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Second Language Acquisition of Quantifiers by Arabic Speakers of English: Feature Reassembly Approach

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This paper reports on an experimental study addressing second language acquisition of English quantifiers by Arabic speakers. Due to several differences found between Arabic and English regarding types, meanings and functions of quantifiers, Arabic learners encounter challenges in mastering them properly. Unlike English, Arabic does not make lots of distinctions among the different meanings that each quantifier might bear; using the same quantifier to bear two or several meanings at the same time. Arabic, for instance, does not differentiate between countable and non-countable nouns using the same modifier in contrast to English. According to the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2005, 2009; Choi & Lardiere, 2006), second language (L2) speakers must successfully reassemble existing features of their first language (L1) into the L2 feature-based sets in order to accommodate the L2 grammar. The researcher tests the validity of this prediction for the L2 acquisition of English quantifiers, which requires Arabic learners of English to remap semantic concepts of quantity onto new and different morpholexical configurations. Data from 40 L1 Arabic learners of English at different levels of proficiency and 20 native speakers who completed a picture/sentence matching task suggest that only the meanings which require different and new semantics-morphology remapping is difficult.

Keywords: Arabic quantifiers, English quantifiers, feature reassembly hypothesis, mapping

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1. Introduction

Quantifiers are a grammatical closed class words that belong to the wider class of determiners, Hornby (2005, p. 1233) defines a quantifier as a determiner or a pronoun that comes before a noun phrase to convey its quantity. For instance, the form *two* in the following English idiom signifies the quantity of the peas.

(1) Like two peas in a pod.

L2 acquisition of English quantifiers is an area of attested difficulty due to the fact that there are potential cross-linguistic variations, namely L2 speakers are required to remap semantic concepts regarding quantity onto language-specific morpholexical configurations during the course of L2 development.

It has been argued that we can isolate the semantic elements (meanings) from the surface elements (linguistic forms). These meanings are universal whereas forms are language-specific. Within the Minimalist Program proposed by Chomsky (1995, 2000), the Faculty of Language includes a universal computational system and a lexicon which includes lexical elements made from bundles of (formal, phonological and semantic) features. These features are components of a universal inventory, made available by the so-called Universal Grammar (UG), which can be accessed throughout the process of acquiring an L1. Chomsky (2000) argues that acquiring an L1 includes two related processes: feature selection and feature assembly. He describes these as single processes only achievable whilst the language-specific feature sets are selected in each L1, activated by exposure to the accessible linguistic input which brings about each language selecting a specific feature and assembling a specific lexicon. Parametric differences across languages are argued to be established by dissimilarities in both the feature selection and how these features are clustered onto functional categories and lexical items. Forms, hence, are where language variation lies. Empirical evidence suggests that learning how the same meaning is distributed over different pieces of functional morphology is challenging for L2 learners.

Some researchers argue in support of Bley-Vroman's Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (1989), according to which access to UG is no longer fully available in L2 development. On the contrary, other researchers such as Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996) argue that UG is fully accessible and that divergence is due to other factors such as L1 knowledge. Yet, Schwartz and Spouse (1994, 1996) propose the Full Access Full/Transfer Hypothesis (FT/FA), according to which the initial state of the development course is the full L1 system. Mapping challenges and L1 transfer are argued to be the result of the divergence between the patterns produces by the native and non-native speakers (Haznedar & Schwartz, 1997; Lardiere, 1998).

Different theories attempt to explain L2 development from different perspectives. One of the newest theories to the field of L2 development is Lardiere's (2005, 2009) Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH), in which she adapts a minimalist approach to L2 development. According to the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, L2 speakers must successfully reassemble existing features of their L1 into the L2 feature sets in order to show target-like presentations (Lardiere, 2005, 2009, Choi & Lardiere, 2006). Lardiere (2009, p.173) proposes that "[a]ssembling the particular lexical items of L2 requires that the learner reconfigures features from the way these are represented in

their L1 into new formal configurations on possibly quite different types of lexical items in the L2." Lardiere (2005, 2009) argues that old-style parameters are dead and that even if a feature is similar in L1 and L2, it may not be encoded on corresponding morphemes.

