

The acquisition of tense morphological features in Azerbaijani and English: the case of typological difference

Issa Mellati

MA student, Ilam University, Iran
issamellati@yahoo.com

Saleh Ashrafi

MA student, Azerbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran
Saleh.ashrafi@live.com

Ghadder Jeddi

MA student, Azerbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran
Ghader.jeddi1367@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the acquisition of past perfect morphological features by Azerbaijani learners of English across three different levels of language proficiency and within a generative framework. Hence, an attempt was made to test the claims and predictions made by a number of generative theories specifically including Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH), Full access/Full transfer (FAFT), Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) and Modulated Structure Building Hypothesis (MSBH). To do so, Thirty-six Azerbaijani learners of EFL at three levels of proficiency were randomly chosen from Voice of Tabriz Institute. To see whether Iranian Azerbaijani learners of English were able to reset past perfect morphology in English language and whether language proficiency affects Iranian Azerbaijani learners' acquisition of past perfect morphology three tests, Translation Test; Functional Test and Grammatical Judgment Test respectively administered. The results indicated that there were significant differences among proficiency levels of language learners in Translation Test, Functional Test and Grammatical Judgment Test.

Keywords: transfer, Azerbaijani learners, EFL, reset, past perfect morphology, (RDH), (FAFT), (MSIH), (MSBH)

Introduction

In learning a foreign language, negative transfer is one of the most important barriers to successfully accomplishing the learning process. Negative transfer occurs when previously learned material disrupts learning of the new materials of a foreign language. These previously learned materials are aspects of L1 that are claimed to transfer to the interlanguage grammar of the non-mainstream learners and cause morphological inflection problems. These problems are due to the factors that are absent in L2 or realized and ordered in different ways in L2.

On the one hand, the affixal nature of inflection may produce structures that are not acceptable in an L1 grammar. On the other hand, the morphosyntactic features represented by such structures may not be present in L1 (Bliss, 2006). Altogether, L2 learners' problems in inflectional morphemes may be due to transfer of morphosyntactic constraints from the L1 or their lack of sufficient morphological knowledge of L2. Also, L2 learners have access to universal grammar options that are not instantiated in the L1, including new parameter settings for functional categories and their feature values.

The goal of this paper is to assess these and other factors in the field by investigating the role of transfer in second language productions of English past perfect morphology by Azerbaijani learners of English. In this respect the role of language background possessed by Azerbaijani learners of English is investigated through comparative study with respect to the most recent syntactically-based generative models of L2 acquisition including Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH), Full access/Full transfer (FAFT), Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) and Modulated Structure Building Hypothesis (MSBH).

Theoretical framework of the study

This study attempts to test the most recent generative models of L2 acquisition related to the issue of language transfer and non-mainstream language learning. First model is that of Hawkins (2001) in which he proposes the theory of syntactic development known as Modulated Structure Building. In this model, L2 learning is modulated by L1 structure and functional categories such as N (noun), A (adjective), P (preposition) and their phrasal projections such as NP, VP, AP and PP are built up based on the input. There is also a transfer of L1 structures and categories at the earliest stage of L2 acquisition. Some parameters are reset fairly quickly such as the head parameter, since head-complement relations are particularly salient. Stage 2 involves structure building triggered by L2 input. Once a functional category is acquired, it builds structure by projecting a specifier and a complement. Stage 3, steady state, may be native like if learners acquire all L2 settings of parameters. Therefore, based on this model learning starts with lexical projections followed by structural projections by the L1.

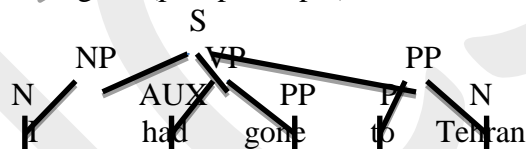
However, there are still three other models to test in this study. One of them is Full access/Full transfer (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). According to this model, the entirety of L1 grammar is the L2 initial state, but this is not always the case. This initial grammar can be changed; that is, L2 learners are not restricted to L1 state. They can make use of UG parameter settings that are not in L1. In this respect, Lardier (2005) argues that parameter resetting cannot explain variations in morphological inflection of second language acquisition. Accordingly, Representational Deficit Hypothesis (Hawkins & Iizuka, 2003; Tsimpli, 2003) claims that there is not parameter resetting in adult L2. Consequently, speakers can never acquire functional categories or features that are required by the L2 but absent in the L1. The only uninterpretable formal features that can be realized in the interlanguage are those that are represented in the L1. In other

