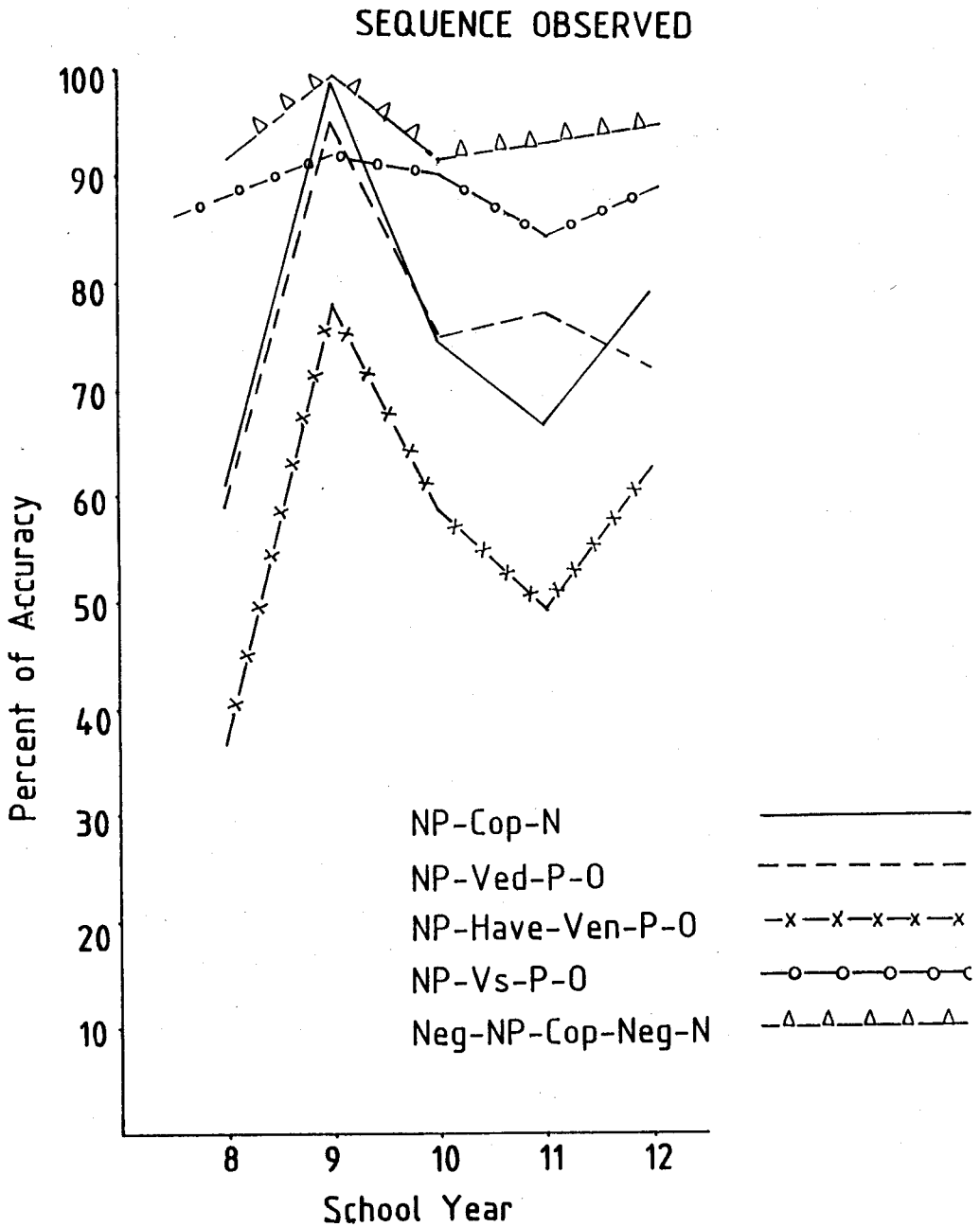
SEQUENCE OBSERVED

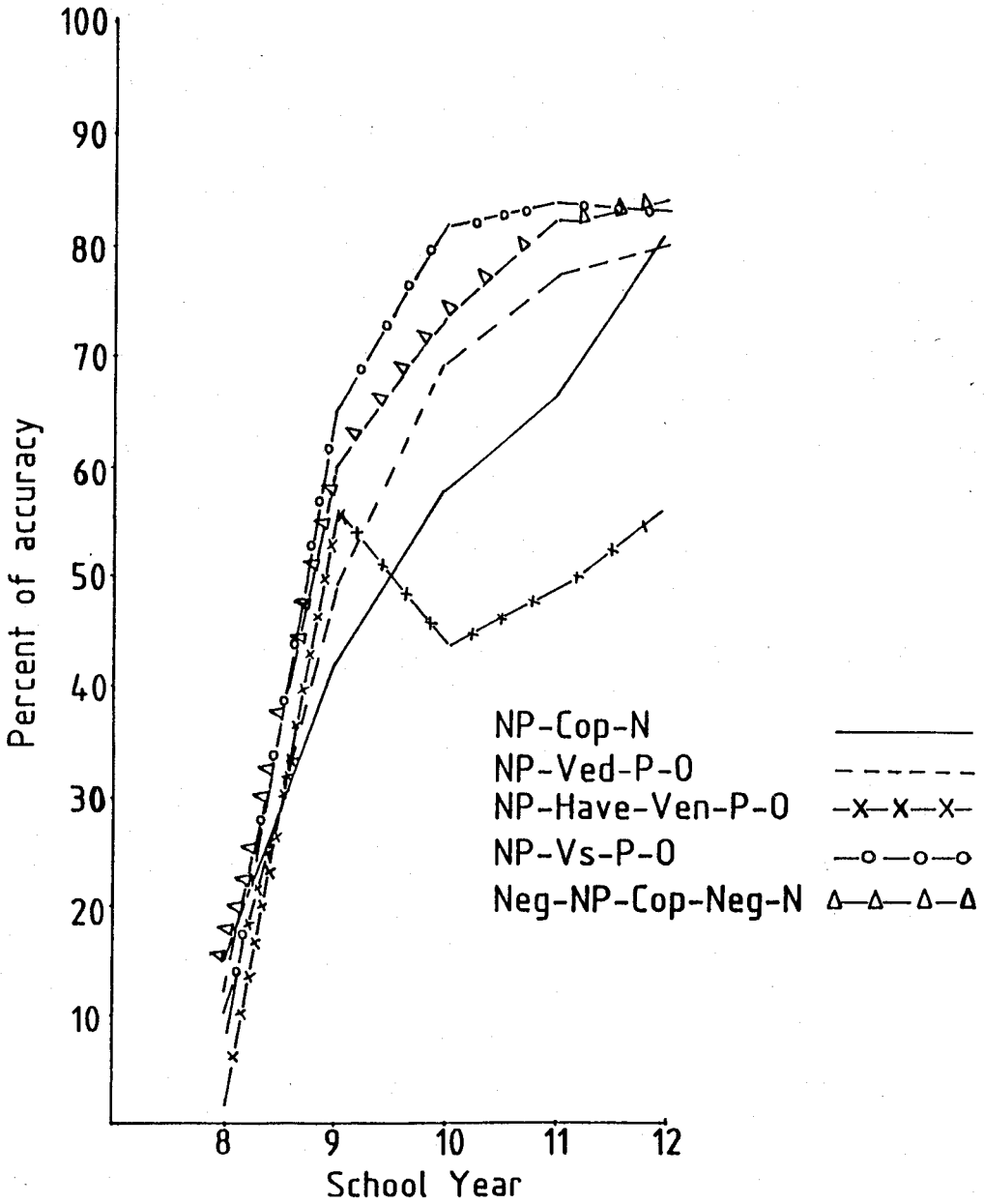|	
NP-Cop-N	——————
NP-Ved-P-O	— — — — —
NP-Have-Ven-P-O	—x—x—x—x—x
NP-Vs-P-O	—o—o—o—o—c
Neg-NP-Cop-Neg-N	—Δ—Δ—Δ—Δ—Δ

School Year

Percent of Accuracy

Fig. (7) : The acquisition sequence of five sentential structures by students of low academic achievement, using the percent of accuracy.

