

Variability in the Use of 'ing' Forms by Iranian EFL Learners: A Form-Function Analysis

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Abstract: *This study provides an overview of learners' language in terms of systematicity. It investigates the role of a form (ing) in the light of its functions (ongoing action, after the proposition, adjective and noun phrase) to uncover the systematic nature of language learning. In order to achieve the desirable results, the form-function analysis was done, in which the data were collected cross-sectionally whereby the participants were divided into four groups based on their language proficiency (pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels). The frequency of the form (ing) with which different functions were realized, was counted to see whether learner's language can be considered as systematic or unsystematic. The results revealed that the learner's use of the form (ing) in the light of its functions seemed to be systematic rather than unsystematic. Performing form-function analysis demonstrated the role of variability in language learning by proving the fact that systematic distribution of forms in accordance with functions seems to be an important factor in learners' language system.*

Key words: *learners' language, systematicity, form-function analysis, variability*

Introduction

Language learning is a process that different mechanisms are involved in it. It requires a system to make it perform better. A system can be a type of analysis or different kinds of analyses which organize its fundamental elements. In recent years, researchers aim to seek whether there is a relationship between language forms and the functions underlying language learning process. Any language consists of many forms which carry different functions in the context they are applied. It seems that there should be a form-function mapping in which each form is realized by a specific function. Of course not all the grammatical features in a language are functional in this way. Some features are completely formal. A type of analysis that demonstrates the relationship between the forms of the language and their functions is the form-function analysis which is a subdivision of the term "functional analysis".

According to functionalists' point of view, language is concerned with its use in the context of situations, focusing on meaning conveyed in different situations. In functional studies of second

language acquisition, researchers are concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning, and achieving their personal communicative goals (Mitchel & Myles, 2004). Functional analyses are of two kinds, depending on what constitutes the starting point of the analysis (Barkhuizen & Ellis, 2005). In a form-function analysis, as they pointed out, the starting point is a linguistic form in which the analyst investigates the specific meanings that this form realizes. On the other hand, in a function-form analysis the starting point is a language function and the analyst then identifies the grammatical forms used to perform this meaning.

In the present study, the focus is on the form and its underlying functions. Huebner's (1979) study is the best example of form-function analysis. He conducted a longitudinal study in which he identified all the noun phrases where the learner used *da* (the learner's phonological version of English *the*) in oral data collected at three-weekly intervals. As a result of this analysis, he was able to show that the learner's development was characterized by stages consisting of different form-functions mapping. In this type of analysis, it is believed that if you teach form, the learners know how and when to use it to perform its function. Form-function analyses provide a much richer description of learner language than afforded by frequency analysis aiming at counting not just for what forms learners have at their disposal but how they use these forms to communicate their meaning (Barkhuizen & Ellis, 2005). According to Ellis (2002), comprehenders tend to perceive the most probable syntactic and semantic analyses of a new utterance on the basis of frequencies of previously perceived utterance analyses. Therefore, language users tend to produce the most probable utterance for a given meaning on the basis of frequencies of utterance representations.

Apart from Huebner's study in terms of form-function analysis, little research has been discussed regarding the role of form-function analysis in uncovering the systematic variability of language learning. Although considerable research has been devoted to the role of functional approach in second language acquisition, rather less attention has been paid to the role of systematicity in learner language and whether form-function analysis is able to uncover the variations in learner language. Hence, the aim of the present study is to examine whether the variability in the learners' use of grammatical form (*ing*) in the light of its functions (ongoing action, after the proposition, adjective and noun phrase) is systematic or unsystematic. It seems that in frequency analysis which studies the role of sequence learning (Ellis, 1999), the variability in performance cannot be appreciated; systematicity in language learning could not be predicted since there is no form-function relationship in this type of analysis. By conducting a form-function analysis, this paper is to appreciate the role of systematicity in language more and reveals that what seemed to be unsystematic or free variation (Ellis, 1999) will be systematic. Thus, the design of this study replicates that of Huebner's (1979, 1985) study conducting form-function analysis, and it is going to uncover the systematicity behind language learning more.

