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THE FREQUENCY EFFECTS OF A RELATIVELY RARELY USED GRAMMAR STRUCTURE: THE CASE OF HAD BETTER

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ABSTRACT

The proposed study aimed to investigate the frequency effects of a relatively rarely used grammar structure, namely had better, and its impact on the process of second language learning. 43 university students participated in the study, who were undergraduate engineering students at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Their English proficiency level ranged between lower-intermediate and upper intermediate. The second language acquisition (SLA) literature indicates that the more frequently a language structure is encountered by a learner, the more likely the successful acquisition of that language structure is, whether this is for the learner's first (L1) or second (L2) language (Ellis, 2002; Gries, 2008). Two modal auxiliary verbs, had better and should, were particularly selected for this study. They were selected because one of them (had better) is rather rarely used (both in spoken and written discourse), whereas the other modal auxiliary (should) is used very frequently. The findings obtained from this study were analyzed in terms of form and meaning relationship. While the findings indicated that only one-third of the participants correctly identified that ['d] in the ['d better] pattern corresponded to had, more than half of the students (51%) thought that ['d] corresponded to would. The results for meaning, on the other hand, displayed a very different pattern from the findings for form. 65 percent of the participants correctly identified that "you'd better see a dentist" could alternatively be expressed by saying "your teeth are not in a good state. I advise you to see the dentist". These findings suggest that learners acquire the meaning of a grammatical pattern significantly more easily than the actual grammatical pattern itself, which means that they had far more trouble with form than meaning. The implication of these findings is multifold, which this article will address.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing scholarship in that it investigates a relatively rarely used auxiliary verb (had better) and its impact on second language acquisition. More specifically, it attempts to explore the frequency of "had better" especially in terms of form-meaning relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the frequency effects of a relatively rarely used grammar structure, namely *had better*, and its impact on the process of second language learning. The modal auxiliary verb *had better* occurs only 507 times in the British National Corpus, whereas *should*, another modal auxiliary verb, which has almost the same meaning as *had better*, occurs 107, 822 times. In other words, the word *should* occurs as many as 212 times more than *had better*. The relatively low frequency of *had better* compared to *should* has important pedagogical

implications for instruction, which merits investigation. The research question that will guide this study is as follows:

To what extent does the frequency of *had better* as a function word have an impact on the process of learners' acquiring their second language?

As Ellis (2002) puts it, language acquisition and frequency of structures are inextricably intertwined. This implies that success in language acquisition is contingent, at least to some extent, upon how frequently a learner is exposed to language. Schwartz and Causarano (2007) explain that compared to low-frequency constructions, high-frequency language constructions provide more exemplars for L2 learners to make generalizations. Ambridge *et al.* (2015) explain that frequency effects of language constitute a phenomenon for which any successful theory must account, and posit that "any successful account of language acquisition will need to incorporate frequency-sensitive learning mechanisms" (p. 240). Ellis (2002) cited in Gass and Mackey (2002) in the same vein, argues that "frequency is a fundamental cognitive mechanism in every domain of language processing" (p. 250).

That there exists a relationship between frequency and language acquisition have been corroborated by studies which point to the fact that there is indeed a link between frequency and morpheme acquisition (Freeman, 1975; Ellis and Schmidt, 1997; Goldschneider and DeKeyser, 2001). Langacker (1987) discussing the role of entrenchment in cognitive organization, posits that the degree of entrenchment becomes more solid with each use of a linguistic structure and points out that extended periods of disuse have a negative impact on the entrenchment. Through repetition, a novel structure becomes progressively entrenched and ultimately a unit, implying that the entrenchment of a novel language unit depends on how frequently it occurs. The notion of entrenchment is used in cognitive linguistics to refer to the degree to which the formation and activation of a cognitive unit is routinized and automated (Schmid, 2007). With repeated use, a novel structure becomes progressively entrenched, to the point of becoming a unit. Moreover, units are variably entrenched depending on the frequency of their occurrence.

Frequency of language and success in language acquisition, be it first (L1) or second (L2) is based on the premise that the "more frequently a linguistic item is encountered by a learner, the more likely the item will be acquired by him/her" (Ellis, 2002; Gries, 2008). Simply put the more language a learner *hears* or *reads*, the more possibility of learning takes place. Frequency effects, as per the literature, certainly play a significant role in second language acquisition. Ambridge *et al.* (2015) argue that frequency effects are ubiquitous also in children's first language acquisition, which will be further explored in the literature review below.

In what follows, a more detailed discussion of the relationship between frequency and second language acquisition is provided. Particular attention will be paid to rarely encountered language input as opposed to frequently encountered language input. The modality of exposure to input, i.e., written versus oral input in particular will also be dealt with. Such a discussion will necessarily involve a comparative analysis of the acquisition of function and content words.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of frequency in the process of language acquisition is delicately captured in Ellis (2002) following quotation:

> The knowledge underlying fluent use of language is not grammar in the sense of abstract rules or structure but a huge collection of memories of previously experienced utterances. These exemplars are linked, with like kinds being related in such a way that they resonate as abstract linguistic categories, schema, and prototypes. Linguistic regularities emerge as central tendencies in the conspiracy of the database of memories of utterances (pp. 166–167).