SEQUENCE OBSERVED

Legend:

NP-Cop-N ────────
NP-Ved-P-0 ─ ─ ─ ─ ─
NP-Have-Ven-P-0 ─x─x─x─
NP-Vs-P-0 ─o─o─o
Neg-NP-Cop-Neg-N Δ─Δ─Δ─Δ

X-axis: School Year (8, 9, 10, 11, 12)
Y-axis: Percent of accuracy (10–100)

First, how are we to explain the great degree of fluctuations in the acquisition of the five sentences? A number of reasons can be suggested to explain this phenomenon. First, we may borrow an explanation from general psychological theories of learning. Wong, R. and John D. Raulerson (1974: 32) observe that, 'The learning of complex skills is not usually a smooth, continuous record of improvement. More typically, plateaus occur during which time improvement seems to stop.' It is true that this observation describes a phenomenon, and does not explain it. It cannot be gainsaid, however, that learning a foreign language is a complex skill. And according to this view it seems that there are some similarities between the psychological process of learning a foreign language and other complex skills. Nevertheless, it is difficult to defend this view, not only because of the overwhelming evidence against behaviorist theories of learning, but also because these theories are now quite unfashionable (Carroll, J.B., 1981).

The second reason is related to the notion of input. One has to agree with Rod Ellis (1985: 13) that' the notion of input is one of the most controversial topics in SLA.' The evidence concerning the relationship between linguistic input and output is contradictory, to say the least. Larsen Freeman (1978) is of the opinion that, when a form is newly introduced, it seems to be remembered well, but when it is not frequently used, it tends to be forgotten. L. Freeman (1978) obtains evidence from many studies including those of R. Brown (1973) to emphasise the relationship between liguistic input and output. Pit Corder (1981) makes a distinction between 'listen to' and 'take in' when discussing the influence of linguistic input on output. Pit Corder rightly argues that a child may listen to a linguistic form, but may not take it in. However, the notion of input may not be helpful in explaining the phenomenon of regression observed here, because the fluctuations observed are not unique to a particular structure, and that they behave in a remarkable regularity in relation to one another. Nonetheless, it may be possible to turn to the notion of input later when the performance of the subjects in each academic level is studied.

The third reason to be suggested in trying to explain this phenomenon is related to the particular learning and teaching conditions prevailing in the Sudan. However, it will later be argued that these particular reasons are in agreement with many of our present day thinking about foreign language

learning. The researcher feels that the highly competitive, national examinations which are given at the end of each educational stage, specially 'The Intermediate School Certificate Examination' may be one of the causes of the phenomenon of regression. This may become clear if we look into the performance of the subjects in each of the three levels of academic achievement separately. Figs. 5, 6 and 7 present the performance of the subjects of high academic achievement, average academic achievement, and low academic achievement respectively. It may be observed from these three figures that the fluctuations or to use a more technical term the regression observed in Figs. 3 and 4 can still be observed in Figs. 5 and 6 and almost disappear in Fig. 7; in other words, the regression is still observed in the average and high academic achievement levels and disappears in the low academic achievement level. It may also be observed from Figs. 5 and 6 that the best performance is that of the subjects in grade 9. Almost all the students of high academic achievement in grade 9 gave correct answers to all the five questions and that almost all the students of average academic achievement gave correct responses to three of the five questions. Moreover, the subjects who represent high and average academic achievement seem to progress in a regressive fashion, whereas the subjects who represent low academic achievement progress in a rather more natural and steady manner?

The researcher discussed these findings with a number of intermediate school teachers. There was a consensus of opinion among these teachers that grade 9 is a very special and critical year in the life of a Sudanese school learner. It is the last grade in the intermediate stage, and the students have ahead of them a very crucial and a highly competitive examination. Obtaining a high aggregate in this examination means a place in a good secondary school and then the road to the university is paved. Failure in this examination will bring the school life of the child to a sad end. And this most likely means a manual job, something which is dreaded by children and their parents. Parents and perhaps their children too, realize that the future prospects of a child with only an Intermediate School Certificate are quite dim to say the least. Therefore, most parents, children and teachers take this examination quite seriously, so much so that teachers and students begin to prepare for this examination even from grade 8. One of the very major tasks usually carried out in this connection is that the students promoted to grade 9

