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Investigation into the Acquisition of Pakistani English Adjective Sequence by ESL Learners: A Pilot Study

Laila Ali Mir [1] , ***Abdul Malik Abbasi*** [2*]

[1] *English Department, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi 74000, Pakistan*

[2] *Faculty of Language and Culture Studies, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi 74000, Pakistan*

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of first language (L1) transfer on learning English adjective order among Urdu ESL learners. In English, adjective order is rigid, typically in the sequence opinion, size, age, shape, colour, origin, material, and purpose, i.e., a white lovely German car or a beautiful big wooden table. Therefore, languages like Urdu follow different rules of adjective order. These language structural differences can be challenging for Pakistani ESL learners. Which may transfer the rule pattern of L1 on adjective placement, can lead to systematic error. The study focused on a group of English as a second language learners whose first language is Urdu. This study specifically seeks to determine the accuracy of second-language learners by identifying common error patterns in the use of English adjective order. The primary hypothesis proposed that the impact of the first language (Urdu) structure based on the rules of adjective order often interferes with English adjective order, leading to systematic error. To test this hypothesis, the study used a quantitative method; purposive sampling was utilized, and 43 ESL learners participated based on proficiency level. The participants were instructed to arrange a set of adjectives in order, and Cloze tests were conducted. The study reveals that Urdu ESL learners' proficiency and accuracy in producing English-specific adjective order were impacted by common rules of L1 (Urdu) and English. These results emphasize the significance of taking L1 transfer into account in ESL instruction and

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Abdul Malik Abbasi, Faculty of Language and Culture Studies, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi 74000, Pakistan;
Email: amabbasi@smiu.edu.pk

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reveal that the influence of L1 may play a part in learning English adjective ordering. Larger sample sizes and educational approaches that lessen L1 interference in adjective placement should be the focus of future studies.
Keywords: Investigation; Acquisition; Pakistani English; Adjective Order; ESL Learners

1. Introduction

Grammar is the most important and stressful aspect of mastering a new language. Language learners who understand grammar well can interact with people effectively. English speakers define nouns, verbs, and sentences with various kinds of modifiers. Among the often-used modifiers are adjectives. English learners can choose from an extensive range of adjectives for defining a noun, such as "*clean bat*" or "*red ball*", according to the extensive linguistic vocabulary. Regardless, English is among those languages that enable speakers to employ several nominal adjectives simultaneously. English speakers must thus arrange selected adjectives in a certain order when more than a single adjective is used. According to numerous studies, native speakers generally choose a certain adjective order. For example, most native speakers would rather use a long thin brush than a thin, long brush[1]. Although the phrase "*a thin long brush*" is free of grammatical mistakes, most native speakers do not find it to be "correct." According to the study by Imran & Wahid[2], the significance of developing materials for education centred around a scientific explanation of language is to be learned by both the learner's native language and the target language. Therefore, when creating an ESL curriculum that caters specifically to the learners' developmental needs, it becomes essential to recognize the significant influence of their L1 background. Language learning is a complex process. Learners, while learning a second language (SLA), often use the linguistic structure of their first language. Which can facilitate or hinder second language learning. There are significant areas where L1 interference is observed in syntax and word order. Particularly, the placement of adjectives in English sentences[3]. In English, adjective order is typically rigid in sequence: *opinion, size, age, shape, colour, origin, material, purpose*. (e.g., *a white lovely German car* or *a beautiful big wooden table*) Therefore, languages like Urdu follow different rules of adjective order (placement). These language structural differences can be challenging for Pakistani ESL learners. Which may transfer the rule pattern of L1 on adjective placement, can lead to systematic error. The study focused on a group of English as a second language learners whose first language is Urdu.