words, there are permanent effects of L1 syntactic representations on the interlanguage grammar. This is also referred to as Failed Functional Feature Hypothesis (Hawkins & Chan, 1997). According to this hypothesis, morphosyntactic categories that are not activated in an L1 grammar will be inaccessible to the learner in their L2. Lardier and her colleagues claim that such functional features might be present in L1, but might or might not be realized in L2 development. Therefore, in their opinion, there must be a focus not on the selection but on the assembly of elements of these features in L2. They also argue that the ways in which grammatical features are morphologically combined may affect their over realization in L2. Their model is known as Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis which in contrast with what RDH claims. According to this hypothesis, learners have problems with realization of the correct surface morphology. Learners' problems at the initial state will not disappear due to these mapping problems.

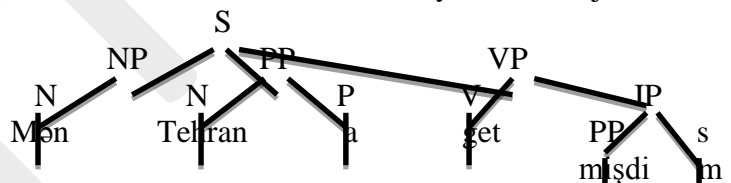
Linguistic assumptions

Past perfect structure is used to indicate actions that have been completed before any other actions in the past. This structure in English is as follows:
(subject + had + past participle of the main verb):

To go → went (past) → gone (past participle)
I had gone to Tehran.



In order for this structure to work well, an auxiliary verb (had) and past participle of the main verb after that must be brought. We can obviously see that this structure in English is constructed through separate words for auxiliary and past participle. However, it is realized differently in Azerbaijani:
getmək = to go Mən Tehrana getmişdim.



In Azerbaijani there is no separate word for auxiliary. There is not also a separate word for past participle of the main verb. Rather, in Azerbaijani, the main verb is inflected to construct the past perfect. The suffix morpheme (mişdi) which is a sign of past perfect is added to the main verb. It is also inflected for the subject of the sentence. Because Azerbaijani is a head-marking language, the suffix morpheme (m), which is a sign of subject, is also added to the main verb.

This study

Because Turkish and English differ in reassembling or parameter resetting of the past perfect structure, it can be hypothesized that Azerbaijani learners of English may have difficulties while acquiring this structure. The present study investigates the acquisition of syntactic properties of past perfect structure from the parameter resetting perspective.

Research questions

1. Are Iranian Turkish learners of English are able to reset past perfect morphology in English?
2. Does language proficiency affect Iranian Turkish learners' acquisition of past perfect morphology in English?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 36 Azerbaijanian learners of Voice of Tabriz Language Center located in Tabriz. 18 of them were males and the other 18 were females. These learners were from three proficiency levels including elementary, intermediate and advanced. All of these learners were equally assigned to these levels. Each level was consisted of 12 learners (6 males and 6 females).

Instruments

Translation Test

In this test, 20 items of Azerbaijanian sentences of past perfect structure were given to the learners. They were asked to translate these sentences from Azerbaijanian to English. These learners were hoped to supply correctly had + PP part of past perfect in their translations. They were given one point for each correct translation and were not given any point for incorrect translations.

Functional Test

In this test, 20 items in the form of small dialogue were given to the learners. In each item, a blank was planted and learners again were asked to supply correctly the had + pp in the blank. One point was given for each correct answer and none for incorrect answers.

Grammatical Judgment Test

In this test, 20 sentences of past perfect were given to the learners. They were asked to judge whether each sentence was correct or incorrect and mark its related category in the paper. 12 of these sentences were correct and 8 of them were incorrect. The incorrect sentences were related either to the place of had like (Three boys ran away had) or to the correct form of the past participle of the main verb like (I had tell my brother, I had to gone to). Like the other two tests, in this test also one point was given for each correct answer but none for incorrect answers.

