

Morphological Development in a Bhutanese Child: A Case Study of English as A Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the morphological development of a 58-month-old Bhutanese child, Dorji, learning English as a second language in a multilingual setting. The study employed a qualitative case study design focusing on speech samples collected during spontaneous father-child interactions. Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) and grammatical morpheme analysis were applied to assess linguistic complexity, emphasizing on plural markers, verb inflections, negations, and interrogatives. The findings indicated an MLU of 5.94, which is within the typical range of first language learners, suggesting advanced morphological competence despite English being the child's second language. The child demonstrated strong Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is evident from the use of academic vocabulary such as "gravity" and "helium planet." However, weaker Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) were observed through limited conversational fluency and inadequate use of negation and question structures. The study indicated the critical role of parents in teaching early morphological development, while limited exposure to spontaneous peer interaction may hinder functional grammar growth. Overgeneralization of morphological rules, inconsistent auxiliary usage, and reliance on rising intonation for questions reflected an early developmental stage in conversational competence. Thus, the study highlighted the importance of balanced language exposure that integrates both structured academic discourse and naturalistic communication. It contributes to the limited body of research on second language acquisition in underrepresented multilingual contexts and offers pedagogical implications for early language instruction, parental involvement, and curriculum design for both academic and communicative language proficiency.

Keywords: Mean Length of Utterance (MLU), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Morphological Development, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS).



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INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition in young learners is influenced by complex interactions of cultural, cognitive and environmental factors. A key element of language learning is morphological development such as prefixes, suffixes, and inflections which serves as a foundational component in language learning. It enables learners to decode complex vocabulary, comprehend syntactic structures, and produce grammatically accurate sentences (Matwangsang & Sukying, 2023). However, learners frequently encounter challenges in acquiring morphological structures. These difficulties often

arise due to changes in the quality, quantity, and the timing of linguistic information, as well as cross-linguistic discrepancies between their native and second languages. Notably Rangsaewoot and Sukying (2023) stated that while morphological awareness instruction significantly improved vocabulary knowledge of Thai EFL, learners continue to struggle with morphemes that lacked analogs in their L1. Similarly, the recent study by Ntalli et al. (2025) on verbal morphology among child EFL learners in Russia and China shows that L1 and age of onset have significant effects: older starters outperform younger ones, and accuracy with features such as past tense and third person singular agreement is influenced by structural similarity in morphological systems such as L1 having verbal agreement vs not.

Moreover, recent study also addresses the disparity in proficiency types. Guo & Feng, (2024) ethnographic case demonstrates that an adult English as a second language may exhibit stronger Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and weaker Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) due to an imbalance in exposure, with structured academic input predominating and informal interactive exposure being limited.

Additionally, children are exposed to a variety of languages in multilingual environments like Bhutan, which may have a similar effect on the morphological development of English. Although there are currently few direct studies on morpheme acquisition in Bhutan, results from related multilingual contexts indicate that exposure to multiple languages can either help or hinder morpheme acquisition, depending on the degree of exposure and the structural similarity between L1 and L2 (Ntalli et al., 2025).

When combined, these recent studies demonstrate the complexity of morphological development in early second language learners and the need for pedagogical strategies that take into account age, first language background, and the degree of morphological overlap or divergence between languages, while also addressing formal academic instruction to support CALP and informal interactive exposure to support BICS. Building on these insights, the present study aims to explore:

1. How does a Bhutanese child demonstrate morphological development in English as a second language, in terms of mean length of utterance (MLU) and acquisition of morphemes?
2. What is the role of parental input in supporting the child's English language acquisition, as conceptualized through parental input and interactionist theories?