2. Materials and Methods

Previous studies[4] examined the role of adjectives within Old English. Adjectives might appear before or after the head noun throughout this era of English grammar, although the prenominal position was the most common. This difference in the place has been attributed to Old English's relatively open word order in most Old English grammar books. Nonetheless, it was demonstrated that prenominal and postnominal adjectives had different meanings, and that these meanings varied depending on several factors. The indefiniteness of the Noun phrase that the Adjective Phrase is a part of, the inflectional kind of adjective used, strong or weak, and the function of the Adjective Phrase in relation to information, structure, theme, or rhyme, or available or new information, was used mostly in Old English. However, the study by Yasir et al.[5] demonstrated that this component is dependent on the other criteria, and the quantity of adjectives also matters. The study by Amusan[6] suggested that the adjective phrase was conditioned by several syntactic, semantic, and context/pragmatic factors and that it carried meaning, at least in certain situations. Additionally, the study by Arsalan et al.[7] pointed out that these characteristics are not exclusive to Old English but are also present in several other languages such as Italian and Spanish, and even Modern Greek, particularly documented in the literature. Prenominal in Old English gave way to more postnominal in Middle English, according to the studies by Hawkins[8] and Fischer[9], the adjective's basic position shifted from prenominal to postnominal in Middle English. A few decades later, another study[10] takes up the subject of adjective ordering and distinguishes two categories of English adjectives: the "residuum" of adjectives that refer to attributes not included in the first category (size, shape, evaluation) as well as those that discuss "inherent" characteristics (colour, substance, origin).

Adjectives in prime class, which name intrinsic properties, appear closer to the noun. Furthermore, the things that are closely related in the mind are often placed strongly together in communication, which is invoked by Whorf's concept of inherent. According to the study by Seiler[11], the theory of inherent and meaning accuracy, adjectives that have a limited range of applications are more likely to recognize traits that are inherent to the modifying noun.

2.1. Ordering English Adjectives and Urdu Adjectives

In adjectives, absolute and non-absolute are the two main categories into which adjective classification falls. Adjectives that lack the ability to be compared or graded are referred to as absolute. On the other hand, non-absolute adjectives are gradable or related. Adjectives of size (large, tiny, etc.) are gradable, for instance. Since a chair is either wooden or not, we can state that one thing is larger than another; material adjectives are not gradable. It is common in the English language to come across dual adjective phrases formed from adjective combinations. The three main combinations are NN, AA, and NA[12]. Additionally, when modifying a noun with a mix of both an absolute adjective and a non-absolute adjective, the non-absolute adjective usually appears to be closest to the noun. For example, the term "*large iron table*" is used more frequently than "*iron large table*." Similarly, English speakers consistently follow the most common ordering of adjectives when two adjectives, either absolute or non-absolute, appear together[13]. For instance, most native speakers use phrases like "*a beautiful big wooden house*" and "*a red beautiful book*" more frequently than "*a woody strong stool* and *an adorable short girl*". Additionally, it has been proposed that people are born knowing the proper order of adjectives[14].

2.2. Prenominal English Adjective Orders

The case of English prenominal adjective ordering provides more straightforward proof of the indifference to these non-syntactic constraints[15]. When a noun is modified by several adjectives to create an intricate noun phrase, it is recognized that each one has semantic restrictions on the adjectives' order, as seen in examples.

A fine small vase?
A small, fine vase.

An illustration of this occurrence can be found in the schematic, which is found in a study by Kemmerer et al.[16]. Assume first that each adjective assigns semantic classifications or features based on the attributes of the adjectives' own referential notions, like in the case of semantic classes:

[Value] [Size] [Dimension] [A physical attribute] [colour]

For instance: orders for:

Good Big tall hot red

According to this account, the primacy of the semantic classification value-size causes adjectives like good and nice to come before other adjective kinds like huge and tall. Extremely poor acceptability of native speakers' off-line evaluations will result from many adjective NPs breaking the limitations[17]. Furthermore, keep in mind that the degree of phrase structure has no bearing on this occurrence. Here, NP2 and NP3 are syntactically equivalent, just like the hierarchy. Lately, the emphasis has shifted from its acceptability outside to its processing performance and usage. According to Kennison[18], who employed the self-paced reading paradigm, reading difficulties in native speakers' comprehension processes were induced by breakdowns of the semantic restraints of pre-nominal adjectives ordering. In particular, the data demonstrated that when the phrases are devoured by the native speakers with a violation in sequence, reading delays appeared immediately.