quite willingly take regular classes during the long summer vacation in preparation for the entrance examination. The parents concerned pay the teachers handsome fees for conducting the summer courses. Not only will the summer course prevent the most likely attritional effects of the long summer holidays on the students' knowledge of English, but it will also help the students to become acquainted with the English syllabus of grade 9, i.e. Pupils Book 2 of 'The Nile Course For The Sudan' as well as the three set readers, since the students in grade 9 have to study three English simplified texts as an important requirement for the English langage Intermediate Certificate Examination. this may provide strong evidence in support of the importance of input to the acquisition of a foreign language (Krashen, 1981, 1983, 1984). As we will explain later, the only other students who study English literary texts are the students in the literary section.

There still remains one point to clarify. Why do the students of high academic achievement regress or in some cases level out, whereas the students of low academic achievement seem to reach a peak and then level out? We feel that the answer to this question again lies in the particular learning and teaching situation in the Sudan. As has already been mentioned, it is the practice in the Sudan to stream students into science and literary sections from the second year of secondary education. The students in the science section are the prospective candidates for the medical, engineering and other science faculties, whereas the students in the literary section are the prospective candidates for the literary faculties. although success in English is necessary for university entrance, it is customary for students in the science section to devote most of their time and energy to the subjects of their specialization and tend to give less attention to other subjects such as English and Arabic. On the other hand students in the literary subjects concentrate on the subjects of their specialization, which include Arabic, English language and English literature. It is interesting to note that students in the literary section have to take English Literature as a subject in the school certificate, which is taken at the end of grade 12. Because of the examinations backwash effects teachers tend to prepare their students for this examination from grade 11. This suggests that students in the literary section are exposed more to English than students in the science sections. This may explain why the subjects in the low academic stream i.e., the literary section, after making a bad start seem to maintain their progress in English for a

longer period and that in the end they even excell students of average achievement (see Table 7). This explanation is in accordance with many of the old and modern assumptions about second language acquisition (see Pattison, 1967; Krashen, 1981, 1983, 1984; Widdowson, 1984). Although the researcher feels that he has laboured a lot to explain the phenomenon of re-gression, he still feels that this phenomenon needs further investigation (3).

Research Question 3: Do learners who have the same linguistic background, but who have different academic achievement levels, show the same or different acquisition orders?

In order to answer this question, the percent of accuracy for the acquis-ition of each of the five sentential structures for each academic level was cal-culated. The result of this analysis is presented in Table 8. In addition to this, a Spearman rank order correlation matrix was computed for the three acquis-ition orders (see Table 9. Let us first discuss the findings presented in Table.

Table (7)

A comparison of the performance of the subjects in the five sentential structures, using the percent of accuracy method.

Grade	ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT		
	LOW	AVERAGE	HIGH
	%	%	%
8	9.70	67.10	82.63
9	55.03	92.71	99.00
10	66.54	77.29	76.46
11	72.32	72.42	83.53
12	74.56	68.76	89.29

Table (8)
The percent of accuracy and the acquisition order of the five
sentences, for the subjects in the three academic levels.

| | ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT | | | | | |
| | HIGH | | AVERAGE | | LOw | |
	%	RANK	%	RANK	%	RANK
S. 1	75.8	4	73.3	3	50.0	4
S. 2	78.5	3	72.4	4	64.7	3
S. 3	63.3	5	54.1	5	64.9	5
S. 4	88.9	2	88.5	2	73.5	1
S. 5	92.1	1	90.7	1	70.5	2

The following findings are suggested by Table 8. Firstly, it seems that the subjects in the three academic levels find sentence 3 as the most difficult sentence to acquire. Secondly, there seems to be agreement between the subjects in the high and average academic levels on the acquisition order of sentences 5 and 4., as being the first and second in order of acquisition respectively. Thirdly, there is agreement between the subjects in the high and low levels on the acquisiton orders of sentences 1 and 2. There is, however, disagreement between the subjects in the high and average academic levels, on the one hand, and the subjects in the low academic levels on the other, on the acquisition order of sentence 5. As we have already observed, sentence 5 seems to be the easiest sentence to acquire by the whole population and also now by the subjects in the two higher academic levels, but as second in order of acquisition by the subjects in the low academic level. It may be remembered that one of the reasons suggested to explain why sentence

