

“I am years seven old.”
ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH WORD ORDER
BY BOSNIAN AND TURKISH CHILDREN

Azamat Akbarov, Larisa Đapo

International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate differences in the acquisition of English word order between Bosnian and Turkish students resulting from word order in these two languages (Bosnian and Turkish). In second language acquisition, the knowledge of the native language (L1) in acquisition of a foreign language (L2) can indeed have a facilitating or inhibiting effect on the learner's progress in mastering a new language. Thirty children from the first grade at the International School of Sarajevo were tested. Some of them attended the kindergarten where English was a language of communication and the rest of them had six months of exposure of English in school settings. We wanted to find possible differences in acquiring word order in English in these groups of children as well. This study offers new results for acquiring correct word order in English.

Keywords: language acquisition, word order, EFL

Article history:

Received: 5 April 2016;

Reviewed: 27 May 2016;

Revised: 1 June 2016;

Accepted: 1 August 2016;

Published: 20 August 2016

Azamat Akbarov is Professor of Linguistics at the International Burch University in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He has extensive experience in several areas of Applied Linguistics, in which he has published widely. Professor Akbarov has also presented at numerous international conferences and his research interests include linguistics, cognitive grammar, and cross-linguistic features of SLA, TESL, Discourse Analysis, and Bilingualism. He is the President of the Association for Applied Linguistics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Chairman and Editor-in-chief of the Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics Conference (FLTAL), and regularly organises international events in the field of language education.

Email: azamatakbar@yahoo.com

Larisa Đapo is a PhD student at International Burch University in Sarajevo. She is interested in researching effective techniques in teaching vocabulary to young learners in ESL classrooms and vocabulary acquisition by young learners.

Word order in English, Turkish and Bosnian languages

All languages have a basic or underlying word order. Some languages are labeled as strict word order languages and rarely stray from the basic word order. Some languages allow more flexibility. There are six basic word orders for the sentence: subject–verb–object (SVO), subject–object–verb (SOV), verb–subject–object (VSO), verb–object–subject (VOS), object–subject–verb (OSV) and object–verb–subject (OVS), (Tomlin, 1986).

English has little word order variation. In English, word order within sentences is more fixed to distinguish subjects from objects. The basic underlying word order in an English sentence is: Subject- Verb- Direct Object. Example: Joe writes poetry. We say that English is the S-V-O (subject-verb-object) language like French, Cantonese, Spanish and many other languages. The major languages that follow the S-O-V (subject-object-verb) pattern as their basic ones are Turkish, Japanese, Korean and Persian languages. Some languages that use the V-S-O (verb-subject-object) pattern as the basic order are Malayo, Polynesian languages such as Tagalog, the classical versions of Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic and Celtic languages like Welsh and Breton.

Word order in English tends to keep the subject and verb as close as possible. Sentence 1 shows an example of this order.

S1. The students sent their homework to the teacher.

1. subject (*the students*)
2. verb (*sent*)
3. direct object (*their homework*)
4. indirect object (*the teacher*)

This order is rarely altered. Native English-speaking readers are accustomed to finding the various parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective etc.) in the order given in the example.

In contrast to English, Turkish follows a Subject-Object-Verb pattern. There are some other word order differences such as 'prepositions' following the noun in Turkish, modal verbs following main verbs, relative clauses preceding the noun they modify. These variations often result in students having difficulty with the placement of

elements in longer, more complex English sentences. Turkish has no definite article, and the use of the indefinite article does not always coincide with its use in English. So interference mistakes are predictable in this area. Similarly, personal pronouns in Turkish are used much less frequently than in English.

The neutral word order in Bosnian is Subject-Verb-Object. However, other orders are possible since inflectional endings clearly mark the grammatical relations and roles in the sentence. In general, word order is principally determined by topic (what the sentence is about, or old information) and focus. There are no articles in the Bosnian language.

Language transfer in the acquisition of word order

The role of cross-linguistic influence or linguistic transfer in second language acquisition has been a field of extensive research in the past few decades. Transfer is a traditional term from the psychology of learning, which means the imposition of previously learned patterns into a new learning situation.

In second language acquisition, the knowledge of the native language (L1) in acquisition of a foreign language (L2) can indeed have a facilitating or inhibiting effect on the learner's progress in mastering a new language. Traditionally, facilitation effect is known as positive transfer, while inhibition is considered as negative transfer.