Methodology

Research Question

In order to deepen our understanding of variability in language learning and how it affects, the present study attempts to answer the following research question:

“Is variability in learners’ language use of *ing* form in the light of its four functions (ongoing action, after the preposition, adjective, and noun phrase) systematic or unsystematic?”

Participants

Participants in this study include 24 EFL (English as a foreign language) learners who are learning English in a private language institute. Participants were randomly selected from four classes (six learners from each class consisting of different levels of proficiency- Pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels) and they were provided by the different tasks in order to achieve the desirable results. In order to determine their level of proficiency, Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1995) was applied. It should be noted that the reliability statistics of the test equals 0.80 highlighting the high reliability value.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, data were collected cross-sectionally in which learners are from different levels of language proficiency (Pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels). The participants were provided with tasks (see appendix 1) in order to produce forms (*ing*) regarding the aim of the study. It should be noted that learners’ level of language proficiency was achieved through the administration of Oxford Placement Test or OPT (Allan, 1995) which is a widely used instrument in research.

Data Analysis

Based on the data collection procedure, the frequency of forms with which functions were realized according to the specific form (*ing*) was counted. Conducting this type of frequency analysis reveals that there should be a patterning in the learners’ use of the form in relation to the functions it maps on to. Regarding this type of analysis, the role of interlanguage is appreciated, and it can be considered as a tool to recognize the impact of interlanguage development during language learning. Therefore, the analytical method adopted in the current study is the form-function analysis (Young, 1996) uncovering the relationship between forms and their functions.

Hence, it is aimed at investigating to what extent learners can apply the specific forms to communicate in light of its functions.

Findings

In order to gain the desirable results, participants were expected to answer the questions in the form of tasks. The results of the participants' answer regarding the functions, with which the form (ing) is realized, are shown in the following tables. Generally, it can be concluded that there is a systematic variability in the learners' use of the *ing* form in the light of its four functions (ongoing action, after the proposition, adjective and noun phrase) among the four levels of language proficiency participated in the present study. Although the variability in the learner's language is predicted, the degree of predictability (systematicity) is to some extent different among the participants of the study. Table 1 shows the least degree of systematicity in the learners' language. As can be seen, the most degree of predictability lies in the noun phrase function produced by the learners, rather than other three functions.

Table 1. Pre-intermediate level

Functions Participants	Ongoing action	Adjective	Noun phrase (subject)	After the proposition
One	5	1	6	3
Two	5	5	6	7
Three	3	2	6	3
Four	2	3	3	1
Five	2	1	3	7
Six	3	2	6	2
Total%	20/42=47	14/30=46	30/36=83	23/42=54

In the functions: ongoing action, adjective, noun phrase and after the proposition, there must be seven, five, six and seven correct answers, respectively.

Table 2 provides some degree of systematic variability in learners' use of the *ing* form in relation to the four functions it maps on to.

Table 2. Intermediate level

Functions	Ongoing action	Adjective	Noun phrase (subject)	After the proposition
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Participants				
One	5	5	6	7
Two	4	5	6	7
Three	5	3	6	7
Four	7	2	6	3
Five	6	4	6	5
Six	5	3	5	3
Total%	32/42=76	22/30=73	35/36=97	32/42=76

As shown in this table, the highest degree of variability belongs to the noun phrase function with the percentage of 97.

Table 3 gives the results obtained from the upper-intermediate group of learners in terms of the degree of systematicity regarding the variability in language learning.

Table 3. Upper-intermediate level

Functions Participants	Ongoing action	Adjective	Noun phrase (subject)	After the proposition
One	5	5	6	6
Two	5	5	6	7
Three	6	5	6	7
Four	5	5	6	7
Five	7	2	5	7
Six	4	3	6	1
Total%	32/42=76	25/30=83	35/36=97	35/42=83

As can be seen, the highest degree of systematicity is devoted to the subject function in the learners' performances. The same was true for the two previous tables. It seems that predictability shows itself in the subject function better than the other three functions.

Unlike Table 1, Table 4 shows the most degree of predictable variability. As can be seen, three functions (adjective, noun phrase and after the proposition) have the full percentage of correctness of task requirement.