Frequency, and more specifically frequency in the input is defined as "the relative frequency of formal features in the language that people hear or read (Vanpatten and Benati, 2010) as cited in Kartal and Sarıgül (2017). The frequency of linguistic structures (the word "structure" is purposively used in this context, to refer to a grammatical

category, i.e. function words) to which second language (L2) learners are exposed are argued to have a major impact on the second language acquisition process since the frequency of structures a learner is exposed to promotes the process of acquiring a second language (MacWhinney, 1997; Ellis, 2002). The frequency of input that facilitates the learning process as such is usually referred to as "frequency effect". According to Ellis (2002) input frequency has effects on such language domains as spelling, reading, phonology, phonotactics (possible phoneme sequences), formulaic language, lexis, morphosyntax (grammar), grammaticality, language comprehension, and syntax.

According to Chomsky's Universal Grammar, humans are born with an innate language capacity that allows us to produce infinite number of sentences. The School of Functionalism, in contrast, claims that grammars emerge from thousands of different structural constructions, which are internalized and mapped onto our cognitive capacities through the frequency of input. Frequency of input, in addition to other variables, is argued to facilitate and promote learning (Tomasello, 1998; Wray, 2002).

Some researchers have approached the role of frequency in language acquisition with some caution. Schwartz and Causarano (2007) for instance, justifiably indicate that despite the fact that the frequency of input plays a significant role in learning a second language, it is not the only factor involved in learning a second language. Ellis (1994) who has adopted a rather prudent attitude to the role of frequency in language acquisition remarks:

Overall there is very little evidence to support the claim that input frequency affects L2 acquisition but there is also very little evidence to refute it. Perhaps the safest conclusion is that input frequency serves as one of the factors influencing development, often in association with other factors such as L1 transfer and communicative need (p. 273).

Ellis (2002) argues that the role of frequency in second language learning has been neglected in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. It is also a fact that researchers displayed a skeptical approach to the role of frequency in language acquisition. This could be attributed to a fear of reverting back to a pedagogy inspired by the Audio-Lingual methodology, which is purportedly believed to promote a stimulus-response based instruction. Such a methodological approach is thought to predominantly involve rote memorization and mechanical drills, which are usually blamed for being decontextualized (Ellis, 2002; Schwartz and Causarano, 2007).

2.1. How Frequency of Function Words Impacts Acquisition

Ellis (2002) and Larsen-Freeman (2002) point out that frequency of input is not the sole variable in language learning. They point out that if that were the case, then the definite and indefinite articles of English would be easily acquired by learners. In their analysis of how frequently patterns containing gerunds and infinitives are used, Schwartz and Causarano (2007) argue that since native speakers of English use infinitives almost 10 times more frequently than gerunds, students are likely to learn and use the infinitive structure more rapidly. Bardovi-Harlig (2002) attributes this discrepancy to the fact that language structures that are morphologically less complex are more easily acquired by learners. In her analysis of the frequency and complexity of the two structures, *will* and *be going to*, Bardovi-Harlig argues that in the production of the structure *be going to*, learners are more challenged since the correct form of the verb *to be* has to be inflected appropriately based on the tense and the subject/agent of the action.

It is argued that there is also a direct relationship between the number of errors and frequency (Schwartz and Causarano, 2007). Compared to low-frequency constructions, high-frequency constructions provide more exemplars for L2 learners to make generalizations, which directly relates to the number and kind of errors made by learners. According to the *Prevent Error Thesis*, for instance, structures that have high-frequency can reduce, or even prevent errors in contexts in which they are the target (Ambridge *et al*., 2015).

The inquiry in this particular study involves the analysis of the modal auxiliary verb *had better*, especially in comparison to *should*, another modal auxiliary verb, which can be regarded as a synonym of *had better*. The assumption in this study is that *had better* is much more challenging to acquire for learners for a number of reasons.

The first one is that it is much less frequently encountered than *should*, and also heard less frequently in informal conversations. The second reason is that *had better* is morphologically more complex than a single item such as *should* as it contains two free morphemes. What makes things worse for learners is that the *had better* structure, on top of being extremely infrequent, is usually contracted to *'d better*, where the *apostrophe d* is hardly audible in fast-paced natural conversations among native speakers. This results in learners' perceiving, or hearing only "you better see a dentist" rather than "you *had better* see a dentist". Another factor that might impede the acquisition of *had better* is the fact that as a two-word modal auxiliary verb, it contains a verb in the past form (had), which might lead the learners to initially think that the *had better* structure refers to some action in the past.