One of the earlier hypotheses on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis tried to predict the likelihood of linguistic transfer in second language acquisition based on the similarities as well as the differences between various aspects of L1 and L2. That is, similarities in linguistic structures in two languages will result in positive transfer, while differences will create an interference which is known as negative transfer.

Another theory underlying language transfer is that of markedness. The hypothesis of markedness theory concerns correlations, i.e. pairs of "marked" (least distributed) and "unmarked" (more distributed) structural entities in the language (O'Shannessy, 2011). According to this theory, those linguistic phenomena in the target language which are more marked than the corresponding phenomena in the native language will be more difficult to learn. However, there is a problem to apply the markedness principle to cross-linguistic

analyses, which makes it problematic to predict which structures in L2 would be more likely substituted with corresponding structures in L1.

Over the last twenty years a cognitive approach to language transfer, as well as to other psycholinguistic phenomena, has prevailed in the field of SLA. One of the most important findings of the time was that L1 directly and indirectly influences L2 acquisition. Indirect influence, in turn, reflects underlying organization principles of the language and the learner's metalinguistic awareness of that knowledge.

The most revolutionary linguistic theory of the past few decades within the cognitive framework was that of universal grammar proposed by Chomsky in 1965. According to Chomsky, the learner must take a very limited input in L2 and construct a clean grammar of the language being learned. The final product would be a language in which redundancies will be minimized at all costs.

The universal grammar theory and its application to the major linguistic fields, including second language acquisition, have attracted a lot of scientific attention over the last three decades. However, it has also become an issue of debate and has been opposed by the connectionism theory. Rather than focusing on innate constraints, connectionists try to look at the ways in which the learner extracts regularities from the L2 input.

Evidence on word order changes from earlier studies

Studies on language transfer in SLA were predominantly carried out in the field of syntax (Tomlin, 1996). One of the major concerns of those studies was to see how word order in L2 might be influenced by the structural differences of the word order in L1 (Hohle, Horing, Weskott, Knauf and Kruger, 2013).

There has been conflicting evidence relating to the influence of L1 on the L2 word order in production. Some studies reported that L2 acquisition is affected by the SVO (subject-verb-object) ordering in L1 (O'Shannessy, 2011), others suggested that the production of simple declarative sentences in English is not strongly influenced by the structural nature of L1 (Hengeveld, Rijkoff and Siewerska, 2004).

Furthermore, there was controversy as to whether an L1 basic word order can be transferred to L2 where such word order is not used at all.

McFadden (2005) found no evidence of such transfer in Japanese learners of English (i.e., Japanese uses SOV order, while English uses SVO). Plunkett and Westergaard (2011) supported that finding but suggested that such transfer can occur in case a language makes use of more than one basic word order (e.g., Dutch). Other evidence suggested that the initial word order acquisition is guided by universal principles rather than by the specifics of the contact languages (Tomlin, 1986).

Is an earlier start better?

Whether the focus is on teaching ESL or EFL, many teachers, parents, and researchers are concerned with determining the optimal age for learning a second language (L2) or foreign language. Children seem to pick up languages quickly. However, does starting language learning earlier mean children will grow up speaking English as a second foreign language better than those who start learning English as high school students or adults?

Early studies have argued that there is a critical period for language acquisition that lasts until puberty. However, starting ESL at a younger age does not necessarily provide an advantage over a later start. For example, young learners are not considered the most efficient language learners. In terms of the rate of acquisition, with the length of exposure and instruction kept constant, adults and teenagers actually outperform young learners, with teenagers doing better than both children and adults, except in pronunciation. In terms of pronunciation, young learners are known to be good imitators and can achieve native-like pronunciation. However, students who start English language instruction in high school can also attain a native-like proficiency. According to Shin (2000), despite the popular belief, it is not well documented by research that an early start to second or foreign language learning alone will result in higher levels of attainment.

Method

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (simple sentences) between the children who speak Bosnian as a mother tongue and the children who speak Turkish as a mother tongue.

Hypothesis 1a: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (sentences with articles) between the children who speak Bosnian as a mother language and the children who speak Turkish as a mother language.

Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (simple sentences) between the children who went to kindergarten where English was spoken and the children who did not go to kindergarten.

Hypothesis 2a: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (sentences with articles see the above comment) between the children who went to the kindergarten where English was spoken and the children who did not go to kindergarten.

Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (simple sentences) between the older children and the younger ones.