Procedure

After randomly selecting 36 learners of three proficiency levels in Voice of Tabriz Language Center, the researcher himself punched these three tests together and administered them. He asked learners to answer to the items of these tests according to the given instructions. He was also ready to answer any question and obviate any misunderstanding raised by the items of these tests. After learners finished answering to all of the items, he collected all of the papers. The analysis of the gathered data was done by 21th version of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

To come up with possible answers for research questions, the results of this study are as follows:

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for three educational levels

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammatical Judgment	Elementary	12	6.5000	1.00000

	Intermediate	12	14.8333	0.83485
	Advanced	12	18.9167	0.28868
Functional	Elementary	12	6.3333	0.49237
	Intermediate	12	14.5833	0.51493
	Advanced	12	18.2245	0.23152
Translation	Elementary	12	6.5833	0.90034
	Intermediate	12	14.6148	0.50355
	Advanced	12	18.4568	0.26448

As shown in Table 1, the obtained mean scores for three educational levels in three tests shows that there are differences between the performances of the learners on three tests.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA of Difference between three educational levels

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Grammatical Judgment	Between Groups	961.167	2	480.583	809.834	.000
	Within Groups	19.583	33	0.593		
	Total	980.750	35			
Functional	Between Groups	980.722	2	490.361	2489.526	.000
	Within Groups	6.500	33	0.197		
	Total	987.222	35			
Translation	Between Groups	939.556	2	469.778	1215.895	.000
	Within Groups	12.750	33	0.386		
	Total	952.306	35			

As shown in Table 2, the obtained values for (Sig.) and (F), shows that the differences between mean scores of three educational levels in three tests are significant.

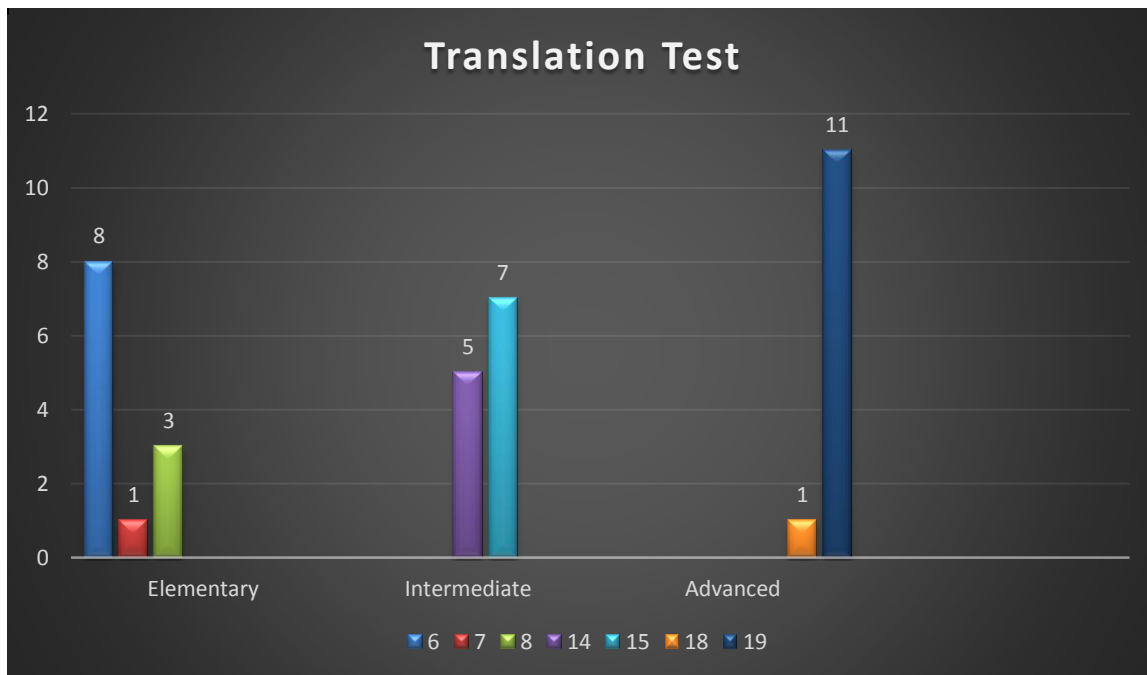


Figure 1: Total points for Translation Test of three levels

As shown in Figure 1, all the learners' performances on Translation test in three levels were different. From 12 learners of elementary level, 8 learners got 6_{pts}, 1 learner got 7_{pts} and 3 learners got 8_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lowest point which was 6 was got by most of the elementary learners. Also, from 12 learners of intermediate level, 5 learners got 14_{pts} and 7 learners got 15_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most average points which were 14 and 15 were got by intermediate learners. From 12 learners of advanced level, 1 learner got 18_{pts} and 11 learners got 19_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the highest points which were 18 and 19 were got by advanced learners.