Building on the FT/FA (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994, 1996), the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis holds that L2 learners starts their L2 development identifying equivalence between lexical entries in the target input and those of their L1; they link lexical entries they come across in the input with the feature-based sets of the morpholexical equivalents in their L1, on the basis of their meaning or grammatical function. That is, grammatical function and meaning are the triggers and cues that L2 speakers use to map lexical entries they perceive in the target input to feature clusters of their L1. This process is followed by the L2 constructions being mapped to the L1 feature sets for the element that is established to be equivalent. As soon as this initial mapping is made, feature reassembly can take place and the L1-based feature set is adjusted by adding or deleting from the L1-based feature set, as triggered by evidence available in the input. Nevertheless, feature reassembly might be slow or might not occur if evidence in the input is infrequent, or if it is rejected by the L1 system (Lardiere, 2005, 2009). The generative aspect of SLA has lately directed much attention towards integrating the study of L2 input. This has been evidently articulated by Rothman and Slabakova (2017) who have stated that: "A newer idea in generative theorizing is that L2 convergence crucially depends on how much evidence in the input there is and how clear such cues are in the input itself." (p. 23).

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on testing the prediction of the Future Reassembly Hypothesis and more specifically the predictions related to L2 development of the two tasks described in the FRH: mapping, and the feature reassembly (Gil and Marsden, 2013). Lardiere (2009) suggests that learners generate initial mapping based on noticed likeness in meaning, but furthermore proposed that "the acquisition researcher [...] will always be guessing – albeit hopefully making a professionally- informed best guess from among a smallish range of possibilities – as to which morpholexical correspondences between languages a learner is initially most likely to establish" (p. 219). This study addresses the underlying linguistic competence of L2 learners using a minimalist feature-based contrastive analysis in a new context: Arabic-English interlanguage. The researcher tests the validity of Lardiere's prediction for the L2 acquisition of English quantifiers, which requires Arabic learners of English to remap semantic concepts onto new and different morpholexical combinations. In the next section, the research points out the similarities and differences between the two languages where necessary in terms of the meaning and function of quantifiers

.

2. Examining Feature-Reassembly in the L2 Acquisition of Quantifiers

It is well known that interlanguage grammar originates from cross-linguistic variation. Arabic does not make distinction between the different meanings the modifier might bear (Jawad, 2015). Arabic, for instance, does not differentiate between countable and non-countable nouns using the same modifier for both whereas English does as exemplified in (2).

(2)

English		Arabic
many or *much*	≠	*kaθiir* 'many/much'
e.g., *many books*		*kōtb kaθiir* 'much/many books'
e.g., *much milk*		*ḥlyb kaθiir* 'much/many milk'

The form *many* indicates a large number, typically followed by plural countable nouns such as *books*. Whereas, *much* refers to a large quantity, typically followed by uncountable nouns such as *milk* (Douglas et al., 1999: 275). English selects two distinct forms to refer to two different forms of plurality, i.e. *many* for countable objects and *much* for non-countable objects. Whereas, Arabic has a language-specific system typically selects a single form *kaθiir* 'many/much' to refer to the two meanings: i.e. for (un)countable determined nouns. The form *kaθiir* 'much/many' has other counterparts in Arabic, e.g., *iddat* and *adeed* 'much/many'. Yet, they all share the same meaning and function.

Several lines of evidence suggest that if learners start the L2 development from a scratch, they would follow the same avenue acquiring the new language in the same way having the same interlanguage no matter what L1s they speak; however, this is not what happened. Although L2 speakers are likely to follow the same developmental path, they produce different patterns depending on what their L1s were (Villanueva, 1990). Building on the Full Transfer/ Full Access (FT/FA) theory by Schwartz and Spouse (1994, 1996), the initial phase of L2 acquisition is the full set of their L1s. L2 learners are expected to start with the assumption that L2 forms are quite equal to those of their L1s. They would look for the mopholexical counterparts for already clustered feature set of their L1 on the basis of the similarity between them in meanings or functions. For instance, they would assume that *each* and *every* are quite equal to *kull* 'each/every/all'; used as an equivalent to all of them.