2.3. Hypothesis of Universal Hierarchy

Stringer[1] discusses about changing the way that the modifiers are taught in a book chapter. Stringer questioned the efficacy of the current teaching resources for adjective ordering in a lesson from Universal Grammar because most introductions were not tailored to the needs of the students in relation to their L1 background. As a result, he suggested that the performance of ESL students could differ depending on the L1. Based on their absoluteness, he divided all the adjectives into two categories: non-absolute adjectives (NA) and absolute adjectives (AA). The latter were gradable or relative (like opinions, length, etc.), while the former were ungradable or non-relative (like material, origin, etc.). He evaluated ESL students using (NN) and (NA) combinations. The findings revealed that while all three groups

performed very poorly in the non-absolute + non-absolute adjective (NN) ordering, they were highly proficient in the non-absolute (NA) adjective ordering, indicating a thorough comprehension of this English combination. He postulated that L2 acquisition of English adjective ordering may be influenced by Universal Hierarchy. As the study on adjective ordering has progressed, researchers have found that even though there was variation among straight hierarchies of adjective ordering while speaking distinct languages, those hierarchies shared certain rules. Most frequent orders, including "Size > Shape" (little square box), pertained to the NA pairing and were used in Chinese, Thai, Italian, Celtic, and even English.

According to the above study, the existence of this shared trait suggests that the NA ordering may be a component of Universal Grammar, a linguistic structure that facilitates the learning of information about the NA combination. This finding further clarifies the exceptional scores displayed by ESL speakers in the NA combination, given that neither language uses direct pre-nominal adjectives. However, the analysis of NN and AA arrangements in other languages has not been properly investigated, and there is insufficient proof to conclude that there are universal rules governing the arrangement of adjectives in these combinations.

2.4. L1 Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

Abbasi et al.[19] argue that the findings further revealed that interlanguage interference was also found in morpheme acquisition order in terms of the nature of linguistic features of both languages L1 and L2. Ccontemporary Studies on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) show that several factors affect second language acquisition, including age, learning environment, teaching approach, and learners' prior knowledge of L1[20]. Researchers in earlier decades have proposed that acquiring a second language may benefit from the transfer of knowledge through one's first language (L1) in a few areas, such as morphology and syntax[21].

Inspired by promising findings from studies on L1 impact in other domains, the researcher determined to investigate how the L1 affected ESL learners' English adjective ordering. It is therefore expected that among ESL learners with a particular L1 background, there will be a prominent influence of their L1 background on the second language learning of the arrangement of adjectives in English. The researcher was inspired to investigate the potential effects of L1 transfer on Urdu ESL learners' acquisition of English adjective order by the positive findings of previous studies looking at L1 influence in other areas. L1 transfer is influenced by Universal Grammar, which is another factor that may have an impact on second language acquisition. It proposed the concept of Universal Grammar, which refers to the innate linguistic principles that reinforce language structure and are subconsciously adapted by language learners[22]. According to Glass[23], the query of whether L1 and L2 novices can acquire the universal principles in natural order is still up for debate. The development of a strong and implicit language knowledge in learners is one potential advantage of UG. It is expected that when it comes to adjective ordering, students will find it relatively simpler to comprehend adjective orders that follow the general guidelines provided by the general hierarchy. The possible influence of L1 on L2 adjective ordering, however, has not been thoroughly studied. It remains unclear how students acquire a grasp of adjective order in English. Stringer became the first researcher to examine adjective ordering in non-European native languages. However, it was believed that SLA involved Universal Grammar. As previously mentioned, he believed that the NA order was a component of the Universal Structure, making this order easy and natural for ESL students from different language backgrounds to master.

2.5. Purpose

The study aims to offer comprehensive insights into the correlation between Pakistani ESL learners' native-like adjective ordering formation and proficiency in language. This study specifically seeks to determine accuracy of high-proficiency language learners outperforming low-proficiency language learners by identifying common error patterns in the use of adjective ordering that is preferred by the grammatical rules of English.

2.6. Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of L1 transfer on learning English adjective order among Urdu ESL learners.
- To identify the common errors in the placement of adjective order made by ESL learners

- To assess the accuracy of learners' adjective order based on their proficiency level.

