

## **The Acquisition of the Comparative and Superlative Adjectives by Jordanian EFL Students**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the acquisition of the comparative and superlative adjectives by Jordanian EFL students. The data were collected from two groups of Jordanian EFL students, i.e. 30 tenth graders and 30 second year university students. Each group consists of 15 males and 15 females. The participants were given a questionnaire of 20 sentences which cover the regular rules for forming the comparative and the superlative forms using novel nonsense adjectives. According to the findings of the study, university students showed that they master the rules to some extent more than the tenth graders. The overall performance of both groups is better when it comes to monosyllabic adjectives; however, when adjectives are polysyllabic, students' performance becomes worse. On the other hand, slight difference in favor of female was found in terms of students' gender.

**Key words:** Jordanian EFL, comparative and superlative adjectives, female and male difference

### **1. Introduction**

English comparative and superlative adjectives formation are phonological processes that follow specific morphological rules which must be applied in order to form the correct adjective form. Comparatives are used to differentiate between two persons, objects, or places. In order to provide the correct comparative form, specific rules must be followed. First, if the adjective is monosyllabic, one adds (-er) at the end of the adjective, e.g. "small-smaller". Second, if the monosyllabic adjective consists of a (consonant, vowel, and consonant) form, one must double the last consonant and add (-er), as in "fat-fatter". Third, if the adjective ends with (-y), one needs to omit the (-y) and add (-ier), as in "funny-funnier". Fourth, if the adjective is polysyllabic; consisting of more than two syllables; whether it ends with (-y) or not; one must add "more" before the adjective, as in "expensive- more expensive" and "satisfactory-more satisfactory". Nevertheless "than" is the most important

word to be included when comparing between two entities. For example: The elephant is bigger than the ant.

On the other hand, the use of the superlative is significant when showing the differences between three or more persons, objects, or places where one entity is superior to the others. The superlative formation process follows a certain set of rules somehow similar to those followed for comparatives. First, if the adjective is a monosyllabic adjective; consists of no more than two syllables, one must add (-est) to the end of the adjective as in “small- the smallest”. Second, if the adjective is formed of CVC the last consonant is doubled and (-est) is added at the end, as in “big-the biggest”. Third, if the adjective ends with (-y), one must delete it and add (-iest). Fourth, if the adjective is polysyllabic, whether it ends with (-y) or not, the expression “most” must be used before the adjective. For example: “The lion is the most courageous animal in the jungle”. Besides, “the” must precedes the desired superlative form. However, there are exceptions for the comparative and superlative adjectives. As for comparatives, we have “good-better than” and “far-farther than”, etc. and for superlatives, e.g. “good-the best” and “far- the farthest”, etc.

The study reported here aims at examining whether Jordanian students are able to apply the adjectives formation rules to new adjectives, and whether their academic level and gender play a role in this process. Specifically, it seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1) To what extent are Jordanian EFL students able to apply the comparative and superlative rules of adjectives to new nonsense words?
- 2) Is there a difference between the 10<sup>th</sup> graders and second year university students in their ability to form adjectives?
- 3) Is there a difference in students' ability to form comparative and superlative adjectives that can be ascribed to gender?

## **2. Literature Review**

Berko (1958) was the first to examine the adjectival inflections in an experiment conducted on native English children aged 4-7 years old. Part of her extensive research on children's acquisition of the English morphological rules, children were asked to provide the comparative and superlative forms of nonsense adjectives, e.g. \*quirky. For instance, the child was shown dogs that were increasingly \*quirky and expected to say that the second was \*quirkier than the first, and that the third was the \*quirkiest”. The results were not as she

expected, as only one child out of eighty was able to provide the correct form. Only under certain conditions where the experimenter provided the child with the form \*quirkier, s/he was able to supply the (-est) form. However, this was successful with only 35% of all children. Berko (1958) concluded that children do not have these patterns under control as they have to be provided by both the adjective and the comparative form. It might be the case that such forms are little used by children as they are still acquiring such inflectional processes.

Selby (1972) conducted a similar study to Berko's (1958). Two samples of subjects were tested, adults and pre-school children. Selby's pre-school subjects were aged between 3 years and 6 months and 15 years and 6 months, where gender was not a variable. She used the same wording outlined by Berko, but with non-colored drawings. As suggested by Selby (1972), adults and children over the age of 8 need to be tested in small groups and completed the test in written form, whereas Children below the age of 8 should be tested individually. The study indicated that some of the morphological rules were already well developed, some were partially developed and some "are virtually non-existent before school entry and up to the age of about 10" (Selby 1972: 297). Concerning the comparative and the superlative, most of the tested rules reached a ceiling at about the age of 12, but even adolescents of the age of 14 or 15 were found to be still poor at forming the comparative and superlative. According to Selby (1972: 293), most of the tested rules showed a "steady improvement towards a ceiling value" except for the derivation and the use of the comparative and the superlative which show a slower and later development.