Literature Review

An essential component of the development of both oral and written language is morphological development, which includes the learning and orderly arrangement of morphemes such as roots, prefixes, suffixes, and inflections. Building vocabulary, enhancing reading comprehension, boosting spelling accuracy, and strengthening written expression all depend on morphological awareness, that is defined as the deliberate capacity to examine and work with these morphemic units (Levesque et al., 2017). In addition to promoting literacy in first language (L1) learners, morphological awareness is a crucial process in second language (L2) learning, especially when learners come across complicated vocabulary and syntactic structures,(Lee et al., 2022)

Early research by Brown (1973) revealed a consistent pattern in the way English-speaking children learn morphemes, such as the past tense -ed, plural -s, and progressive -ing. However, later research has revealed that this developmental pattern is frequently broken by L2 learners because of factors such as age of acquisition, cognitive maturity, cross-linguistic effect, and differences in both the quantity and the quality of L2 exposure (Wang et al., 2025). Learners may also encounter slower rates of acquisition or interference effects when learning English morphology if their first language (L1) does not have comparable inflectional or derivational structures (Marks et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of considering typological distance between the L1 and L2 in order to understand the morphological development.

Empirical studies indicate that explicit instruction in morphology can significantly accelerate L2 acquisition. Interventions using morpheme analysis, word-building exercises, and scaffolded practice have been shown to improve both recognition and productive use of inflectional and derivational morphemes, particularly when integrated systematically into the curriculum (Ahmed Badawi, 2019). Furthermore, compared to oral assessments, written evaluation tasks frequently show a higher sensitivity to morphological growth. Through more effective use of the language, students have shown encouraging advances in English proficiency despite structural barriers such as limited classroom exposure and differing levels of instructor ability (Namgay & Sakulwong, 2024). One of the most important factors influencing morphological acquisition is cross-linguistic transfer. When the L1 and L2 have comparable morphemic shapes or structural patterns, positive transfer takes place, which speeds up learning. On the other hand, negative transfer—which slows learning or results in recurring morphological errors—may occur when similar forms are absent in the L1 (Ke & Xiao, 2015). Another important factor is age: younger students may rely more on implicit learning mechanisms, whereas older students may exhibit greater metalinguistic awareness and gain more from explicit instruction (Maaytah, 2025).

Further influencing the morphological development is the sociocultural setting. In particular, the difference between Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) points out how learners may acquire academic language skills without reaching equivalent proficiency in everyday conversational language when opportunities for informal interaction are limited (Ballera & Beup, 2025). According to Liu et al., (2025), exposure to authentic language, meaningful social connection, and active classroom involvement helps to increase the morphological knowledge of second language learners.

In the Bhutanese context, English serves as the primary language of teaching in Bhutan from the very beginning of the school year, *Dzongkha*, *Tshangla*, *Lhotshampa*, and other regional languages predominate at home and in the community (Wangdi & Dhendup, 2024). Therefore, Bhutanese learners often struggle with English morphological structures, especially inflectional ends, complex derivations, and word construction patterns. Common mistakes in written production are found in classroom-based research, indicating that morphological norms have not been fully internalized (Marshall & Lely, 2007). Additionally, student morphological acquisition is further influenced by teacher-related factors such as pedagogical confidence, professional development opportunities, and access to instructional resources (Wangdi & Dhendup, 2024).

Despite the global growth of research on morphological development in multilingual, little is known about underrepresented, multilingual setting such as Bhutan. The language and pedagogical reality of Bhutanese learners may not be well reflected by the majority of the material currently in publication, which is based on urban, monolingual, or immersion-rich environments (Tsimpli et al., 2019). Furthermore, the dynamic, longitudinal aspect of morphological acquisition is also not captured by the majority of studies, which use cross-sectional approaches. Context-sensitive research that investigates the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, social, and pedagogical factors influencing L2 morphological development is therefore desperately needed in Bhutan (Tshering, 2021). These findings suggest that a thorough morphological assessment is required for the assessment on oral, written, receptive, and productive tasks is essential to capture the full spectrum of learners' competence.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to analyze the morphological development of a Bhutanese child learning English as a second language. Actual language use was captured by recording a spontaneous 20 minutes conversation between the child and his father in a natural home environment. This time frame was thought to be adequate for analysing a representative sample of the child's language use to study morpheme usage, grammatical structures, and recurrent linguistic patterns. The recorded speech was transcribed and made ready for in-depth analysis.