The hypothesis in this study is that *had better*, let alone its meaning, is particularly difficult to acquire for learners, especially in terms of *form*. In other words, learners may feel challenged owing to the fact that the *apostrophe + d*, as noted above, is not clearly audible. Paradoxically, students may have an easier time understanding the *meaning* of this particular structure since it is always used in contexts that make the meaning comprehensible more easily. For instance, the sentence "you'd better study hard to pass the exam", could be easily comprehended by learners from the context whereas internalizing the actual structural pattern may indeed prove challenging. It is for this particular reason, we hear learners of any language saying "I can understand everything that is said, but I have trouble expressing myself orally", which points to the fact that in language learning, comprehension is much less challenging than production. Research indeed points to the fact that learners' comprehension of the target language is significantly more developed than their abilities production skills, i.e. speaking and writing, particularly with regard to grammatical accuracy (Swain, 1985; Harley *et al.*, 1990; Harley, 1992). Based on the preceding, one can argue that learners' comprehension skills enjoy superiority to their oral production skills.

Crossley *et al.* (2014) emphasize that meaning plays a major role in the acquisition of second language. They point out that a linguistic item is likely to be internalized and incorporated into learners' interlanguage system only if it is 'meaningfully experienced' and thus stored in the long-term memory. That a language item has to be 'meaningfully experienced' on the part of learners has a variety of implications which will be further discussed below.

The most important feature of *had better* is that it belongs to a linguistic category referred to as *modal auxiliary verbs*, which are in fact function words. Function words consist of linguistic items containing prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, modal auxiliary verbs, auxiliary verbs, and functional morphemes such as definite and indefinite articles (Stromswold, 1994). Function words, as opposed to content words, do not substantially alter the meaning of a sentence since their function is limited to assigning grammaticality to a sentence. Foster and Ohta (2005) indicate that function words, which can also be labeled as morphosyntactic components of language, do not necessarily lead to a breakdown in communication in that missing, incorrect or unrecognized morphemes or problems with tense, case, or gender do not substantially contribute to the meaning-making process. Tyler *et al.* (2002) emphasize that content words, on the other hand, tend to be more concrete and pictureable, or imageable compared to function words, and serve syntactic purposes (Smith and Witten, 1993). Content words are said to have a high value of *imageability* of a word, which refers to "the degree to which its referent can be perceived through the senses" (Tyler *et al.*, 2002). A lexical item gains the status of being imageable if it can be perceived through senses. The word "car", for instance, is highly concrete and imageable since its meaning is associated with many sensory properties (size, shape, etc.), whereas a word such as *discrimination* does not invoke a concrete and imageable meaning since it is significantly less concrete in terms of imageability. This indeed accounts for the reason why content words are much easier to acquire than function words (Chung and Pennebaker, 2007).

It is worthwhile pointing out that frequency effects are not limited to adult second language learning only; children's L1 acquisition is also impacted by frequency effects. Ambridge *et al.* (2015) for instance, posit that children indeed learn frequent words before infrequent ones, and provide an example of American English-speaking children's L1 acquisition. They explain that American children first produce the words *Daddy*, *Mommy*, *bye*, *hi*, *uh-*

oh, *dog*, *no*, *ball*, baby, and *book* much before the words *computer* and *coffee* (p. 243) since they hear these last two words less frequently.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design. 43 university students participated in the study, whose English proficiency level ranged between lower-intermediate and upper intermediate. The students were taking a communication course in English, the focus of which was on productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing. The course puts a heavy focus on speaking skills in particular; students, as a partial requirement of the course, have the obligation to deliver three Power Point presentations on a variety of topics including engineering topics as all the participants were students in the Faculty of Engineering.

The instrument for this study consisted of two main components. One of them attempted to assess learners' awareness of *form*, or more precisely the grammatical structure. More specifically, the study attempted to investigate whether students knew that in the [*'d + better*] pattern, the contracted ['d] pattern did indeed correspond to *had*. The second component, on the other hand, aimed to assess whether students were aware of the *meaning* of the contracted [*'d +better*] pattern. In other words, the meaning component aimed at understanding whether students were aware that *had better* is a structure that is "used to give advice about what someone should do" (Longman Online Dictionary). Each component comprised one single task. The component that assessed form read:

*You'**d** better see the dentist.*

'd represents:

a- Had

b- Would

c- Both *a* and *b*

d- Neither *a* nor *b*

As for the meaning component, it was designed considering the fact that the presence of a past form (had) would potentially confuse the learners and make them think that *had better* would rather refer to a message in the past. To this end, different tense options were integrated into the options such as "It is good that you *saw* the dentist." Below is the second component of the instrument:

You'd better see a dentist.

Which of the following sentences best matches the meaning of the above sentence?

a- It is good that you saw the dentist.

b- Your decision to see the dentist is a good idea.

c- It is a good idea that you are planning to see the dentist.

d- Your teeth are not in a good state. I advise you to see the dentist.