From the generative linguistic perspective, this occurs if learners do not have an access to the input that provides evidence (positive/negative or both) that would help them notice the gap between their interlanguage grammar and the target language, activate modification and accommodation of the target representations and thereby advance their L2 development. Under the current proposal, if such evidence was unconsidered and the leaners do not notice the gap between the two systems, the L1 representations remain unmodified; L2 learners are likely to develop incomplete or incorrect representations by substituting a correct form with incorrect one, adding an extra form or omitting the form altogether (White, 2003; Lardiere, 2009). The next section presents the experimental study on knowledge of quantifiers in Arabic-English interlanguage.

3. The experimental study

To test the validity and the predictive power of the FRH, two feature-based classes are incorporated in the design of a pen-and-paper sentence-picture matching task. Table 1 shows the quantifiers incorporated in the study: Type 1 includes quantifiers that are expected to be mastered effortlessly since the two languages share identical morpholexical corresponding forms. Whereas, Type 2 are expected to result in difficulty attributed to the fact that each language coveys the same meaning in a language specific way.

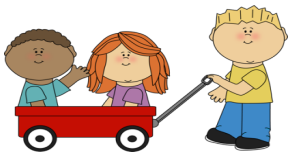
Table 1. *Type 1 and Type 2 integrated in the picture-sentence matching task.*

Type	*1: FR (−)*	*2: FR (+)*
Example	*no, some, cardinal numbers, both, any, all, enough*	*each, every, either, neither, much, many, few, little*
Prediction	easy to acquire	difficult to acquire

The first type includes matching feature sets that require no feature reassembly, FR (−); namely, both languages share identical feature bundle, mapping a corresponding form onto the same meaning, i.e. X is equivalent to Y, they are semantically similar as exemplified in (3). The English form *all* specifies the whole of a group; it precedes (un)countable nouns. (Douglas et al., 1999). The Arabic modifier *kull* 'all' has only one counterpart *all* in English (The form *kull* 'all' has another counterpart in Arabic, e.g., *jamia* 'all'. Nonetheless, they are identically the same, i.e. they share the same meaning and function).

(3) Arabic English
kull 'all' = *all*

The Arabic quantifier *wahad* 'one', for instance, is quite equal to *one* in English. Likewise, other quantifier such as other cardinals (*two, three, four* …etc.), *no, some, all, both, any, enough* and *a lot/lots* of have literal and identical counterparts in both languages. Sample stimuli of Type 1 targeted in the test is shown in figure 1.



1
a. There are no kids in the wagon.
b. There is one kid in the wagon.
c. There are two kids in the wagon.

2
a. There are no kids in the wagon.
b. There is one kid in the wagon.
c. There are two kids in the wagon.

Figure 1. *Sample stimuli of Type 1 targeted in the task.*

The other type included in the design was forms with mismatching feature sets that require feature reassembly (FR+). In Type 2, the two languages encode the same feature onto non-corresponding morphemes; X is not equivalent to Y, they are semantically different, as shown in (4) and (5).

(4) a. *There are a few strawberries in the refrigerator.* English
b. y-wğād qāleel men ālfārāwlāḥ fi āṯālāğāh. Arabic
there few/little of al-strawberries in the-fridge .
'There are few/little strawberries in the fridge'.

(5) a. There is a little milk in the refrigerator. English
b. y-wğād qāleel men ālḥālyb fi āṯālāğāh. Arabic
there few/little of al-milk in the-fridge.

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'There are few/little milk in the fridge'.