5 seems to be the easiest sentence to acquire was perhaps that some of the subjects might have used some avoidance strategies, by not using a full negative sentence. It may also be remembered that when the subjects who have not used a full negative sentence were excluded from the calculation of the percent of accuracy, the result obtained showed that sentence 5 became second in order of acquisition instead of first and that sentence 4 became first in order of acquisition. This is strikingly similar to the acquisition order we have just observed for the subjects in the low academic level. It may be interesting to suggest that the subjects who might have used avoidane strategies, or at least the subjects who have cleverly avoided giving a full negative answer to Q. 5, and took the easier option of giving an affirmative sentence, might have been mainly from the subjects in the higher academic levels. J.B. Carroll (1965) suggests that the leaners' general intelligence helps them in understanding instructions, and also in answering questions.

In addition to the computing of the percent of accuracy, a Spearman Rank Order correlation matrix was also calculated for the three acquisition orders (see Table 9).

Table (9)
A Spearman Rank Order Correlation matrix for the three acquisition orders observed for the three academic levels.

	High	Average	Low
High		.9	.9
Average			.8

It is true that the acquisition orders observed for the subjects in the three academic levels are not identical,but they are very similar. The slight differences observed may be due to the subject's ability to manipulate the liguistic knowledge that she/he has in trying to successfully meet the demands of the communicative situation. However, it must be pointed out that although the subjects' scholastic achievement does not seem to significantly influence the order in which they acquired the five sentences being investigated, it does seem to influence the speed and the rate with which they acquired these sentences.

Research question 4: What advice can be offered to course and textbook writers for the Arab World?

In this section a summary of the findings that may have relevance to course and textbook design will be given. Then an attempt will be made to show how these findings can be related to course and textbook design. However, no attempt at giving a detailed inventory of structures will be ventured here, for a number of reasons, not the least important of which is the fact this study has attempted to investigate but a limited number of English sentential structures, some of which are basically similar. Nonetheless, some criteria will be suggested. This study seems to suggest at least three important findings that may have relevance to course and textbook writers from the point of a process oriented approach (Widdownson, 1984).

First, ample evidence is given to suggest that simple structures are acquired before more complex ones. The idea that simple structures are acquired earlier than more complex ones is an old one (see Mackay, 1985, R. Brow, 1973). Unfortunately, there is presently some disagreement as to what is really meant by simple and complex structures (Widdowson, 1984). In this study, however, a simple structure is defined as one which has a fewer number of morphemes, specially functor morphemes.

Therefore, the first advice to be offered to course and textbook writers is that simple structures must be introduced before complex ones. It may be observed that this suggestion or criteria can easily be conceived in the case of a structural syllabus, but may seem difficult to apply in the case of a functional syllabus.

It will be suggested here that the criteria of simplicity can also be useful when writing a functional syllabus. Where a rhetorical function can be linguistically realised by a variety of forms, then the simplest form may be selected. This may seem to lead to a conflict between goal oriented and process oriented criteria (Widdowson, 1984), because the simplest form may not necessarily be the most appropriate form for the particular communicative function or situation. However, this problem seems to be solved by Wilkins (1976: 59) suggestion that:

> At the lowest level he (the learner) can express them (the rehtoric functions) only in the simplest and least differentiated manner. By the time he reaches the most advanced levels of learning he has at his disposal a range of expression capable of communicating the same notions with far greater subtltey and nuance. (4).

Secondly, strong evidence has been given in this study in support of the influence of the learner's native language, i.e. Arabic on the acquisition of the second language, i.e. English.

It has been argued earlier that the structures which have functors found in both English and Arabic seem to be acquired earlier than the structures which have functors found in English, but not in Arabic. It is true that some researchers still deny or at least try to undermine the role of the learner's first language in the acquisition of a second language (see Burt and Dulay, 1980). However, the situation is succicently summarised by Pit Corder (1981: 74):

> Fairly large scale studies in the United States have shown that second language learning in young children, whatever their mother tongue, does show the same formal properties as the language development of infants acquiring that same language as a mother tongue. This has led some investigators to equate first and second language learning. However, in the case of older children, either in a formal or informal setting, the influence of the mother tongue becomes more evident, until when we are dealing with adults, particularly if they are educated, interference seems to be strongest.