The two questions in the instrument were designed with a view to assessing the two fundamental concepts in second language acquisition: *form* and *meaning* (Long, 1980). To put it another way, the instrument first intended to assess whether the learners had acquired the structure (the form), according to which [*'d better*] corresponded to *had better* and whether they knew that the [*'d better*] structure is used to give advice to people (the meaning). It is important to emphasize that the researcher conducted his study with students from four intact classes. In other words, students were not recruited on the basis of experimental set-up conditions.

The two items in the instrument were not initially designed as multiple-choice questions; they were first designed as open ended questions. For validity and reliability purposes, the instrument was pilot tested with 11 students, again from an intact class. Almost half of the students provided appropriate answers while some students had difficulty understanding the question. In the first question, for instance, students were asked the question *what* ['d] *represented in the sentence* "You'd better see the dentist". One student, for instance, answered: "I have to see the

dentist". Other than the misunderstanding in the preceding example, problems with handwriting, spelling, and sentence structure made the assessment of the item indeed difficult, and to this end, the researcher reverted to multiple-choice format as it made the process easier for both the researcher and the students. What follows below are the findings displayed in pie charts and tables. There are two pie charts and two tables; Chart 1 and Table 1 represent the results for *form* (grammar) and the Chart 2 and Table 2 display the results for *meaning*.

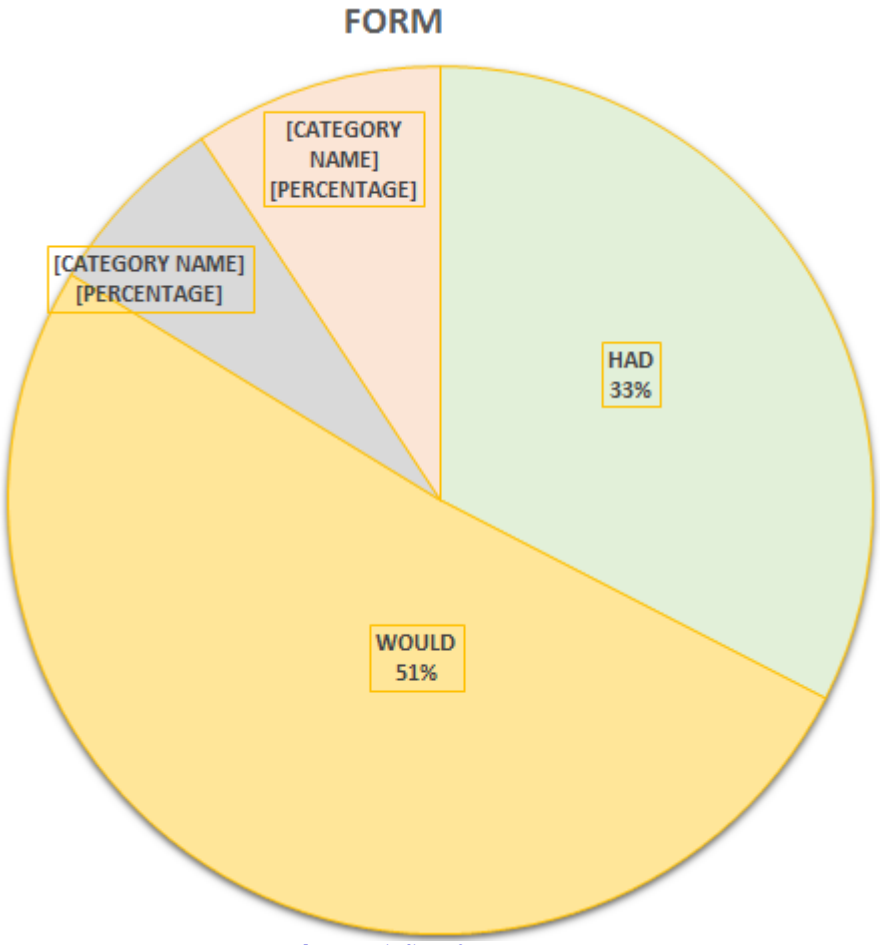

Chart-1. Findings for Form

Table-1. Findings for Form

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
HAD	3	5	5	1	14	33
WOULD	4	3	8	7	22	51
NEITHER a NOR b	3	0	0	0	3	7
BOTH a AND b	1	0	1	2	4	9
TOTAL	**11**	**8**	**14**	**10**	**43**	**100**

4. FINDINGS

The findings will be discussed in terms of the two fundamental aspects of language; meaning and form. Foster and Ohta (2005) posit that "progress in acquiring the second language system is seen as manifested by increased fluency and accuracy" (p. 403). Fluency is usually addressed by a focus on meaning, where the main aim of instruction is to develop students' ability to use the target language to engage in meaningful and effective communication. In contrast, a focus on form approach would necessarily involve the integration of grammar into instruction, which would address accuracy. Long (1996) developed the Focus on Form approach as research indicated that it was indeed difficult for learners to achieve high levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaning-centered instruction. The findings obtained from immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies, in

particular, revealed that certain features of learners' L2 remained non-target like despite the many years learners spend in immersion programs. It was evident that exposing learners to mere comprehensible input and meaningful interaction would not suffice to address accuracy (Harley, 1993; Harley & Swain, 1985, cited in (Simard and Wong, 2004; Swan, 2005)). The constructs Focus on Form and Focus on Meaning will be further discussed below in the section "conclusion". What follows below is a discussion of the implications of the findings for form and meaning.