For instance, the Arabic quantifier *qāleel* 'few/little', that conveys the meaning that the amount is less than expected, does not correspond directly to a single equivalent in English. The forms *a little* and *little* specify a small quantity with plural uncountable nouns, whereas *a few* and *few* specify a small quantity with plural with countable nouns (Douglas et al., 1999). Arabic does not differentiate between countable and non-countable nouns with quantity using the same modifier *qāleel* 'few/little' to convey the two meanings, e.g., *fārāwlāḥ qāleelah* 'few/little strawberries' and *ḥālyb qāleel* 'few/little milk'. Whereas English differentiate between countable and non-countable nouns using different modifiers for each, e.g., *few strawberries* (for countable objects) and *little milk* (for non-countable objects).

(6) *a. Each (of the) boy(s) was very polite.* English
b. kull wāḥd mēn ālāwlād kān mwdāb. Arabic
each/every/all one from the-boys was polite.
'Each/every/all (of the) boy(s) was very polite'.

(7) *a. Every student needs support and guidance.* English
b. kull ṭālēb y-āḥtāǧ ldām w ālērshād. Arabic
each/every/all student PRES-needs the-support and the-guidance.
"Each/every/all (of the) student(s) needs support and guidance'.

Another example is the distinction between *every* and *each* in English; two distinct forms; *each* in English refers to members of a group of people of things separately i.e. for an individual object; one by one. Whereas, *every* refers to a group of people or things, i.e. combined together as one. Arabic, on the other hand, selects a single form *kull* 'each/every' to deliver both meanings. This contrast is shown in the examples above (6) and (7). Sample stimuli of Type 2 targeted in the test is shown in figure 2.

a. Each candy tastes different.
b. Every candy taste different.
c. No candy tastes different.

a. Each candy tastes good.
b. Every candy taste good.
c. One candy tastes good.

Figure. 2 *Sample stimuli of Type 2 targeted in the task.*

Due to the fact that Arabic learners of English frequently encounter quantifiers quite early in their L2 exposure and have the opportunity to practice it more at least in a classroom context, they are likely to map the English quantifiers to their L1 feature set at an early stage of L2 development. Since *every* and *each* are morphophonologically different, the L1 does not offer any clue that another meaning for *kull* must be anticipated. Therefore, Arabic-speaking of English are likely to associate occurrences of *each* and *every* with their L1 equivalents, mapping the two forms onto only one counterpart *kull* in the Arabic L1. Once Arabic-speaking learners of English

establish an association between *each* and *every* in the input and their L1 feature set for *kull*. This process should be triggered by evidence in the input that includes *every* and *each* in different contexts (positive evidence), or by establishing the difference showing that *each*, for instance, is not acceptable in some contexts.

Crucially, L2 learners are faced with mapping task: they need to differentiate between *every* and *each*. However, note that, in principle, this case suggests a logical problem of language development, namely 'Poverty-of-the-Stimulus' (POS) (Schwartz and Sprouse, 2000; White 1985) particularly with Type 2. This is attributed to the fact that input does not provide evidence about where *every* and *each* are unacceptable and consequently it does not motivate the relevant change. That is, the input does not provide evidence that feature-base sets of L1 are unacceptable in some contexts of L2. This is evident if we take into consideration that neither teachers of English nor English textbooks provide sufficient details on the restrictions of using quantifiers, hence classroom instruction is unlikely to support such change. As far as L2 instruction is concerned, this kind of knowledge is relatively infrequent and not sufficiently introduced to alert the learners to the relevant distinctions. That is, learners are not taught about ungrammaticality related to the use of these surface forms in relation to some context, explicitly or implicitly. This may result in delay in the mapping process or unacceptable mapping which eventually may result in difficulty in the feature reassembly process; the feature reassembly may be slow, hard or unattainable. This case constitutes a potential learnability problem, hence Arabic learners of English are likely to demonstrate non-target-like knowledge of quantifiers, even at higher levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, no feature assembly is needed in Type 1 since the L1 and the L2 share identical feature-based sets. In this scenario, Arabic learners of English will use quantifiers appropriately once the mapping process is established appropriately.