2.7. Research Questions

- How does learners' L1 interfere with English adjective order placement?
- What are the mistakes made in the use of adjectives by L1 Urdu learners?
- To what extent do learners' proficiency levels affect learners' accuracy in English adjective order?

3. Methodology

This section carefully describes the methods used in this study and provides comprehensive information about the participants. The methodology section seeks to offer thorough insights into the complex relationship between ESL learners' production of adjective order and language proficiency. Additionally, it tests the accuracy of adjective orders that are more similar to correct English adjective order. Less proficient learners produce fewer adjectives and make common grammatical mistakes than proficient learners. The researchers used adjective sentences to assess English adjective ordering preferences in the Urdu language, building upon the research approach used by Scontras. The research employed a quantitative approach; numerical data was opted to examine systematically the influence of L1 transference on learning English Adjective order among Urdu ESL learners.

3.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed in the selection process, with an emphasis on their proficiency level. Using a non-probability selection technique called purposeful sampling, participants are chosen for the study based on attributes or qualities. Participants were selected for this study throughout the first semester (beginner level) and final semester. The purpose of this choice is centred on the idea that these subjects are proficient in the English language and are also exposed to the grammatical elements related to the adjective phenomenon being studied. The study involved the participation of 43 ESL students, aged between 19 and 30 years. The English language learning process began for each participant throughout their primary school years. The participants in this study were chosen undergraduate students from an institute in Karachi. This method ensured participants had relevant exposure to English grammar and adjective structures.

3.2. Testing Procedure

A collection of 20 phrases and a Cloze test was conducted, comprising three distinct sets of adjective arrangements that were produced like Stringer's research model. Participants completed two sets of adjective ordering tasks, each with 10 phrases, designed to test their understanding of English adjective order. There were ten phrases in each set, first set include identifying the *correct sentences based on adjective order*, second set was based on *rearrangement of adjective sentences* in order, and third Cloze test was conducted, which indicates that non-absolute adjectives are arranged with other non-absolute adjectives (like *a new, pricey pen*); (2) AA, which indicates that absolute adjectives are arranged with other absolute phrases (like *a square silver shape*); and (3) NA, which indicates that non-absolute adjectives are arranged with absolute adjectives (like *a small gold statue*). Since the reversed order is rare in English due to a general preference for non-absolute order, the researcher chose not to include the AN combination. A study's adjective order was identified as expected.

4. Results

4.1. Cloze Test

A forced-choice Cloze test with 20 blanks was administered to assess general English proficiency. This test helped categorize learners into low and high-proficiency groups. A Cloze test was given to all participants following the Adjective Ordering Task. This kind of exam has been widely utilized in L2 acquisition research to assess the general language ability of ESL learners since the 1970s [24]. This study assessed the participants' level of English proficiency. A meaningful piece was cut down to 20 words for the forced-choice Cloze test. The participants were required to select the choice they believed best suited each blank from the four provided. The test had a total score of 20, and each participant received one point for correctly responding to a single blank. The purpose of the Cloze test was to split the 43 respondents

into two groups: the low- and high-proficiency groups. It became clear from examining the test results that the respondents' overall proficiency was relatively high. None of the respondents was able to get the maximum score of 43, and no one received a score lower than 15, even though the best score obtained was 37 out of 43. As shown in **Table 1**, it was thought reasonable to split the participants into two groups to further examine the different levels of proficiency. According to the low-proficiency group received scores between 6 minimum and 28 maximums, while the high-proficiency group had scores between 15 and 37, these findings were based upon the Cloze test.

Table 1. Results from the Cloze test.

	No.	Min. Score	Max. Score	Mean
Proficiency Mark	43	15	37	26

4.2. Adjective Arrangement Test

Participants completed two sets of adjective ordering tasks, each with 10 phrases, designed to test their understanding of English adjective order. After completion of the Cloze test, the participants were instructed to complete the adjective arrangement test. Every participant received instructions to respond to the questions. 10 carefully chosen double-adjective phrases were used as an adjective arrangement test. Two sentences were placed in the middle of each set. Despite having different sequences of adjectives, these statements used the same descriptors. The ordering adjectives test offered an overall score of 10 for each combination, 20 score for two sets of tests. Test one was choosing the right order of adjective phrases, and the second test was adjective ordering. 10 items were included in each set.