Table 4. Advanced level

Functions Participants	Ongoing action	Adjective	Noun phrase (subject)	After the proposition
One	7	5	6	7
Two	5	5	6	7
Three	6	5	6	7
Four	7	5	6	7
Five	6	5	6	7
Six	6	5	6	7
Total%	37/42=88	30/30=100	36/36=100	42/42=100

It means that in advanced learners, the systematicity underlying learners' language can be obviously seen and predicted. These very high percentages indicate that variability in learner's language is to a large extent inherent, and that different sources of variability require various types of analysis regarding the type of form considered.

Table 5 presents the general results of the study. As can be seen, *noun phrase* function has the highest percentage among all groups of learners and *ongoing action* function has the lowest percentage. Of course, based on the data collected from all groups of language proficiency, it could be generally mentioned that the role of systematic variability among all the participants with respect to the form-function mapping tasks performed by them, is obvious and can be best regarded as an important element in second language learning.

Table 5. Distribution of the functions performed by different levels

Functions Level%	Ongoing action	Adjective	Noun phrase (subject)	After the proposition
Pre-intermediate	47	46	83	54
Intermediate	76	73	97	76
Upper-intermediate	76	83	97	83
Advanced	88	100	100	100
Total Average	71.75	75.5	94.25	78.25

Discussion

To summarize, the results of this study show that variability in learners' language is systematic; or a learner's interlanguage knowledge constitutes a system in the same sense that a native speaker's grammar is a system (Ellis, 1990). Therefore, variability does exist in the learner's developmental level of language and according to the results of this study, is to the large extent systematic. As Hebner's (1979) and Young's (1996) studies confirmed that form-function analysis can be a preferred tool for uncovering the underlying systematicity, in this paper the conducted analysis of *ing* form in the light of its function revealed the predictable variability in language learning, thus uncovering the systematicity in the learners' language.

It should be noted that data in the present study were collected cross-sectionally due to time limitations according to the schedules of the institute. In order to achieve preferable results, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study of form-function analysis to gain better results. Another limitation arises from the shortages of literatures in this field of study in order to have authentic results, thus requiring more researches in this area of analysis for future researchers to shed more light on form-function analysis and the role it can play in the better analysis of the learners' language.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study has contributed to our understanding of the role of systematicity in the learners' language by conducting a form-function analysis. It can be concluded that language is more than grammatical forms and it is best conceptualized as a system of form-function mappings, in which the forms are realized to convey the specific function in the dynamic nature of language learning.

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Appendix**Appendix 1. Tasks Used for Data Collection**

No. Level:
<p>Complete these sentences below using either the present simple or present continuous.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I golf every weekend. (play)2. He TV, at the moment. (watch)3. She hard these days. (work)4. Pauline is in Hong Kong. (live)5. I think you too much, nowadays. (smoke)6. Do you still with your parents? (live)7. Smells good! What are you? (make)8. The children tennis outside, now. (play)9. What you now? (do)
<p>Supply the correct form of the verbs in parentheses.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Are you interested in English? (learn)2. I'm scared of in the sea. (swim)3. Thanks for me a ride. (give)4. How about the bus? (take)5. We have no chance of enough money. (save)6. I am against in public places. (smoke)7. You can't learn English without mistakes. (make)

Choose the best answer that correctly fits the sentence.

1. It's ___ how popular American music is around the world.
a. surprised
b. surprising
2. I thought the movie "Independence Day" was really ____.
a. bored
b. boring
3. That tall new building in Kuala Lumpur really ___ me!
a. fascinate
b. fascinating
c. fascinates
4. I think flying in an airplane is a ___ experience.
a. terrifying
b. terrified
c. terrify
5. That three hour lecture yesterday was really ___ !
a. tired
b. tiring
6. Halloween is coming soon! What a ___ holiday!
a. frighten
b. frightened
c. frightening

Complete the sentences with the correct form of the underlined verbs.

1. I'm sorry, but you can't smoke here.
Excuse me. isn't allowed here.
2. Jackie tries very hard to play every game well.
..... a game well is important to Jackie.
3. I write all my letters on the computer now. It's easier.
..... letters on the computer is easier.
4. Don't sit at home and feel lonely. It won't help you.
..... at home and lonely won't help you.
5. Jenny would like to learn about different cultures because it is helpful.
..... about different cultures is helpful.