Hypothesis 3a: There is no statistically significant difference in acquiring word order in English (sentences with articles) between the older children and the younger children.

Participants

Our participants were 30 children who attend the first grade at the International School of Sarajevo. 15 of them were children who speak Bosnian as their mother tongue and 15 who speak Turkish as their mother tongue. For graphical representation, see Figure 1.

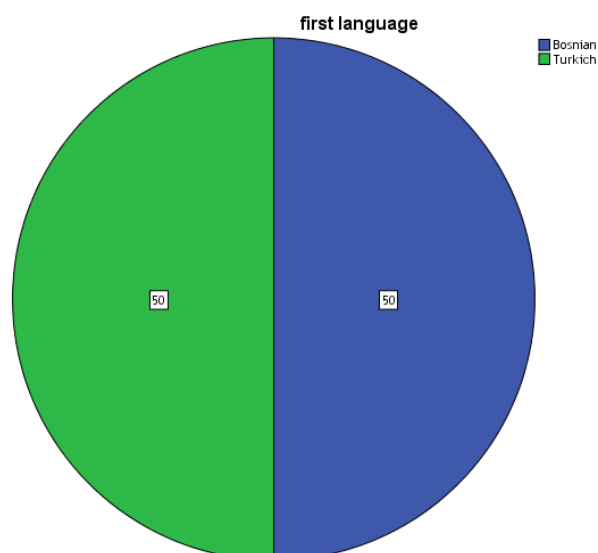


Figure 1 First language distribution of the sample

The range of their age was from 6.6 to 7.7, with average value of 6.84 years and standard deviation $SD = .438$ (Figure 2).

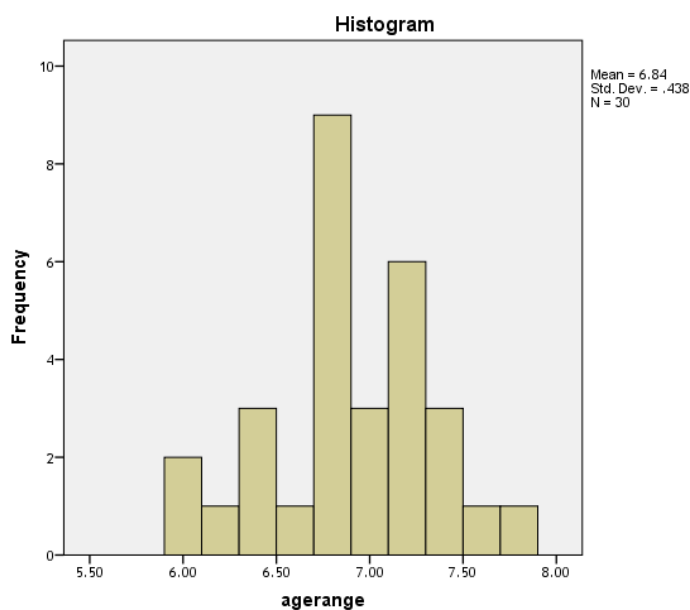


Figure 2. Distribution of sample by age

19 of them were males (63.33%) and 11 were females (36.67%). For graphical representation, see Figure 3.