4.1. Form

In this section, first a brief discussion of what *form* refers to will be provided, which will be followed by the analysis of the findings obtained from the study. The term "form" is possibly the most commonly used concept in the second language acquisition literature, and it is likely to have multiple interpretations in terms of its meaning since it is loosely defined. Ferrante (2003) for instance, uses the phrase "linguistic features of the language" to refer to *form*. Aarts (2015) on the other hand, regards *form* as metalanguage and defines it as the category labels used for the building blocks of grammar, i.e. word classes, phrases, and clauses. The word form is also frequently employed in collocations with constructs such as Focus on Form and Focus on Forms. Independent of any collocations, the word "form" is usually used to refer to structure, and by structure grammar is meant. That said, the word form, in reality, may refer to any aspect of formal language properties, which can include spelling, punctuation, phonemes, morphemes, affixation, coherence between sentences and paragraphs, etc. In the SLA literature, as stated above, it is most commonly used in the two following constructs:

a- Focus on Form, which refers to occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—motivated by perceived problems with comprehension or production"(Long and Robinson, 1998).

b- Focus on Forms, which refers to the explicit teaching of discrete items of grammar, lexis, functions, and notions one at a time, like the presentation of a grammatical point traditionally (Long, 1997a).

The findings displayed in Chart 1 and Table 1 have important pedagogical implications. In terms of form, the findings indicate that *only* one-third of the participants correctly identified that [*'d*] in the [*'d better*] pattern corresponded to *had*. Another interesting finding was that half of the students thought that [*'d*] corresponded to *would*, which is not so surprising considering the fact that most of the [*'d*] contractions in spoken English correspond to *would*. A good example comes from a very common structure: *would like to*. Since the *would like to* structure is taught at even elementary levels, it should not be surprising that learners have the understanding that [*'d*] normally corresponds to *would*. That learners interpret [*'d*] in the [*'d + better*] pattern as *would* seem to remind us of a fossilization pattern, which is referred to as *overgeneralization* (Brown, 1994). According to this fossilization pattern, learners extend the use of a grammatical rule or linguistic item beyond its acceptable pattern, generally by making words or a structure follow a more regular pattern. In this particular instance, learners overgeneralize the *would like* ('d like) and *would like to ('d like to)* patterns, and carry the contracted [*'d*] pattern over to the *had better* (*'d better*) pattern. Since *would like (to)* pattern is a much more frequently occurring pattern in English, this form of fossilization on the part of learners makes so much sense. The fact that learners are not exposed to the *had better* pattern as frequently as they should, could well be a consequence of learners' being exposed to a much simpler grammar structure "should" significantly more frequently, which most of the time replaces *had better*. The

reason why it (*should*) is labeled as simple because it contains only one free morpheme, as opposed to *had better*, which consists of two free morphemes.

As discussed above, morphologically more complex structures are more challenging for learners to acquire (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002). Looking at the whole picture, especially in terms of form, the findings reveal that two thirds of the students were not aware that the [*'d*] contraction in the [*'d better*] pattern corresponded to *had*.