In (1998), Kennison, et al., presented an article in the annual meeting of the psychonomic society in Dallas, Texas. The article was under titled: "forming comparative and superlative adjectives in English: prescriptive versus psychological rules". The research investigated how native speakers of American English formed comparative and superlative adjectives. The subjects were 200 undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma in a psychology class, and all of them were native English speakers. Two studies were conducted. The first study was to figure out the extent to which native speakers of American English follow the prescriptive language rules for forming comparative and superlative adjectives using a questionnaire where students were asked to circle the adjective they prefer to use within a sentence. The second study was conducted based on the assumption that participants may use some of these adjectives in everyday language use. Sentences containing a target adjective were presented along with a graded scale presented to the right of each sentence,

and students were asked to circle the most acceptable comparative/superlative adjective form. The results showed that native speakers of American English did not conform to the pedagogical rule for any type of adjectives.

Mohammad (2008) investigated errors in the use of adjectives in the EFL writings of Sudanese university students. The data of the study was collected from a test that covered eight areas in the use of adjectives in order to examine students' abilities in all applications of adjectives. Regarding the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, the study revealed that the students made errors in 35% which indicates that they do not master such area in adjectives. The results also indicated that the students' errors occurred mostly in irregular adjectives as well as the multi-syllables adjectives. The students applied the rules of *er/est* – *more/most* in a situation where it is inappropriate. They extended the regular rules to the irregular adjectives. According to Mohammad (2008), these errors can be attributed to lack of proper classroom techniques as well as insufficient materials provided by teachers. In the same vein, Ibrahim (cited in Mohammad 2008:68) found that the students' errors in adjectives were in the area of comparison; the students generalized the rule by adding –*er* and –*est* to all adjectives indiscriminately.

In an attempt to examine the common grammatical mistakes made by Albanian students during the EFL learning process, Kaçani (2014) found that the use of incorrect comparative and superlative forms of the adjectives is a common mistake of these learners. Students use the adverb 'more/most' before one- and two-syllable adjectives in the addition to the use of the comparative or superlative morpheme –*er* or –*est*. For example, the participants of the study were found to use forms like: 'this is more easier / more easy than.../ the most funniest', 'drive more faster' instead of 'this is easier than... / the funniest', 'drive faster'. In order to explain this result, Kaçani (ibid) posited that the learners are influenced by the Albanian language.

In the Jordanian context, Al-Harafsheh (2012) conducted an error analysis study to identify and explain the problems Jordanian EFL learners encounter in using English adjectives. A twenty minute multiple choice test was used as a data collection instrument. The questions were set up according to four types of errors in the usage of adjectives in English: (1) *NP is (more/-er) adj. prep. phrase NP*, e.g. The man is bigger from his son. (2) *NP is NP.adj.* (word order), e.g. He is a boy tall. (3) *Adjectives with generic and plural reference* (adj.s with plural reference. N), e.g. The rich men will help the poor men. (4) *NP is (far/much) more adj. than NP.* (Double comparative), e.g. She is much more richer than my

sister. The study revealed that Jordanian EFL students commit errors when using English adjectives especially in double comparative, NP is (more/-er) adj. prep.phrase. NP, and word adjectives with generic and plural reference (adj.s with plural reference. N). The study also indicated that Jordanian students face problem in some types of adjectives especially in comparative, superlative adjectives and adjectives with prepositions. According to Al-Harafsheh (2012), the main factors for the frequent errors in these patterns and types of adjectives are the transfer from mother tongue to English language.

In spite of the importance of Al-Harafsheh's (2012) study in identifying the problems Jordanian students face regarding adjectives, it does not show whether students are able to apply the adjectives formation rules to new adjectives, and whether their academic level and gender play a role in this process. Therefore, it seems plausible to conduct a study in this area. This study is an attempt in this direction.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. The subjects**

This paper tests the acquisition of the comparative and superlative adjectives by Jordanian EFL students. Moreover, it examines if there is a difference among the participants in their ability to apply the adjectives formation rules to new adjectives that can be ascribed to their academic level and gender. Sixty students aged between 15-20 years old from both the tenth grade and the second year university students were examined. All tested individuals were of Arabic speaking parents. The participants were first divided into two age groups; tenth graders and non-English major sophomores to investigate the role of academic level. Then they were divided into other two groups, i.e. males and females to see whether gender affects the mastery of adjectives formation rules or not.