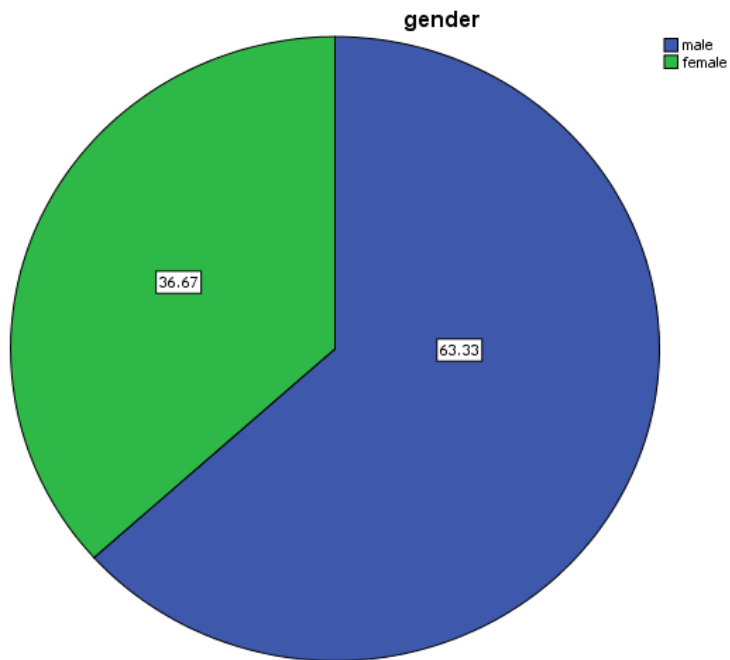


Figure 3- Gender distribution of the sample

Most of the children have had six months of exposure to English in primary school settings which use English as a medium of instruction. However, some of them attended kindergarten where English was considered as a language of communication. There were 19 children (63.33%) who went to kindergarten and 11 of them who did not (36.67%).

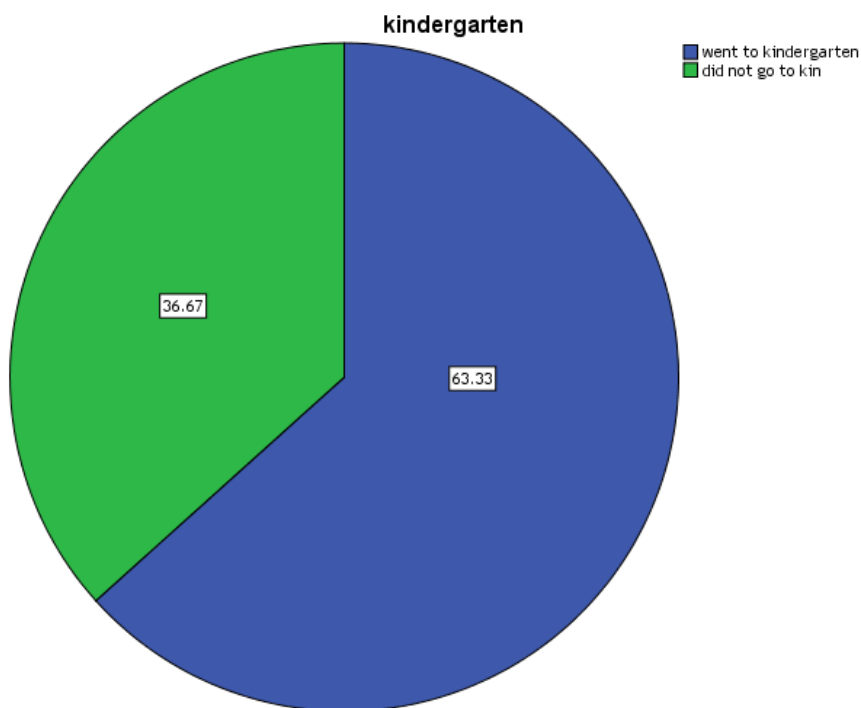


Figure 4- Distribution of the sample regarding attending kindergarten

Procedure

All children were tested in school settings. All data collection was conducted in the children's classrooms and the children had one lesson to do the task. They needed to form 14 sentences using the words provided. The words were not put in a correct order, so the children had to put words in a correct order which will follow English language rules. The first seven sentences contained 4 or 5 words. They presented "simple sentences". For example: seven, I, old, years, am. The next seven sentences had 6 or more words, including articles as well (play, I in, the, like, to park) and they are called "no simple sentences"

Results

Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted to test the reliability of items. For the first seven sentences there was $\alpha = 0.58$ and for the sentences with articles $\alpha = 0.76$

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that Bosnian and Turkish children do not show a statistically significant difference in making well-formed simple sentences. As we can see, there was a significant difference in the scores for Bosnian children ($M=6.4$, $SD=0.9$) and Turkish children ($M=5.1$, $SD=1.5$); $t(28)=2.96$, $p = 0.006$.

Group Statistics					
	first language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
simples	Bosnian	15	6.4000	.91026	.23503
	Turkish	15	5.0667	1.48645	.38380

Table 1. Descriptive values for "simple sentences" (regarding first language)

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
simples	Equal variances assumed	2.543	.122	2.963	28	.006	1.33333	.45004	.41146	2.25521

Equal variances not assumed	2.963	23.20 5	.007	1.33333	.45004	.40280	2.26386
-----------------------------	-------	------------	------	---------	--------	--------	---------

Table 2. Independent sample test (“simple sentences”, regarding L1)

The corresponding two-tailed *p* value is 0.006, which is less than 0.05 and 0.01. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis at 5% and 1% significance level, which means that the average outputs of two groups of children are significantly different from each other, i.e., the children with different L1 do not have the same efficiency.