In order to calculate the Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) grammatical structures, recurring linguistic patterns and morpheme usage was calculated using the following formula.

$$\text{MLU} = \frac{\text{Total number of morphemes}}{\text{Total number of utterances}}$$

The average length of the child's morpheme utterances is captured by this metric, which offers an index of language development. Furthermore, morphological features such as the past tense -ed, progressive -ing, and plural -s were methodically coded to track developmental trends.

Data collection was done in a familiar and relaxed home environment to ensure the authenticity of the child's speech. Ethical procedures were strictly followed by obtaining informed and written consent from the parent of the child and a pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity and privacy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) and Morphological Development

The child's Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) was 5.94, with a total of 297 morphemes produced over 50 utterances. This score closely matches developmental norms and demonstrates considerable syntactic and morphological ability for first language (L1) learners of a similar age

(Brown, 1973; Hoff, 2006). Although English is the child's second language (L2), this high MLU suggests a strong command of grammatical structure and word formation. Such results are demonstrates that L2 learners exposed to rich linguistic input can achieve developmental milestones similar to L1 learners (Ellis, 2008; Tomasello, 2003).The child's Mean Length of Utterance reflects both quantitative progress and qualitative advancement in linguistic development. According to (Vygotsk, 1978) sociocultural framework, language learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable interlocutors. In this context, the father's scaffolded interaction and corrective feedback appears to have supported the child's acquisition of complex morphosyntactic structures. Furthermore, the discussions recorded in the transcript focused on academic topics such as the solar system and earth provided rich and engaging content that promotes language development and vocabulary growth.

Morphological and Syntactic Patterns

The child displayed a broad range of grammatical morphemes, including plural markers, progressive aspect, and auxiliary verbs.

Table below summarizes the key morphosyntactic features observed in the transcript.

Table 1. Morphosyntactic Features Observed In The Transcript

Utterance Feature	Frequency	Example
Plural- s	15	Planets, Sizes
Progressive -ing	8	Going, acting
Past tense –ed	6	Jumed, moved
Over generalization	3	Windys
Auxiliary verb	10	Is, are, do

The frequent use of the plural “-s” in a variety of utterances showed early mastery of this high-frequency morpheme. Similarly, the use of the past tense “-ed,” though less frequent, indicates a growing capacity to indicate past events—a more intricate morphological element that usually follows plurals and progressives (Dulay & Burt, 1974). Furthermore, there are also instances of overgeneralization, such as “windys,” which reflect typical developmental patterns in early morphological acquisition as children apply learned rules broadly before refining their usage (Baldawi, 2011). Moreover, the frequent use of auxiliary verbs such as “*is, are, and do*” indicates that the child has begun to internalize basic English sentence structure which are essential for more complex clause building (Gnanapriyadharshini & Ragupathi, 2024). These features collectively show transitional stage of morphological development.

According to (Pine, 2005), pattern recognition and rule abstraction are fostered by regular exposure to linguistic input. similarly, application of Vygotsky (1978) ZPD is apparent in the father's use of questions and prompts that might have helped the child in shaping L2 beyond

spontaneous utterances. Moreover, the child's early exposure to English can accelerate learning of new vocabularies in a multilingual setting (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2007). However, the persistence of certain errors, such as overgeneralization and inconsistent tense marking, reflects ongoing interlanguage development, a natural stage in second language acquisition (Cheng, 2015).

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)

The child demonstrated strong CALP, which is evident from the use of advanced academic vocabulary such as *gravity*, *helium planet*). However, weaker BICS was seen in non-standard phrases such as *'I slippery to the gravity out,'* suggesting greater exposure to structured language learning than to natural conversational interactions. In this regard, the gap between CALP and BICS was distinct that the child had the exposure to academic learning environments with limited interaction with the mates. Moreover, the presence of academic vocabulary such as *gravity and helium planet* indicates exposure to educational content, likely through formal schooling or media, which fosters Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2008). This early access to academic learning might have accelerated the child's grammatical development while simultaneously limiting his Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS).