5. Discussion

The study's findings addressed three research questions that are outlined in the part that follows: Research Question 1. How does learners' L1 interfere with learners' acquisition of English Adjective Ordering? 2. What are the common errors in the placement of the adjective order made by ESL learners? 3. To what extent do learners' proficiency levels affect learners' accuracy on English Adjective order? By presenting the comprehensive results regarding the overall adjective ordering phrases as experienced by participants following an analysis of overall scores for the adjective arrangement tests, this section addressed research question 1. The findings demonstrate the degree to which L1 transfer impacts on ESL learners' acquisition of English adjective ordering, as shown and arranged in **Tables 1–4**, which successfully illustrate the items' hierarchical ranking according to their respective scores: percentage of accuracy rate and percentage of errors.

It is clear from the data in **Tables 3** and **4** that participants in this study performed well on size and colour adjectives. It is vital to note, as well, that they performed exceptionally well on a small number of phrases, as evidenced by their noticeably high accuracy percentage. Three phrases that included colour adjectives—*A beautiful white flower*, *A lovely white German car,* and *a beautiful red silk dress*, in particular—performed better than other things in this combination. Colour adjectives were categorized into absolute adjectives and placed in the non-absolute order in that study. Therefore, it was predicted that such adjectives would be rated higher than a combination of adjectives because previous studies have similar findings. Therefore, it is evident that absolute adjectives are easier to place than other combinations. Regarding the first research question, which examined how L1 transfer impacted Urdu ESL learners' acquisition of English adjective ordering, the results of this study are consistent with earlier studies, showing that the NA combination performed better than the AA and NN arrangements by Huang. This finding implies that the participants have some sensitivity to the syntax of their native language, which influences how they produce English adjective placement [25, 26]. It is important to note, though, that the remarkable performance of phrases that contain colour adjectives, like "big blue house," confirms earlier findings regarding the relevance of colour phrases in adjective order by Stringer. These findings highlight how intricate and precise L1 transfer is, as well as how it impacts Urdu ESL learners' acquisition of English adjective ordering. To construct teaching methods that address the difficulties faced by learners in this situation, more research is necessary to investigate other aspects that might contribute to these findings.

Table 2. Demography of the data.

Age Range		
18 to 25 Years	**25 to 30 Years**	**Grand Total**
21	22	43
English Proficiency Level		
Female	**Male**	**Grand Total**
21	22	43
English Proficiency Level		
Advance	**Beginner**	**Intermediate**	**Grand Total**
15	5	23	43

Table 3. Illustrating adjective sequence.

Phrase	Correct	Incorrect	No. of Participants	Accuracy%	Error%
An old big car	22	20	42	52%	48%
A new great chubby soft pixie haircut	23	19	42	54.76%	45.23%
A beautiful white flower	33	9	42	78.57%	21.42%
A plastic broken watch	38	4	42	90.47%	9.52%
A big crowded class	38	4	42	90.47%	9.52%
A spicy delicious chicken curry	27	15	42	64.28%	35.71%
She wore a beautiful long cotton dress	24	18	42	57.14%	42.85%
A lovely white German car	32	10	42	80%	20%
A broken ceramic plate	31	11	42	73.80%	26.19%
She brought a beautiful red silk dress	22	20	42	52.38%	47.61%

Table 4. Showing adjectival order test.

Phrase	Score	Incorrect	No. of Participants	Accuracy%	Error%
An expensive new black cell phone	9	34	43	20.93%	79.07%
A beautiful yellow silk dress	14	29	43	32.56%	67.44%
A dozen pink round plastic plates	16	54	43	74.42%	63.4179%
We visited a grand historical stone building	18	25	43	41.86%	58.14%
She was wearing a soft red woollen hat	19	24	43	44.19%	55.81%
The fluffy young adorable kitten was playing	23	20	43	53.49%	46.51%
A shiny light green car was parked there	27	16	43	62.70%	37.21%
A huge old black dog	29	14	43	67.44%	32.56%
A red vintage British car	38	5	43	88.37%	11.63%