#### **3.2. Data collection**

For conducting this research, novel nonsense materials were created and used; a technique first used by Berko (1958). Such a technique is useful in figuring out whether the subjects are able to provide the correct form based on their knowledge of morphological rules or based on memorizing the comparative/superlative forms. Exceptions were excluded from the study, as it is more interested in figuring out how students respond to rule-based adjectives.

Ten novel nonsense adjectives were created from the common vocabularies of linguistic representation and were of possible sound combinations in English. Each two nonsense adjectives were invented to belong to one of the regular rules of forming the comparative and the superlative. Four of them were monosyllabic, i.e. \*vid, \*qot, \*vonge, and \*sard. Two adjectives were polysyllabic; of two syllables and end with (-y) as \*quirky, and \*lunny. Two other words were polysyllabic, consisting of three syllables as \*copensive and \*ranciful. The last two syllables were polysyllabic of more than three syllables and which end with (-y) as \*matisfactory and \*tranditory. Except for the nonsense adjective \*quirky which was borrowed from Berko's study, all adjectives were new.

The subjects were given a questionnaire of 20 sentences each of which contains a nonsense adjective, and they were asked to circle the correct comparative/superlative adjective form. The questionnaires were distributed arbitrarily on each group. Each student was asked to fill the personal information section first; providing her/his name, gender, age and educational level, followed by three descriptive examples as "the ant is (small, smaller, the smallest) than the elephant". Then, the students were asked to answer the ten questions, each question was of two sentences; one on the comparative form and the other on the superlative form. Students were given about half an hour to answer the questionnaire. Then, questionnaires were corrected given a mark out of 20; one mark was given to each correct answer.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Results were tabulated showing the total correct answers and their percentages for all students who chose the correct comparative/ superlative form. Table 1 below shows the total correct answers for each rule and their percentages according to academic level. In table 1, (group 1) stands for the tenth grade students, and (group 2) stands for the sophomores. Besides, rule 1 stands for those adjectives whose form requires the doubling of the last consonant and the addition of (-er) or (-est) as \*vid-\*vidder- \*the viddest, rule 2 stands for those adjectives which only requires the addition of (-er) or (-est) as \*sard- \*sarder- \*the sardest. Rule 3 stands for those adjectives which end with (-y) and their formation requires the deletion of the (-y) and the addition of (-ier) or (iest) as in \*quirky- \*quirkier- \*the quirkiest. Rule 4 stands for adjectives of more than 2 syllables and do not end with (-y), and their formation requires the addition of the words (more) and (most) as in \*copensive- \*more copensive- \* the most copensive. Finally, rule 5 stands for the adjectives which are more than

3 syllables and end with (-y), and their formation requires the addition of the words (more) and (most) as in \* matisbactory- \*more matisbactory- the most matisbactory.

**Table 1. The total correct answers for each rule and their percentages according to academic level.**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Rule 1 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 2 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 3 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 4 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 5 (n=120)</b>	<b>Overall correct (n=600)</b>
<b>Group 1 (10<sup>th</sup> grade) (30)</b>	70 (58%)	95 (79 %)	73 (61%)	66 (55%)	60 (50%)	403 (67%)
<b>Group 2 (sophomores) (30)</b>	102 (85%)	117 (98%)	80 (66%)	113 (94%)	75 (63%)	526 (88%)

The overall score shows that Jordanian EFL students to a certain extent do acquire the comparative and the superlative form of adjectives where sophomores outperformed the tenth graders by (21%). When it comes to the first and the second rule, the results reveal that sophomores outperformed the tenth graders by (27%) in the first rule, and by (19%) in the second one. This shows that university students are carefully aware of these rules when it comes to forming the comparative/superlative form, and it also indicates that tenth graders are not conscious of doubling the consonant rule since they tended to avoid choosing the form \*vidder or \*the viddest in their selection of the adjective.

Regarding the third rule, the findings show that there is a slight difference between the two groups where sophomores outperformed the tenth graders by (5%). This indicates that they are somehow of the same level. Most students had a mistake with \*quirky and dealt with it as a polysyllabic adjective consisting of more than two syllables without being aware of the illustrative example which was presented at the beginning of the questionnaire. If they were aware of it, they could have know that the adjectives \*quirky and \*lunny are similar in their phonological form to the adjective *happy*.

As for the fourth rule, sophomores seem to be more aware of the fact that adjectives like \*copensive and \*ranciful consist of more than two syllables, so their



comparative/superlative formation requires the addition of the words (more) and (most). In contrast, tenth graders tended to add (-er) for the comparative form; \*copensiver and \*rancifuler, and the (-est) for the superlative one; \*the copensivest and \*the rancifulest.

