Anglophone Acquisition of Case Particles in L2 Korean

Hyunjung Ahn and Julia Herschensohn

1. Introduction

The goal of the present study is to assess various approaches to syntactic features and morphological feature realization in L2 acquisition by examining the understanding of L2 Korean case particles by English native speakers. The written and spoken data collected come from beginning and intermediate Korean L2 learners. In this study, we argue against the position that learners are restricted to the uninterpretable features which reside in L1. The data in this study indicate that there is a discrepancy between the acquisition of syntax and the accurate performance of morphology in L2 acquisition. The Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis is supported by the current study's results which found different proficiencies in the written and oral data made by L2 learners of Korean.

2. Korean Case

Case-valuing in syntax is a universal phenomenon. In English and Korean, nominative case is assigned from T and accusative case is assigned from v. When a DP merges, it has an unvalued case feature which is valued by nominative case on T or accusative case on v. However, case in English and Korean are realized in substantially different ways in that English does not have a morpheme which indicates case on lexical DPs[1].

For all Korean DPs, lexical and pronominal, the subject is realized with an overt nominative case marker *–i* or *–ka*[2], while the object is realized with an accusative case marker *–ul/lul*[3], as in (1). Sometimes the subject DP can be realized with a topic marker, as in (2)[4].

(1) Na-**ka** pob-**ul** mek-ess-ta.
I-NOM rice-ACC eat-PAST-DECL
'I ate rice.'

(2) Na-**nun** pob-ul mek-ess-ta.
I-TOP rice-ACC eat-PAST-DECL

The case particles in Korean can drop in certain situations as in (3).

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[1] Except for nominative and accusative pronouns (e.g., *he* vs. *him*).

[2] The case particles *-i* and *-ka* are realized following a word-final consonant and a vowel respectively.

[3] Like nominative case, accusative case is realized one of two ways, depending on the phonetic environment. *–ul* is used when the particle follows a word-final consonant and *–lul* is used for a vowel counterpart.

[4] Subject DPs in Korean and in Japanese can occur with a topic marker. A topicalized DP indicates a discourse continuant as opposed to new subject-focus. It has been argued that languages such as Korean, Chinese or Japanese are topic-prominent languages (Li and Thompson 1976, Tan 2007).

 Proceedings of the 12th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2013), ed. Jennifer Cabrelli Amaro et al., 1-10. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

(3) Na-ø bob-ø mek-e-ta.
I rice eat-PAST-DECL
'I ate rice.'

In (3), the nominative *ka* and the accusative *lul* are dropped but the sentence remains grammatical. Although Korean case particles can drop fairly freely, there is a limit to the situations where the dropping of case particles is permitted. When scrambling occurs and the object moves in front of the subject, case particles cannot drop. Also, when the noun receives a focus interpretation, the nominative and accusative case particles cannot drop[5]. Therefore, when a DP is newly introduced, the interpretation is very awkward without a case particle, as in (4).

(4) #Yetnale, toki-ø (NOM) sal-at-sup-nita.
Long time ago, rabbit-ø live-PAST-DECL
'Long time ago, there was a rabbit.'
Toki-ø (NOM/TOP) kabuki-ø (ACC) saranghe-ss-up-nita
rabbit-ø turtle-ø love-PAST-DECL
'The rabbit loved a turtle.'

In (4), 'the rabbit' was introduced in the story for the first time and the interpretation is strange without a nominative particle because the DP gets a focus interpretation and it needs to have a nominative particle. At the same time, the newly introduced object 'a turtle' also needs to have an accusative particle.

Therefore, there is a primary difference when it comes to case realization in English and Korean. First, there is an overt case morpheme in Korean and not in English, even though both have the same syntactic derivation of nominative and accusative case assignment in the syntax. In addition, the overt case particles in Korean can be dropped in certain constructions. Nevertheless, the real use of the deletion and the limitations of the deletion are not generally taught in classes. There is a possibility that the learners either have an impaired usage of the morphological particles, or omit them unnecessarily due to the lack of the overt morphological particles in English.

3. Theoretical Background

The Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH, Hawkins 1998, 2000), which evolved from the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH, Hawkins & Chan 1997), argues that adult L2 learners are incapable of acquiring uninterpretable features of an L2 if their L1 does not have the same features. Cross-linguistic variation in uninterpretable features of functional categories may constitute systematic parametric differences between the two languages. And the different parametric setting for these uninterpretable features in languages causes problems for language acquisition (Hawkins & Liszka 2003: 25). In other words, learners can only access uninterpretable features in their native language.