Memon et al. note that both academic and social anxiety can negatively impact the performance and cognitive functioning of ESL learners [26], which in turn affects their communication effectiveness. The competitive nature of modern academia exacerbates this anxiety, as students face concerns about potential failure while striving for success [27]. The study also indicates that the pursuit of social acceptance is a significant factor contributing to student anxiety. Abbasi highlights the importance of phonetic and cognitive aspects of communication skills—such as pronunciation, grammar, listening, and reading—for university students in Pakistan. Persistent shortcomings in English-speaking proficiency at the tertiary level are often linked to inadequate instructional methods employed in schools and colleges. Abbasi et al. [28] conducted a comprehensive survey involving 40 teachers from various sectors in Pakistan, employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate ESL teaching strategies. The results revealed that private institutions implement more effective instructional approaches than their public counterparts. The research highlights the importance of advancing teacher training programmes, workshops, and seminars to support ESL educators in refining their instructional methods and strengthening students' communicative abilities [29]. It is essential for ESL/EFL instructors to recog-

nise the difficulties faced by their students. Limited opportunities for practice are a significant factor contributing to underdeveloped speaking skills; accordingly, learners are advised to improve their proficiency through consistent engagement in speaking activities. To promote active participation, educators should cultivate a supportive classroom environment and interact with students in a courteous and approachable manner[30]. Taken together, this body of research significantly advances our comprehension of discourse markers within the fields of acquisition of adjectives by ESL learners.

6. Conclusions

The study's conclusion is robustly substantiated by empirical evidence and a solid theoretical framework. Findings from both the Cloze test and adjective arrangement tasks demonstrate that first language (L1) transfer plays a significant role in shaping Urdu ESL learners' production of English adjective order. Participants achieved higher accuracy with non-absolute and absolute adjective combinations (NA), as opposed to absolute + absolute (AA) or non-absolute + non-absolute (NN) pairings. This trend corroborates previous research, which posits that NA combinations are more universally accessible due to their alignment with innate linguistic hierarchies. Additionally, the results reveal a positive relationship between proficiency level and accuracy in adjective ordering, such that participants with greater proficiency outperformed those at lower levels. Collectively, these findings validate the study's core assertions and highlight the relevance of L1 influence and learner proficiency in the context of ESL instruction and curriculum design. The study aimed to investigate how Urdu ESL learners' L1 interference impacts the placement and arrangement of adjectives in English. A quantitative strategy was used to achieve this goal, collecting and analysing the data using a systematic error analysis together with an adjective ordering test. Several studies have revealed the difficulties non-native English speakers face when trying to understand the correct order of adjectives, especially when a noun is modified by more than one adjective[31]. L1 interference, which has been criticized by certain researchers, is the cause of this problem, according to Connolly, is in line with previous studies. These results imply that Urdu ESL learners struggle to understand the English adjective ordering. Despite not having received any official training on the precise rules guiding the arrangement of adjectives in English, the participants were adept at producing non-absolute ordering. These results add to the knowledge already available on the transfer of L1 and how it impacts the acquisition of adjectives in second-language settings. It is crucial for ESL teachers to assess their current knowledge and find areas in need of improvement while teaching English adjective orderings. Prior research has also demonstrated how L1 transfer affects learners' perceptions and comprehension of adjective ordering patterns by Scontras. The adjective-noun order seems like an insignificant, simple aspect of English grammar, but Urdu learners of all levels consistently make mistakes when it comes to this subject. The existence of this error in learners' adjective production may be explained by the obvious differences in the grammatical norms of English and Urdu regarding adjective-noun order. However, one potential explanation for the persistence of this kind of inaccuracy is the communicative teaching method's excessive focus on fluency for accuracy. A variety of teaching techniques are needed to address this issue since relying too heavily on one approach may result in the development of some language skills at the expense of others.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.M.A. and L.A.M.; methodology, A.M.A.; software, L.A.M.; validation, A.M.A. and L.A.M.; formal analysis, L.A.M.; investigation, L.A.M.; resources, L.A.M.; data curation, L.A.M.; writing—original draft preparation, L.A.M.; writing—review and editing, A.M.A.; visualization, A.M.A.; supervision, A.M.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Department of English.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data will be available on request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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