Similarly, the child's interest in science might have motivated purposeful language use. Cognitively stimulating activities that demand that students articulate intricate concepts encourage language production that advances their grammatical development (Khudaverdiyeva, 2025). The child may have been more open to exploring complex structures because the child was eager to express abstract ideas in English. Taken together, these findings suggest that early second language learners can achieve native-like morphosyntactic competence when provided with enriched linguistic input, cognitive stimulation, and scaffolded interaction in contexts that value both academic and expressive language use.

Grammatical Morphemes

The analysis revealed several notable patterns in the learner's morphological development. First, there was evidence of accurate use of the plural -s morpheme, as demonstrated in lexical items such as "planets" and "sizes". Second, instances of overgeneralization were observed, including forms such as "windys," indicating an emerging but incomplete grasp of irregular pluralization. Third, the use of the present progressive was limited, with only a few examples such as "going" and "acting." Additionally, the learner demonstrated appropriate application of auxiliary verbs and articles, reflecting partial mastery of basic grammatical structures. Despite these strengths, areas for further development remained, particularly with regard to inconsistent verb conjugation and irregular plural forms. These findings support earlier research indicating that learners often pass through predictable developmental stages, initially generalizing morphological rules before consolidating their understanding of exceptions (Ellis, 2008).

Negation and Question Formation

The child's use of negation reflected an early stage of linguistic development. While simple negative forms such as “no” were used correctly, as in “No, *Pluto is not a planet*,” while complicated negations using auxiliary verbs such as “don’t” and “doesn’t” were used inconsistently. Brown (1973) described Stage 2 of negation development as this pattern, in which negative elements usually come before the verb but are not yet completely incorporated into the syntactic structure. Second language learners frequently rely on surface-level clues in the early stages of acquisition before developing a more systematic command of underlying grammatical rules, which is indicative of such developmental tendencies (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Similarly, the development of question structure was still lacking. The child frequently used rising intonation instead of the proper syntactic inversion to indicate yes/no questions, such as “*Sun?*” Words like “*What is this?*” serve as examples of wh-questions, which were rare and structurally restricted, suggesting an early stage of framing question. Question formation in second language learning generally develops from intonation-based yes/no questions to grammatically complicated wh-questions, as described by (DeKeyser, 2005).

These patterns might have resulted from a lack of exposure to interactive and natural language use, where functional grammar such as questioning and negation often emerges. The lack of unplanned interaction may have limited the development of grammatical structures required for effective conversation, even as organized input seemed to promote lexical and syntactic growth. This emphasizes how crucial diverse communicative situations are for fostering both formal accuracy and functional competence in early second language acquisition (Owusu, 2023).

Influence of Parental Input

Parental input, particularly from the father, played a pivotal role in the child's morphological development. The interactions of father son were characterized by structured conversations that emphasized scientific and academic language, which likely contributed to the child's advanced vocabulary acquisition. However, this focus on formal and content-specific conversation results limited opportunities for developing conversational fluency and pragmatic competence. The father's scaffolding of standard grammatical forms suggests a guided learning approach, that might have resulted child's higher Mean Length of Utterance (MLU). Thus, research highlights the importance of balancing structured input with spontaneous interaction to foster comprehensive language development. Through such support and providing real time feedback—the child was likely guided toward more accurate morphological usage and increasingly complex syntactic constructions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the linguistic strengths and gaps of a young Bhutanese English learner, providing insight into early second language acquisition. The child demonstrated advanced academic vocabulary displaying strong exposure to structured language input. However, there was lack of conversational fluency which might have resulted from less social interaction with the peers. Formal education, home reading activities, and parental involvement were found to be important determinants of language development, especially in vocabulary and grammar. The results emphasize that in order to promote lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic development, a balanced exposure to both structured and spontaneous speech is necessary. Future studies should use longitudinal approaches to examine the long-term impacts of bilingualism and structured English intake. Furthermore, achieving balanced language proficiency requires evidence-based methods to maintain Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) while enhancing Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS).

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