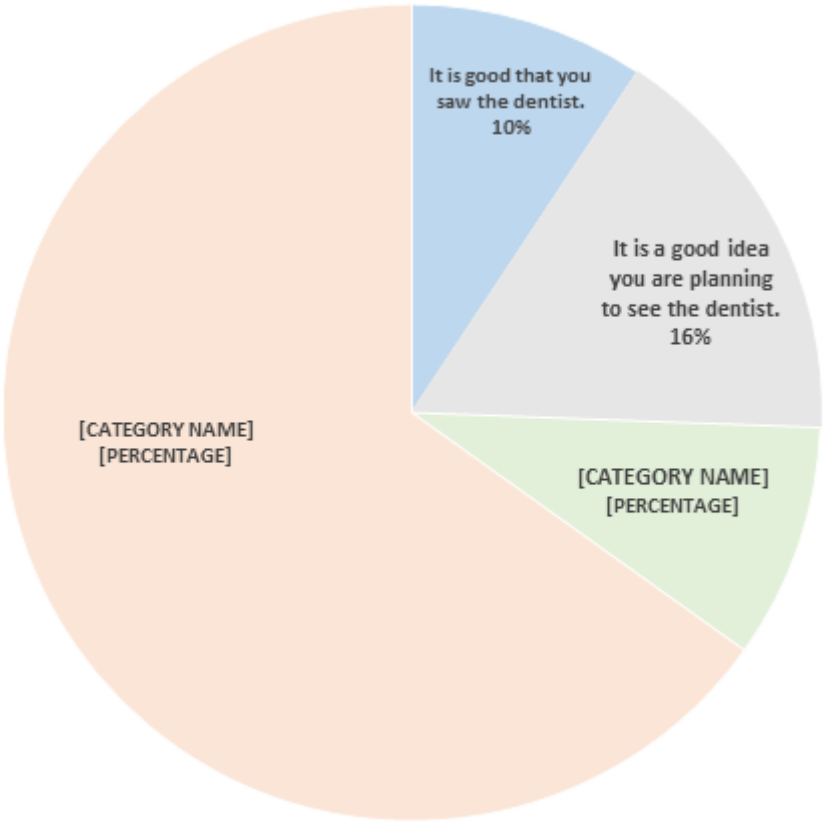

Chart-2. Findings for Meaning

Table-2. Findings for Meaning

				CLASS		
SENTENCE	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**TOTAL**	**PERCENTAGE**
It is good that you saw the dentist.	0	1	3	0	4	10
It is a good idea that you are planning to see the dentist	0	3	2	2	7	16
Your decision to see the dentist is a good idea.	0	0	2	2	4	9
Your teeth are not in a good state. I advise you to see the dentist.	11	4	7	6	28	65
TOTAL	**11**	**8**	**14**	**10**	**43**	**100**

4.2. Meaning

In the second language acquisition literature, meaning-oriented instruction normally refers to promoting learners' ability of comprehending oral or written messages. Long (1996) defines negotiation for meaning as

> *the process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved.*

The aforesaid definition indicates that focus-on-meaning instruction is a fundamental tenet of communicative-oriented instruction, according to which receiving mere meaningful input suffices to make second language acquisition happen. According to such an approach, actively using a language, rather than paying conscious attention to form is what makes people learn languages.

In line with the philosophy of Focus-on-Meaning instruction, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) requires that interactional adjustments between an expert and a novice learner are essential to acquisition. The assumption is that in the process of negotiating a communication problem, modifications to the interactional structure of conversations are made, which in turn facilitate comprehensibility of the input. However, in real-life classrooms, interactions almost always take place between learners, which creates problems in terms of accuracy. It

is usually the case that learners get abundant non-standard (deviant) input from their classmates, which contributes to their forming incorrect interlanguage hypotheses (Lightbown *et al*., 2002).

In the previous section, findings were analyzed in terms of their implications for form. As noted above, the results revealed that only 33 percent of all the learners who participated in this study had acquired the [*'d better*] pattern correctly, and were therefore aware that [*'d*] in

[*'d better*] corresponded to *had*. That only one third of the participants had acquired the *had better* pattern correctly is indeed alarming and has implications for a focus on form, and more specifically for grammar teaching.

The results for *meaning*, on the other hand, interestingly displayed a very different pattern from the results for *form*. The learners who knew that the sentence "you'd better see a dentist" were aware that it could alternatively be expressed by saying "your teeth are not in a good state. I advise you to see the dentist" constituted 65 percent, almost two thirds of the participants. These results are indeed though-provoking, especially in terms of form-meaning relationship and the teaching of grammar. These findings, as far as this study is concerned, suggest that learners had far more trouble with *form* than *meaning*. This is in line with research which suggests meaning-focused instruction usually falls short of addressing accuracy, and in this respect, instruction has to involve some focus of form (Correa, 2011). In light of this new line of research, Long (1991) recognized that an instructional model which is primarily meaning-based with a pure focus on successful exchanges of meaning, did not contribute to accuracy and suggested that a focus on form, i.e., structure of the language should be integrated into instruction. Long's original model required that a Focus on Form (FonF) be incidental (i.e. employed only when a learner need arises), it has been modified to include planned FonF, which is the use of focused tasks "that have been designed to elicit the use of specific linguistic forms in the context of meaning-centered language use" (Ellis *et al*., 2002). Similarly, Long (1991) original suggestion that FonF should be implicit, so as not to interfere with interaction, was modified to include a range of techniques, from implicit (e.g. recasts, input enhancement) to more explicit (e.g. indication that an error has been made, stating a rule).

As Laufer (2006) points out, FonF has been modified in an effort to address accuracy issues in language production. The modified version of FonF was Focus on Forms (FonFs) involved an explicit focus on the discrete-forms of the language via correction, direct and negative feedback, recasts, etc., normally excluded from teaching in meaning-oriented classrooms. Long (1991); Long (1997) and Long and Robinson (1998) posit that occasional focus on discrete language items, or linguistic code features can help students develop an understanding of language structures, which would ultimately result in students' acquiring difficult forms through such intervention and explicit treatment of language structures. According to this newer version of language instruction, while a FonF approach would dominate classroom instruction, occasional shifts to FonFs were tolerated when structural aspects of language were in focus. This was a sharp deviation from Long's original Focus on Meaning (FonM) and Focus on Form. In the original version of FonM and FonF, all classroom activities were to be conducted implicitly (with no recourse to the language structure at all) so that they would not interfere with interaction.