An independent-samples *t*-test was also conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that Bosnian and Turkish children do not show a significant difference in putting in the correct order sentences with articles. We have the scores for Bosnian children (*M*=4.4, *SD*=1.8) and Turkish children (*M*=4.3, *SD*=2.6); *t* (28)=0.16, *p* = 0.87.

	first language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
nosimplesent	Bosnian	15	4.4000	1.76473	.45565
	Turkish	15	4.2667	2.60403	.67236

Table 3. Descriptive values for “no simple sentences” (regarding first language)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
nosimplesent	Equal variances assumed	3.700	.065	.164	28	.871	.13333	.81221	-1.53040	1.797
	Equal variances not assumed			.164	24.620	.871	.13333	.81221	-1.54075	1.807

Table 4. Independent sample test (“no simple sentences”, regarding L1)

The corresponding two-tailed *p* value is 0.871, which is higher than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis will have to be accepted since the *p* value is greater than

0.05 and 0.01. This means that at 5% and 1% significance level, the claim that the efficiency of the two groups of children is the same is right.

Comparing scores for simple sentences and no simple sentences we can see that both of the groups of children showed better understanding in ordering words in simple sentences. All of them had difficulties in ordering words with articles. The results are shown in Table 5.

	Mean	Median	S.D.
Simple sentences	5.8	6.0	0.25
No simple sentences	4.3	5.0	0.4

Table 5. Descriptive values for overall scores

We also wished to examine differences between the children who attended kindergarten where English was used and the children who did not go to kindergarten. We conducted t-test(s) for independent samples. The results are shown in Table 6.

Group Statistics					
	Kindergarten	N	Mean	Std.	Std. Error
				Deviation	Mean
simple	went to	19	5.3158	1.52944	.35088
s	kindergarten				
	did not go to kin	11	6.4545	.68755	.20730

Table 6. Descriptive values for "simple sentences" (regarding kindergarten)

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
simples	Equal variances assumed	7.738	.010	-2.324	28	.028	1.1387	.48998	-2.14244	-.13507
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.794	26.867	.009	1.1387	.40754	-1.97516	-.30236

Table 7. Independent sample test ("simple sentences", regarding kindergarten)

The scores for the children who went to kindergarten (M=5.3, SD=1.5) and for the children who did not go to kindergarten (M=6.4, SD=0.7); $t(28) = -2.8, p = 0.009$. There is a statistically significant difference between the children who attended the kindergarten and the children who did not go to kindergarten. Surprisingly, the children who did not go to the kindergarten scored better results. In addition, these results suggest that earlier does not mean better.

The scores for the children who went to kindergarten were (M=4.2, SD=2.3) and for the children who did not go to kindergarten (M=4.5, SD=1.9); $t(28) = -0.398, p = 0.7$.

		Group Statistics			
	Kindergarten	N	Mean	Std.	Std. Error
				Deviation	Mean
nosimplese nt	went to kindergarten	19	4.2105	2.34708	.53846
	did not go to kin	11	4.5455	1.96792	.59335

Table 8. Descriptive values for “no simple sentences” (regarding kindergarten)

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differen ce	Std. Error Differe nce	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
nosimpl esent	Equal variances assumed	.768	.388	-.398	28	.693	-.33493	.84075	-2.05713	1.387 27
	Equal variances not assumed			-.418	24.152	.680	-.33493	.80125	-1.98807	1.318 22

Table 9. Independent sample test (“no simple sentences”, regarding kindergarten)

There is no statistically significant difference between the children who went to kindergarten and the children who did not go to kindergarten.

		Group Statistics			
	Agegroup	N	Mean	Std.	Std. Error
				Deviation	Mean
simple s	up to 6.7	14	5.3571	1.59842	.42720
	from 6.7. to 7.7.	16	6.0625	1.12361	.28090

Table 10. Descriptive values for “simple sentences” (regarding age group)

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
simple sentences	Equal variances assumed	2.000	.168	-1.412	28	.169	-.70536	.49945	-1.72843	.31772
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.380	22.953	.181	-.70536	.51128	-1.76313	.35242

Table 11. Independent sample test ("simple sentences", regarding age group)

Younger children scored (M=5.4, SD=1.6) and older children (M=6.1, SD=1.1); t(28)= -1.41, p = 0.17. There is no statistically significant difference between younger and older children in making simple sentences.