However, ideally, it is important to recognize that the aforementioned distinctions between the two languages do not suggest that Arabic quantifiers are more straightforward. On the contrary, some Arabic scholars (e.g., Jawad, 2015) claim that Arabic quantifiers are more complicated and harder than those of English due to the fact that Arabic system is highly inflectional. Arabic quantifiers are inflected for gender of the counted nouns (e.g., cardinals) and inflected for case (nominative, accusative, or genitive depending on the noun position within the sentence). On the other hand, English has a system with distinctive features and in contrast to Arabic quantifiers, it has neutral gender. Yet, English quantifiers are also challenging due to the fact that L2 learners are commonly faced with many of the exceptions of their usage as we have seen. Interestingly, it is implausible to suggest that deleting features such as gender is assumed to be easier than adding new features such as countability on the basis of previous findings. With respect to this property, Arabic learners of English never produce sentences including quantifiers attached with gender like (8).

(8) *Only one-*she ballerina falls on stage.* 'Only one ballerina falls on stage'.

Using a minimalist feature-based contrastive analysis, this study was set out to find out whether Arabic learners of English find L2 forms with mismatching feature-based sets (Type 2: FR+) more problematic.

The two tasks are likely to be challenging to accomplish for the Arabic-speaking learners of English due to morphological differences on the mapping task, and poverty of the stimulus with regards to the feature reassembly task. L2 Learners at all proficiency levels are likely to show accurate performance on quantifiers with FR (−) and will emerge earlier. However, lower proficiency learners are likely to have difficulty identifying quantifiers with FR (+). Higher proficiency learners, on the other hand, are likely to be more accurate on quantifiers with FR (+), despite some initial mapping difficulty. If learner's performance on one sentence type differs significantly from their performance on the other, this suggests that the FRH represents the relevant distinction.

A total of 60 participants took part in the study. The Arabic speakers of English (*n*= 40) were divided into three proficiency levels: elementary (Ele: *n*= 5), intermediate (Inter: n= 28) and advanced (Adv: *n*= 7). A cloze passage with 40 blanks based on Slabakova (2001) was used to assess the participants' proficiency. The text was adjusted from *the Advanced Student's Book* by O'Neill et al. (1981) as described by Slabakova (2001).

The L2 learners of English were native-speakers of Saudi Arabic who were born and raised in Saudi Arabia by Saudi Arabic parents. The only language they spoke at home was Saudi Arabic. They had not studied any languages other than English, and were introduced to English around the same age (*M*=12). The participants attended English classes for 4-7 hours a day. The study also included a control group of native speakers of British English (*n*= 20). The purpose of including native speakers is to find out whether the performance of the experimental group significantly differs from that of the control group.

The sentence-picture matching task includes total of 42 items: trials (*n*=2), experimental sentences (*n*=20) and distractors (*n*= 20). The test included acceptable and unacceptable distractors. Equal distractors were used so the participants made unaware of the target purpose of the task. Trials are also used to make sure the participants are aware of the instructions and ready for the task. The experimental sentences included ten tokens with the structure of FR (+) and another ten with the structure of FR (−). The sentences and pictures were controlled for several factors, such as length and structure and complexity of sentences and pictures as well. Participants were asked to look at every single picture and in response they have to circle only one sentence that best describes the relevant picture.

4. Findings

The results demonstrated that, while the control group performed as expected, with statistically significantly higher mean ratings equally on the two types, among the L2 group, only the higher-level learners demonstrated target-like significant knowledge. All groups are significantly different from each other and from the control group. One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was performed to examine the relation between the speakers' performance on the two types. There was a statistically significant relationship between groups of speakers (experimental vs. control) with respect to their performance on the two types as Table 2 clearly shows. That is, there was a significant effect of sentence types at the $p < .05$ level among conditions, [$F(3, 56) = 70.30$, $p = .000$].

Table 2. *One-Way ANOVA comparison output*

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	*df*	*Mean Square*	*F*	*Sig.*
Between Groups	5782.27	3	1927.42	70.30	**.000**
Within Groups	1535.44	56	27.42		
Total	7317.71	59			

Since the null hypothesis was rejected, a post hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test was performed to find out whether the difference with groups is significant. The results reported in the multiple comparison Table 3 indicate that the mean score was significantly different at $p = .000$.