The findings obtained from this study seem to lend support to Renou (2001) who maintains that meaning-oriented instructional approaches put almost no or very little emphasis on form. She posits that meaning-oriented language teaching methodologies such as Communicative Language Methodology and Task-based Learning reject the traditional, decontextualized, explicit teaching of L2 grammar and replace it with language tasks which prioritize meaning and communication at the expense of accurate language production. The consequence of this is reflected in this study as well as in many other studies. Instruction that does not put enough focus on form, either implicitly or explicitly, is not likely to address accuracy in language production as is the case with Canadian immersion programs (Swain, 1985; Simard and Wong, 2004). The findings obtained from this study as well as numerous other studies suggest that an explicit focus on form, along with a focus on meaning, should be a fundamental component of any language curriculum. Students' comprehending oral messages and/or communicating with limited accuracy, in this regard, should not be regarded as an instructional achievement.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the frequency effects of a less frequently used grammar structure, namely *had better*. More specifically, the study attempted to assess the extent to which students' being less frequently exposed to a grammar pattern impacts their second language learning process. The findings revealed that students, especially as far as the "had better" pattern was concerned, had trouble dealing with the grammar of the pattern as only one third of the students correctly identified that "d" in the "had better" pattern corresponded to *had*, rather than *would*. 51 percent of the students, on the other hand, thought that "d" in the "had better" pattern corresponded to *would*.

As for the meaning of the *had better* pattern, two thirds of the students correctly identified that "had better" is normally used to give advice to a person for some future action. This points to the fact that students, in general, did not seem to be challenged regarding the meaning of the message conveyed by the *had better* pattern; they rather had problems regarding the structure of the modal auxiliary "had better". These findings tend to confirm research findings which indicate that learners' comprehension of the target language is usually better developed than their abilities to produce the language accurately (Valeo, 2013). It is obvious that the learners who participated in this study were not all taught English in the same manner. They must have been exposed to varying instructional methodologies depending on the context and teacher. It might well be the case that some students may have been taught through a form-oriented approach whereas others might have been exposed to rather meaning-oriented methodologies. Irrespective of the methodology implemented in their process of learning English, learners displayed a profile which pointed to the fact that they had acquired well-developed receptive language skills, which seem to have happened at the expense of accuracy. This situation has serious implications for instruction, especially as far as accurate language production is concerned.

From the preceding discussion, it is possible to argue that focus-on-meaning instruction, typical of communication-first methodologies, does successfully promote oral communication skills, but usually fails to address accurate production skills. It can, therefore, be concluded that students' poor performance regarding the accurate oral production of *had better* (as well as any other complex grammatical structure) should be attributed to a lack of or inadequate form-focused instruction along with students' being significantly less exposed to the *had better* pattern, the latter of which has critical implications, especially as far as language curricula are concerned. It is the case that some structures such as the modal auxiliary *had better* are less reflected in language curricula. This suggests that not enough emphasis is laid on the grammatical aspect of the *had better* pattern in textbooks. The implication of this for classroom instruction is that the *had better* pattern had better be taught together with the modal auxiliary verb *should*. Instructors, in this respect, face the obligation to make sure that students are exposed to the *had better* structure as frequently as they do to *should*, at least in the classroom. It should not be too difficult to predict that students in English as Second Language (ESL) contexts are not exposed to *had better* (both in the classroom and outside on the street) as frequently as they would to *should*. The English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are even more challenging since students live in a context in which they are deprived of receiving oral/written input outside the classroom. Especially as far as EFL contexts are concerned, it is imperative that learners be exposed to the *had better* pattern in the classroom at a reasonable frequency, especially in terms of form.

It has to be emphasized that the complexity learners face regarding *had better* does not lie in the word *better*, but it rather does in *had*. As discussed above, the *had better* structure consists of two free morphemes: *had* and *better*. The word *better*, on its own, can be argued to contribute to the meaning-making process. In other words, when learners hear/or see the word *better*, they are very likely to make a relatively solid prediction as to how the word *better* would attribute meaning to the sentence. The problem, however, lies in the word *had*; as a function word, it poses challenges to learners in terms of grammar. That *had* is contracted to *'d* is the major challenge. To make things worse, the *'d* contraction is also used in Past Perfect Tense construction. Here is an example:

I had already completed my breakfast by the time my colleagues arrived.

I'd already completed my breakfast by the time my colleagues arrived.

The question to be posed here is how frequently the Past Perfect Tense is used in ESL contexts, or perhaps more specifically, how frequently the Past Perfect Tense is encountered by learners, especially in daily life interactions. The answer to these questions is that the Past Perfect Tense is not used as frequently as the Simple Past Tense, one reason being that the Past Perfect Tense pattern, similar to the *had better* pattern, consists of the combination of two free morphemes (had + past participle), which is not the case for the Simple Past Tense.