Consequently, the second advice is related to the concept of language transfer. If, for instance, a choice is to be made between two simple and un-differentiated rhetorical forms, the one that is similar to a form in the learners' native language could be selected (Lado, 1964; Mackay, 1965; Schachter, 1974; Wilkins, 1976; J. Fisiak, 1981; C. Sanders, 1981, M.S. Smith, 1981; Hamed El Nil el Fadil, 1986). This will undoubtedly make knowledge of the learners' first language neccessary on the part of the course and textbook writers, or at least assistance can be sought from an Arab linguist.

Thirdly, This study has provided strong evidence to suggest that the study of English literature as well as the integrating of extensive reading into the English Language course were quite effective ways of increasing the learners' proficiency in forming the sentences investigated in this study. This is a finding that not many people can quarrel with. The study of English literature and extensive reading seem to increase the learners' exposure to English. And the importance of exposure to English, or to use a more popular term input (Krashen,1981), as an effective way of increasing the learners' proficiency in English is now recognised by alomst all foreign language educators of different theoretical backgrounds (see Bruce Pattison, 1967, R. Lado, 1972, 1977; Krashen, 1983; G.H. Widdowson, 1984). For example, Krashen (1984) cites evidence which supports the idea that there is a strong relationship between good writing and extensive reading for pleasure. It may also be interesting to point out at this juncture that the apparent failure of many students in the Arab world to achieve better standards in English (Hamed el Nil el Fadil, 1975, 1984; B. Carroll, 1983)) is largely due to their lack of exposure to English, and more specifically to the fact that extensive reading is no longer part of the English language course.

Therefore, the third advice to be given is related to the idea of increasing exposure or input. Any textbook writer for the Arab world must take congizance of the fact that plans to increase the learners' exposure to English, must be built into the course. This can best be done by making extensive reading part and parcel of the English Language Course. Generally speaking, there are two basic methods for organizing extensive reading, viz, the class reader method or the class/school library methods. Most modern language courses, such as the Crescent Course for the Arab World have opted for the class/school library method, thus leaving the reading completely under the control of the learner, and many teachers can attest to the failure of this technique.

In view of our experience with the class/library method, the researcher strongly suggests that we revert to the older method of the class reader, which has proved to be very successful (Bright and McGregor, 1970). The use of the class reader method will help us achieve a number of things. Firstly, since the class teacher is in control of the reading, he/she can make sure through quizzes and short tests that the students have read the book or the books assigned. Secondly, since the teacher and some of the students will be reading aloud for most of the reading lesson, this will ensure that most of the students are receiving comprehensible input, which is neccessary for the acquisition of English (Krashen, 1981). Thirdly, the activity of reading aloud can prove to be more effective than the mechanical language drills or even the more fashionable drills for which the learners are not fully prepared. Fourthly, it may be difficult for some non-native teachers of English to provide the necessary comprehensible input, because of their own inability to sustain a conversation in English with their students.

NOTES

1. The researcher had once attempted to carry out a longitudinal study for a whole class of pupils. Unfortunately, after one year 1/3 of the class dropped out for one reason another, after the second year only very few pupils remained in the same class and it proved very difficult to trace the others. This may be because many of the children in Qatari schools come and go with their expatriate families who usually stay for a limited period of time.

2. Though the subjects were repeatedly reminded to answer in complete sentences, some of them did use short answers. This made it difficult to decide whether the writing of a short answer was the result of genuine incompetence or mere laziness on the part of the respondent. This may be one disadvantage about the use of open-endend questions as a natural elicitation technique; specially if the aim is to elicit complete sentences.

3. No attempt has been made to compare this phenomenon with that of fossilization (Selinker, 1972) because it is felt that although there can be some common features between them, they are not identical).

4. The researcher feels that this will in a way bridge the gap between goal
    oriented and process oriented criteria (Widdowson, 1984). It may also be
    suggested that goal oriented and process oriented criteria are not in-
    compatible).

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