Table 3. *Post Hoc multiple comparisons output.*

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: Responses (Percentages)
Tukey HSD

(I) groups	*(J) groups*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*	*95% Confidence Interval*	
					Lower Bound	*Upper Bound*
Ele	Inter	-20.50*	2.54	.000	-27.22	-13.76
	Adv	-28.75*	3.076	.000	-36.87	-20.63
	Control	-35.00*	2.61	.000	-41.93	-28.07
Inter	Ele	20.50*	2.54	.000	13.76	27.22
	Adv	-8.26*	2.21	.002	-14.11	-2.40
	Control	-14.50*	1.53	.000	-18.57	-10.44
Adv	Ele	28.75*	3.067	.000	20.63	36.87
	Inter	8.26*	2.21	.002	2.40	14.11
	Control	-6.25*	2.30	.042	-12.33	-.17
Control	Ele	35.00*	2.61	.000	28.07	41.93
	Inter	14.50*	1.53	.000	10.44	18.57
	Adv	6.25*	2.30	.042	.16	12.34

Based on observed means.
The error term is Mean Square (Error) = 27.41.
*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The most obvious finding that emerges from the analysis is that the results showed a correlation between L2 learner proficiency levels and their performance on the target forms. Figure 3 clearly reveals a developmental path of L2; the more the L2 speakers advance in their L2 proficiency, the better they perform on the target forms. Evidence emerged in the findings is consistent with the prediction that target-like knowledge is unexpected in lower proficiency Arabic-English interlanguage, due to the fact L2 speakers rely more frequently on their L1 knowledge. Delayed feature reassembly is apparent at lower level of proficiency attributed to the poverty of the stimulus problem. However, the findings provide evidence that target-like knowledge is attainable at higher level of proficiency, overcoming the poverty of the stimulus problem. Hence, L2 proficiency seems to be a significant predictor of L2 in this study.

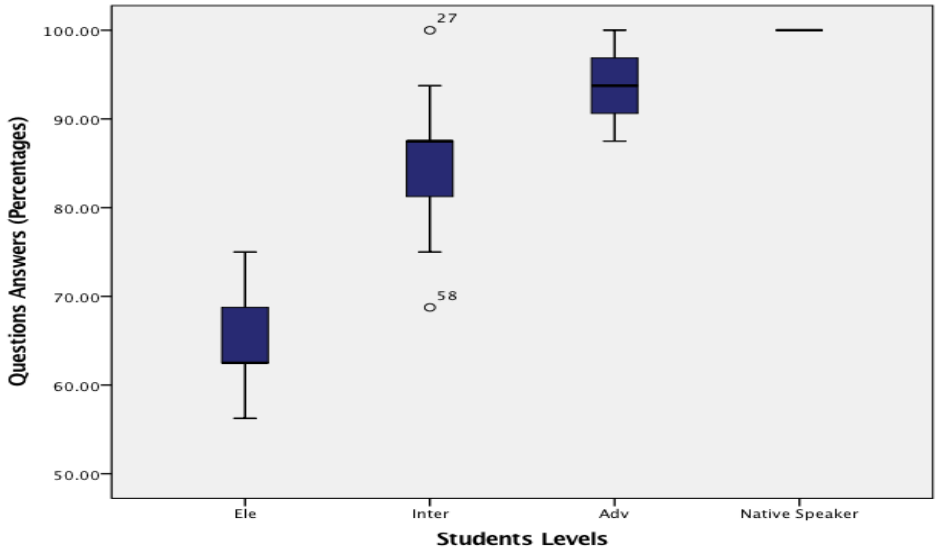

Figure. 3 *Mean percentage in terms of the overall performance of the speakers' groups.*

Perhaps even more important for the purpose of this paper is the finding that despite the L2 speakers long time of exposure to L2 English, evidence of L1 Lexical transfer was found in the data. In such cases, I found evidence of L1 surface properties functioning in early interlanguage grammar of low proficiency L2 learners, those properties were being transferred on the bases of the similarities between them in meanings or functions.