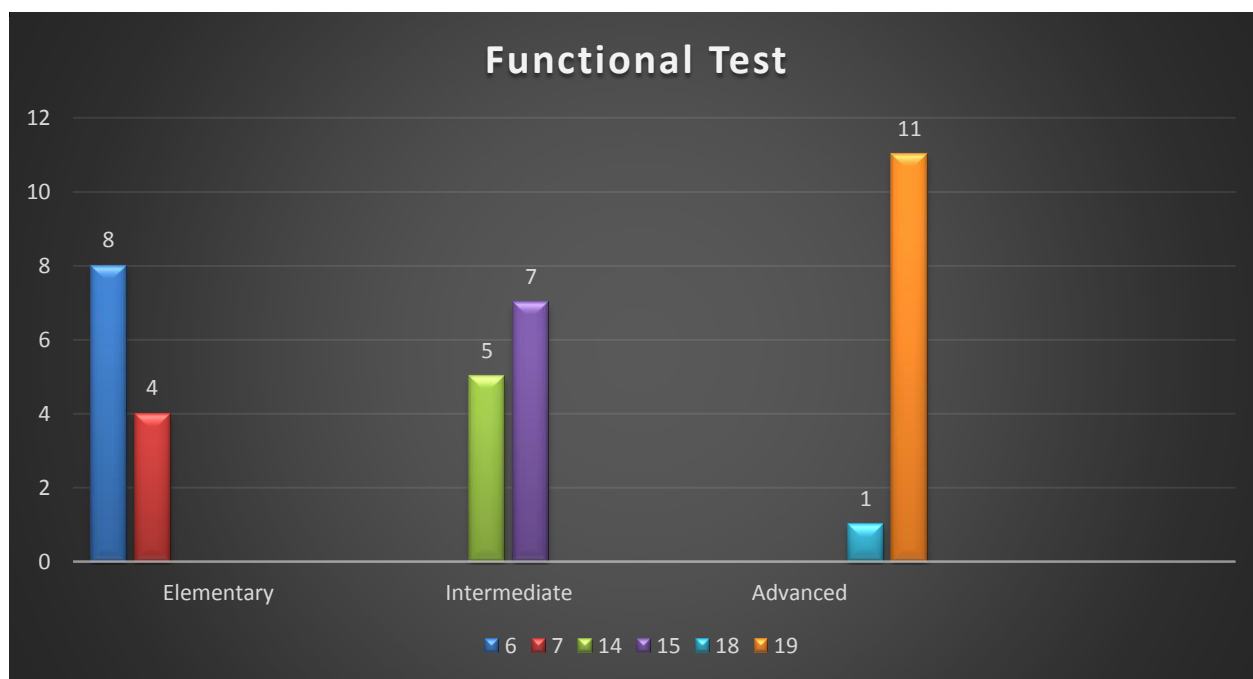


Figure 2: Total points for Functional Test of three levels

As shown in Figure, all the learners' performances on Functional test in three levels were different. From 12 learners of elementary level, 8 learners got 6_{pts}, 4 learners got 7_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lowest points which were 6 and 7 were got by most of the elementary learners. Also, from 12 learners of intermediate level, 5 learners got 14_{pts} and 7 learners got 15_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most average points which were 14 and 15 were got by intermediate learners. Form 12 learners of advanced level, 1 learner got 18_{pts} and 11 learners got 19_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the highest points which were 18 and 19 were got by advanced learners.