Another important factor that renders the use of the Past Perfect Tense difficult is that there needs to be two completed actions in the past. Here is an example:

a- *By the time my father arrived home, I had already completed my homework.*

There is, however, an easier and less complicated way of delivering the same message, which normally exerts less cognitive pressure on learners.

b- I completed my homework before my father arrived home.

Since *b* is less challenging than *a*, its frequency should be in line with the level of its difficulty, implying that *b* is what we are going to hear significantly more frequently than *a*. This indicates that learners will be less exposed to the Past Perfect Tense meaning that the acquisition of the Past Perfect Tense is going to prove challenging. This points to the fact that [had + past participle] and its contracted form, ['d + past participle] will be less encountered by learners.

A search in the British National Corpus reveals that the Simple Past form of *make* (made) was used 90,504 times whereas the Past Perfect Tense form of *make* (had made) was used only 3613 times, suggesting that the Past Perfect Tense form was used 25 times less than the Simple Past form. The implication of this for the classroom is that these corpus search results are reflected in the classroom in a parallel way. In other words, students are not exposed to the Past Perfect Tense in the classroom as much as they do to the Simple Past Tense. This is due to the fact that adequate context is not created in the classroom to expose learners to the [apostrophe +d= ('+d)] structure. That 51% of the participants in this study thought that the [apostrophe + d] in the sentence "You'd better see the dentist" represents "would" attests to the fact that learners are normally exposed to the *would like (to)* structure significantly more frequently than they would to *had better*.

Budi (2017) along similar lines, indicates that the use of the Past Perfect Tense is usually overlapped with simple the Simple Past Tense, suggesting that students are more likely to use the Simple Past Tense than the Past Perfect Tense owing to the complexity of the Past Perfect Tense. Based on his comparative analysis of the frequency of the Past Perfect Tense compared to the Simple Past Tense in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), Budi Putra Johan states that "the use of simple past tense in spoken register is at least 40 percent more frequent than spoken register in the Past Perfect Tense" (p. 632), which supports the above discussion that students get significantly less input in the Past Perfect Tense.

EFL contexts present a more negative scenario as learners are not exposed to English outside the classroom. The question to be posed then is "how frequently does formal instruction address the Past Perfect Tense in EFL contexts?" It is difficult to provide a precise answer to this question, but the answer should be *less frequently* simply because of the context, which provides impoverished input.

As discussed above, the more frequently learners are exposed to a structure, the more likely its acquisition is by learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002; Schwartz and Causarano, 2007). The bottom line here is that *had better* is not a frequently encountered structure and therefore the acquisition of [apostrophe + d] is not straightforward.

It is perhaps more common sense to discuss how frequently instruction should address or tackle complex structures such as *had better*. Rather than discussing how frequently a grammar item or structure is encountered by a learner, a new line of inquiry should be the frequency with which certain complex structures such as *had better* are addressed by instructors. This would obviously be dependent on assessing the frequency with which learners are exposed to complex structures outside the classroom (especially in ESL contexts) as opposed to the frequency with

which they are exposed to those complex structures in the classroom. It is indeed critical that learners be exposed to input both outside and inside the classroom. However, since we do not live in an ideal world, this does not always happen. When students do not encounter complex structures outside the classroom, it then becomes essential that instruction address such discrepancy and make sure that complex structures such as *had better* are covered, repeated, and reinforced in class provided that the curriculum does not impose any constraints on teachers. Unfortunately, it is usually the case that when faced with curriculum constraints, teachers may not have enough time to address such form-related complexity issues.

Another important curricular factor that exacerbates the situation, as Biber and Conrad (2001) and Biber and Reppen (2002) point out, is that textbook authors and curriculum developers adopt a rather subjective approach to the selection of most frequently occurring lexical items, phrases, and grammatical structures. They make decisions based on intuitions and subjective beliefs, which usually fails to reflect the actual language that is encountered and used in real life linguistic exchanges (Biber and Reppen, 2002; Alzuhairy, 2016).

To summarize the foregoing, the acquisition of the [apostrophe + d] pattern presents particular challenges to learners because it is not frequently used in daily language. Structures that contain ['d] such as the Past Perfect Tense (e.g. had seen) and the modal auxiliary had better ['d better] are more rarely used in spoken register, especially when compared to ['d like] and

['d like to] patterns.

It is important for teachers, textbook writers, and curriculum developers to recognize that complex grammatical structures such as *had better*, the focus of this particular study, is unlikely to be learned (Lightbown, 1998) or entrenched (Langacker, 1987; Schmid, 2007) from mere naturalistic input. Explicit instruction and a focus on form is essential to address accuracy, especially for such complex structures since they are more amenable to explicit and form-focused instruction (Alderson *et al*., 1997; Correa, 2011).

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