Although a certain amount of individual variation has been observed, a general developmental pattern can still be seen for Type 2. As you can see in Figure 4, Type 1 with matching feature set was significantly higher than Type 2.The findings suggest that quantifiers of Type 1 (Matching: FR −) were acquired early since English and Arabic have the same corresponding forms with the same feature distributions, whereas quantifiers of Type 2 (Mismatching: FR+) pose a greater challenge for the reason that their L1-L2 feature sets were not equivalent, and, hence, L2 learners were required to adjust the exiting feature set of their L1 to accommodate the target representations.

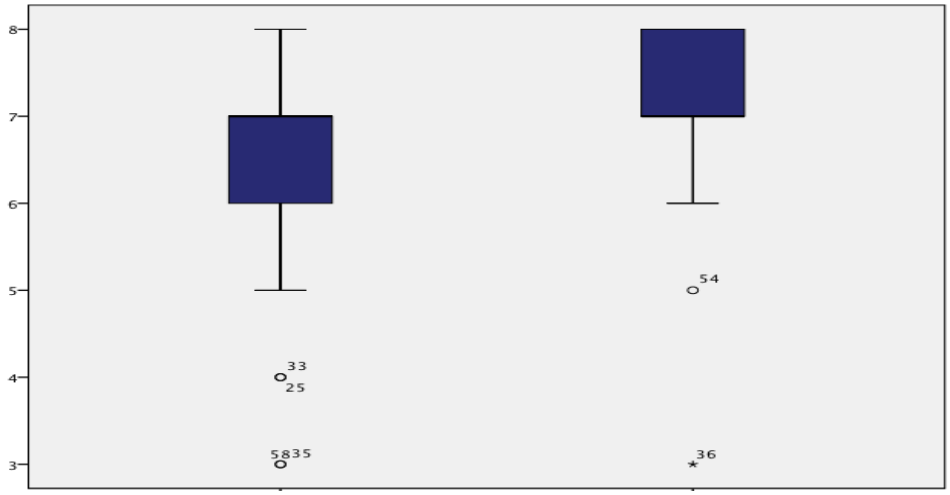

Figure. 4 *Mean percentage of the performance of the L2 group on the two variables.*

The results are in line with Lardiere's (2009) claim that meaning and function are the crucial cues for the mapping process. Given that learners are overwhelmingly faced with apparent poverty-of-the-stimulus situation since the L2 input does not directly trigger the necessary change, lacking evidence about what is impossible and unacceptable, and hence the feature reassembly process was hard or even in some cases unachievable.

Generally speaking, it seems fair to suggest that feature reassembly poses a great difficulty in L2 acquisition of quantifiers. The results of the experimental study on quantifiers by adult L2 learners of Arabic were shown to support the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2005, 2008, 2009). Indeed, the findings suggest that the divergent performance on both types of L2 quantifiers can largely be captured by the feature reassembly approach. Thus, the findings are supportive of the claim that the FRH seems helpful in capturing the likeness and differences between the languages. It facilitates predicting areas of difficulties in the L2 development and hence proposing appropriate pedagogical techniques to overcome potential learnability challenges.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the present study demonstrates how complex the learners' tasks are in mastering L2 forms, and how challenging it is for them to overcome the L1 effect. The predications are fully confirmed and the FRH is supported. The findings suggest that only the meanings which require new semantics-morphology remapping (FR+) is significantly difficult. This supports Lardiere's claims (2005, 2009) that even if the same feature is selected by two languages, if the form-meaning mapping of that feature is different in L1 and in L2, then that feature will pose learnability challenges to L2 learners if evidence in the input does not trigger the required amendment. Based on these findings, it seems fair to suggest that FRH offers an insightful account that helps in expanding our understanding of L2 development. This also supports the conclusion reached by Gil and Marsden (2013) suggesting "the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis offers an acquisition model

that can potentially explain how the development of interlanguage proceeds, beyond the initial state." (p. 49).

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