Group Statistics					
	Agegroup	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
nosimple sentences	up to 6.7	14	4.2857	2.55489	.68282
	from 6.7 to 7.7.	16	4.3750	1.89297	.47324

Table 12. Descriptive values for "no simple sentences" (regarding age group)

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
nosimple sentences	Equal variances assumed	3.825	.061	-.110	28	.913	-.08929	.81424	-1.75717	1.57860
	Equal variances not assumed			-.107	23.741	.915	-.08929	.83079	-1.80494	1.62636

Table 13. Independent sample test ("no simple sentences", regarding age group)

Younger children scored ($M=4.3$, $SD=2.5$) and older children ($M=4.4$, $SD=1.9$); $t(28) = -1.1$, $p = 0.09$. There is no statistically significant difference between younger and older children in making sentences with articles.

We also wished to examine differences between males and females. There is no statistically significant difference between male ($M=5.9$, $SD=1.4$) and female ($M=5.4$, $SD=1.4$); $t(28) = 1.1$, $p = 0.27$ in making "simple sentences" and in making "no simple sentences"; male ($M=4.2$, $SD=2.3$) and female ($M=4.6$, $SD=2.1$); $t(28) = -0.57$, $p = 0.57$.

Discussion

Our results seem to fit our predictions: no difference was observed in the acquisition of word order in English between the children who speak Bosnian and the children who speak Turkish as a mother tongue. The Bosnian children have shown better skills in understanding basic order in simple sentences. The reason could be found in the fact that Bosnian and English have similar word order (SVO). On the other hand, Turkish language has different order (SOV).

This is enlightening information for the teachers of English language. As teachers, we should be aware that the differences between our students' native language and English can cause negative transfer and learning problems. In this context, some Turkish students may experience greater difficulties in acquiring English word order than Bosnian students. Teachers should take that into consideration and include more word order activities. The Turkish children need to be involved in more activities which will help them to acquire word order in English language.

Results have shown that Bosnian and Turkish children have difficulties in acquiring word order in sentences with articles. The International School of Sarajevo should organize extra curriculum activities in order to help those students in the acquisition of word order in sentences with articles.

The results have shown that children who attended kindergarten where English was used do not show better skills in ordering words in simple sentences than the children who did not go to kindergarten.

As predicted there was no difference between younger and older children in acquiring word order. Future research is needed in order to settle a number of questions that arise from our results.

Conclusion

To summarize, we have found that Bosnian children acquire word order better in English in simple sentences. However, there is no difference between Bosnian and Turkish children in acquiring word order in sentences with articles.

In addition, there was difference between the children who attended the kindergarten and the children who did not go to kindergarten where English was used. Actually, the children who did not go to kindergarten show better skills in acquiring simple sentences. On the other hand, there were no differences between these groups of children in acquiring word order in sentences with articles. There were no differences between younger and older children in acquiring word order in English.

References

- Hengeveld K., Rijkoff J. and Siewerska A. (2004). Parts-of-speech systems and word order. *Journal of Linguistics*. 40(3): 527-570.
- Hohle B., Horing R., Weskott T., Knauf S. and Kruger A. (2013.) Effects of focus and definiteness on children's word order: evidence from German five-year-olds' reproductions of double object constructions. *Journal of Child Language*: 1-31.
- Lee E-K., Hsin-Yi Lu D. and Garnsey S.M. (2013). L1 Word order and sensitivity to verb bias in L2 processing- corrigendum. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*1-3.
- Matthews D., Lieven E. and Tomasello M. (2007). French children's use and correction of weird word orders: A constructivist account. *Journal of Child Language*. 34(2): 381-409.
- McFadden T. (2005). OV-VO in English and the role of case marking in word order. *English Language and Linguistics*. 9(1): 63-82.
- Shin,J.K. (2000).Teaching young learners in English as a second language settings. Heinle Cengage Learning. United States
- O'Shannessy, C. (2011). Competition between word order and case-marking in interrupting grammatical relations: a case study in multilingual acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*. 38(4): 763-792.
- Plunkett, B.,Westergaard.M.(2011). The acquisition of word order: Micro-cues, information structure, and economy. *Journal of Linguistics*. 47(3): 756-753.
- Tomlin R. S.(1986). *Basic word order: Functional principles*. London: Croom Helm