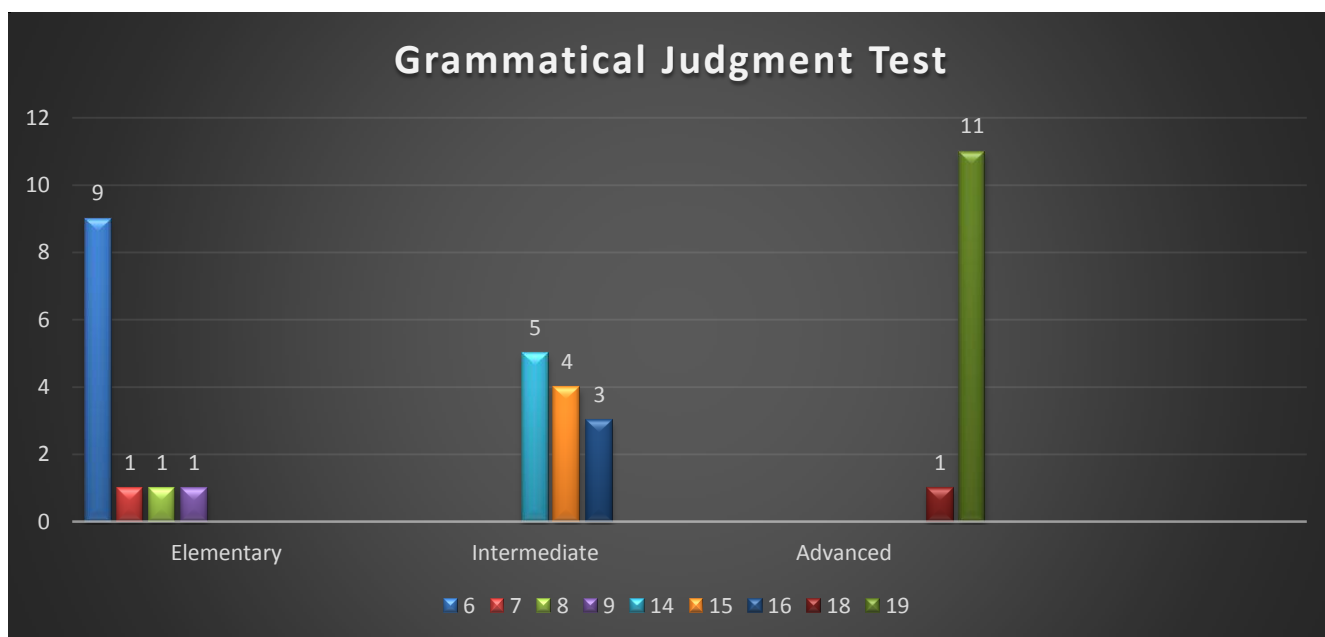


Figure 3: Total points for Grammatical Judgment Test of three levels

As shown in Figure 3 and Tables 8, 9 and 10, all the learners' performances on Grammatical Judgment test in three levels were different. From 12 learners of elementary level, 9 learners got 6_{pts}, 1 learner got 7_{pts}, 1 learner got 8_{pts} and 1 learner got 9_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lowest point which were 6 was got by most of the elementary learners. Also, from 12 learners of intermediate level, 4 learners got 14_{pts}, 5 learners got 15_{pts} and 3 learners got 16_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most average points which were 14 and 15 were got by intermediate learners. Form 12 learners of advanced level, 2 learners got 18_{pts}, 1 learner got 17 and 9 learners got 19_{pts}. Therefore, it can be concluded that the highest points which were 18 and 19 were got by advanced learners.

Discussion

The results of this study are in contrast with the claim of RDH that there is no parameter resetting in adult L2 because at the advanced level, learners proved that they could easily reset those features of L1 that are realized in different ways in L2. However, these results are in accord with the claim of RDH that speakers can never acquire functional categories or features that are required by L2 but are not instantiated in L1 because learners at the elementary level had the most problems with these functional features or categories.

The results of this study are inconsistent with the claim of MSIH that learners' problems at the initial state will not disappear because learners' problems at the elementary level disappeared at the advanced level. Findings of this study are inconsistent with the claim of FAFT hypothesis that the entirety of L1 grammar is the L2 initial state but the results proved that there is much more difference between L1 and L2 in the initial state.

Findings of this study are in consistence with MSB because according to the stage 3 of this hypothesis which claims that steady state may be native like if learners acquire all L2 settings of parameters, learners' problems at elementary level disappeared in final stages.

References

- Bliss, H. (2006) L2 Acquisition of Inflectional Morphology: Phonological and Morphological Transfer effects.
- Hawkins, R. 2001: Second language syntax: a generative introduction. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hawkins, R. and Chan, C.Y.-H. 1997: The partial availability of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition: the 'failed functional features hypothesis'. *Second Language Research* 13, 187–226.
- Hawkins, R. and Liszka, S. 2003: Locating the source of defective past tense marking in advanced L2 English speakers. In van Hout, R., Hulk, A., Kuiken, F. and Towell, R., editors, *The interface between syntax and lexicon in second language acquisition*. John Benjamins, 21–44.
- Lardiere, D. (2005) On morphological competence.
- Schwartz, B. and Sprouse, R. (1996). L2 cognitive status and the Full Transfer/Full access model. *Second Language Research*, 12:40-72.
- Tsimpili, I. (2003) Features in Language development. Invited plenary talk presented at Euro SLA, Edinburg, September 2003.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Grammatical Judgment Test

Decide whether past perfect structure in each sentence is correct or incorrect:

1. I took a shower after I had came back home yesterday.
correct incorrect
2. When I was home yesterday, I had already done my homework.
correct incorrect
3. I had to gone to school three times last month.
correct incorrect
4. My teacher had told me everything about my homework in the class.
correct incorrect
5. Three boys run away had from school last month.
correct incorrect
6. I had gone to Tehran three times last month.
correct incorrect
7. I had tell my brother that he was a big liar.
correct incorrect
8. After I arrived home, I saw that my brother gone had to school.
correct incorrect
9. when I arrived at my brother's home, I saw that I had passed through a long way to arrive at there.
correct incorrect
10. All the players of national football team had exercises a lot bot none of them did their best in the day of mach.
correct incorrect
11. Last year, a serial killer had killed fifteen people, but police couldn't finally catch him.

correct incorrect

12. Four years ago, he had reached a level in applied linguistics that everyone aspired for himself such a level.

correct incorrect

13. When he was alive, he written many books in linguistics.

correct incorrect

14. She had studied many references, but in the day of entrance examination, she had poor performance.

correct incorrect

15. The thieves had ran away before the police knew exactly who they were.

correct incorrect

16. My father had bought me an expensive bicycle, but I couldn't preserve it and it was stolen yesterday.

correct incorrect

17. I had buy three boxes of paper for my printer, but yesterday, I depleted them all.

correct incorrect

18. Last year, I had borrowed one million from my uncle. Finally, I paid my debt yesterday.

correct incorrect

19. He had arrive in the office on time, but by all this, he was criticized for being late.

correct incorrect

20. By the time I arrived home, my father had already departed to Tehran.

correct incorrect

Appendix 2: Functional Test

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate form of the verb.

1. A: did you eventually see your brother?

B: no, when I arrived at home, she (To leave).

2. A: what did you do with your patient?

B: before I arrived, the patient..... (to die).

3. A: when did you go out?

B: I went out after I (to do) my homework.

4. A: did the police arrest the thieves?

B: no, by the time the police arrived, the thieves (to run away).

5. A: did you lend him any book?

B: yes, I lent him three books after I (to read) them.

6. A: did you arrived at the library on time?

B: no, before I arrived, the library (to close).

7. A: did you know anything about his strength in speaking?
B: no, until that time, I (not to know) he was such a good speaker.
8. A: did you clean your room?
B: no, when I got home, my mother (to clean) it.
9. A: did you arrive at your exam session on time?
B: no, by the time I got to class, the exam (to start).
10. A: did you finish your exam very well?
B: no, when the class ended, I (to finish) only the first page of the exam.
11. A: what did you do in the classroom?
B: I answered questions after the professor (to give) his speech.
12. A: why did you decide to leave?
B: I decided to leave because I (to wait) an hour.
13. A: why didn't you go to the movies?
B: I didn't go to the movies because I (to see) it.
14. A: what did happen in the storm?
B: eight feet of snow (to fall) before the storm was over.
15. A: did your wife return her dress?
B: yes, she went to the store and returned the dress she (to buy).
16. A: did the class finally discuss the final exam before the teacher came in?
B: yes, the class (to discuss) the final exam when the teacher came in.
17. A: did your mother know your failing in the exam?
B: yes, before I arrived at home, my sister (to tell) my mother everything.
18. A: did you arrive at home for dinner on time?
B: yes, by the time I arrived at home, my wife (to prepare) dinner.
19. A: what did you do in the first snowy day of winter?
B: before the first snow fell, I (to make) a warm fire.
20. A: did you find an empty room in the hotel when it was raining?
B: yes, before it began raining, I (to find) a hotel.

Appendix 3: Translation Test

Translate these Azerbaijanian sentences into English.

1. Mən kitabımı səndən almamışdım.
2. Onlar süt içmişdilər.
3. Mən sinamaya atamla getmişdim.
4. Onlar kitablarını eşiyə atmışdılar.
5. Mən məktubu yazmamışdım.
6. O məktubu imzalamışdı.
7. Mən kitabımı oxumuşdum.
8. Onlar kitablarını itirmişdilər.
9. O yalnız yuyunmuşdu.
10. Mən dənizdə üzmüşdüm.
11. Mən onları vurmamışdım.
12. O evin satmışdı.
13. O mənim getməyimi bilməmişdi.
14. Ronaldo iki gol vurmuşdu.
15. Mən evdə ağlamışdım.
16. O məktəbdə savaşmışdı.
17. O mənim əllərimi saxlamışdı.
18. Onlar evlərinə tez yetişmişdilər.
19. Məktəbdən evmizəsarı qaçmışdım.
20. Onlar mənə heç nə deməmişdilər.