Regarding the last rule, the results demonstrate that both groups are to some extent of the same level, in which they both scored the lowest performance. They had errors for both adjectives \*matisbactory and \*tranditory by (50%) for tenth graders and (37%) for sophomores. This indicates that Jordanian students, regardless of their academic level, have not yet master the rule with more than three syllables. Finally, students of both groups did not show any preferable form of both the comparative and the superlative; in both forms students' performance is of the same level. This is contrary to Kennison's (1998) results which indicated that suffixed superlative forms are more acceptable in general than suffixed comparative forms.

In order to answer the second question whether there is a difference in students' answers according to their gender, the answers were reclassified into two groups, i.e. males and females, then their answers were tabulated to present the total correct answers and their percentages for all students who chose the correct comparative/ superlative form by gender.

**Table 2: The total correct answers for each rule and their percentages according to gender.**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Rule 1 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 2 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 3 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 4 (n=120)</b>	<b>Rule 5 (n=120)</b>	<b>Overall correct (n=600)</b>
<b>Male (30)</b>	85 (71%)	105 (88%)	78 (65%)	87 (73%)	65 (54%)	458 (76%)
<b>Female (30)</b>	87 (73%)	107 (89%)	75 (63%)	92 (77%)	70 (58%)	471 (79%)



The overall results reveal that there is a slight difference (3%) in favor of female students. This shows that gender seems to play a minor role in students' selection of the comparative/superlative adjectives form. Regarding the first two rules that deal with monosyllabic adjectives, both males and females were to some extent at the same level where females outperformed males by only (2%) in the first rule and (1%) in the second one. As for the third rule, both groups seem to have problems with adjectives that consist of two syllables and end with (-y). The problem relies in considering them as polysyllabic adjectives whose comparative/superlative formation requires the addition of the words "more" and "most" respectively. This may highlight that most Jordanian students, regardless of their gender, are unable to syllabify the adjective in order to apply the right rule and select the correct adjective form. The same results apply for the last two rules where females outperformed males in both rules by 4%.

The findings of the current study demonstrate that academic level and gender affect the acquisition of the comparative and superlative adjectives form. The results indicate that Jordanian students are, to some extent, able to apply the comparative and superlative adjectives formation rules. However, it was found that they encounter some difficulties with the polysyllabic adjectives.

Moreover, the data analysis shows that university students outperformed tenth graders in their ability to form the comparative and superlative adjectives forms. The reason behind the low performance of the tenth graders might be attributed to the fact that school students, especially at public schools, are sometimes taught English in their native language, i.e. Arabic, so unless they memorize these rules by heart, they would not be able to apply them to other new adjectives. On the other hand, university students have a better chance for being exposed to English, since there is a tendency to use English for teaching at the university classrooms in many majors other than the English Language field.

Furthermore, English language and the participants native language; viz. Arabic, have a completely different rules to form the comparative and superlative adjectives. There is not a difference between comparative and superlative forms for adjectives in Arabic, e.g. ("Ahmad *akbar* min axu:h": "Ahmad is older than his brother"), ("Ahmad *akbar* walad fi ilʕeileh", "Ahmad is the eldest son in the family"). In addition, as illustrated by Al-Harafsheh (2012), there is no *more* or *most* in Arabic, instead, there are '*Ashed*' and '*Akther*' (comparative forms in Arabic) and they can be used with one syllable and two or more syllable adjectives unlike English where 'more' and 'most' used with two or more syllable adjectives. This also

negatively affects students ability to master the comparative/superlative forms of adjectives unless they memorize such rules or have the opportunity to practice them.

## 5. Conclusion

The main concern of this study is to see to what extent are Jordanian EFL students aware of the English comparative and superlative formation rules. Sixty students aged between 15-20 years old from both the tenth grade and the second year university were examined. A short questionnaire using ten nonsense adjectives were used for the research. Results showed a slight difference between both groups. The results indicate that students may extend the comparative and the superlative rules to monosyllabic adjectives. However, as rules get more complicated, students' performance becomes worse especially with the adjectives ending with (-y) and polysyllabic words consisting of more than three syllables.

More attention for teaching students, especially at school level, the rules of comparative and superlative adjectives formation seems to be in need. Besides, teachers and textbook writers should be aware of the difference between adjectives in Arabic and English in order for them to present those important grammatical categories meaningfully to Arabic speaking learners of English.

Finally, the study recommends further research to examine the basis on which students depend when forming the comparative and superlative forms and to see whether schools' textbooks are sufficient enough to teach students the rules concerning the formation of the comparative and the superlative adjectives or not.

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