According to this view, Chinese L1 speakers learning English as an L2 cannot acquire the tense feature in English due to the absence of the same feature in the L1 (Hawkins & Liszka 2003). Therefore, learners may omit tense morphology when it is required in the sentence or wrongly substitute another form for the correct one. Franceschina (2001) also argues that English L1 speakers learning Spanish are unable to acquire gender agreement due to the lack of uninterpretable gender features in English. Hence, learners fail to perform gender agreement within the DP when it is required. Therefore, this point of view ascribes failure of the morphosyntactic performance to the inaccessibility of the uninterpretable features in the L2 and different parametric settings in the L1 and L2. In other words, according to RDH the success of L2 acquisition is possibleonly when there is the same parameter with the same uninterpretable features in the L1 and L2.

On the other hand, the Feature (Re)assembly Hypothesis (FRH) proposed by Lardiere (2008) argues that the way of checking and realizing features requires a complex procedure. According to her, L2 acquisition actually occurs through a more complex process that involves not only uninterpretable

[5] There have been proposals that the case particles in Korean are focus particles (Hong 1991, Schütze 2001).

features but also interpretable features. Lardiere stresses the importance of interpretability of languages in the LF component (Chomsky 2001) and shows that the Representational Deficit Approach, which only deals with a binary choice of parametric (re)setting of uninterpretable features, cannot account for the procedure of realization of both uninterpretable and interpretable features in the L2.

For morphological competence by L2 learners, she mentions that includes not merely basic grammatical knowledge of "which forms go with which features" (Lardiere 2008: 4), but the knowledge of "what the conditioning factors or phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic or discourse-linked factors are" (Lardiere 2008:5) in L2 acquisition.

Also, the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis argues that there is a mismatch between competence and performance for L2 learners. The problem of mismatching between the morphology and syntax is not the result of a failure to acquire functional projections (Haznedar & Schwartz 1997; Lardiere 1998a,b, 2000; Prévost & White 2000; Haznedar 2001, 2003).

In Haznedar and Schwartz (1997) and Haznedar (2001), Erdem, a Turkish-speaking child who was learning English, produced many non-finite forms in his speech. Nonetheless, he correctly used nominative subjects before the use of verbal inflection. This can suggest that the use of verbal inflectional morphology and overt subjects are not consistent.. Since nominative checking is related to T (tense), Erdem might not have used nominative subjects correctly if he made errors on verbal inflection. They argue that the uninflected forms produced by Erdem are evidence of him missing Inflections of finite forms, despite the fact that he used nominative subjects properly. Therefore, a mismatch between syntax and morphology in the L2 for learners is predicted according to MSIH.

Therefore, this study investigates the knowledge of L2 Korean case by L1 English speakers by looking at their written and spoken data. The different hypotheses are also tested to see which can best account for the data.

4. The Study

4.1. Research questions

1) Would the learners have complete knowledge of the Korean case particles? The written data from a translation task will show if the learners mark case particles correctly.
2) Would the learners use correct case particles in their speaking? The oral data will indicate if the learners use case particles properly.

The RDH would presuppose that the learners of Korean already have abstract syntactic features in L1 so they would succeed in acquiring Korean case. As a result RDH will predict that learners will use and perform with Korean case particles properly due to the same case system existing in English. By contrast, FRH and MSIH would predict relatively poor performance of case particles in the speaking task since the Korean case particle is a morphological element which is not available in English. It is likely the case that the new morphological features are reassembled in their cognitive process as argued in the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH). FRH proposes that the L2 acquisition process occurs by reconfiguring the sets of lexical (interpretable) features as well as uninterpretable features in the native language (L1) into features appropriate to the L2 (Lardiere 2008, 2009). Despite the presence in the L1, the case features in the learners' interlanguage grammar must go through this complex process. This can lead to impairment in the acquisition as argued by the FRH. The MSIH would also predict that because of the morphological differences, learners would produce relatively lower proficiency in using case particles in spoken data.

4.2. Participants

The participants for this study were 26 university students who had learned Korean for more than 2 years. 16 learners were in the intermediate (second year) class and 10 were in an advanced class (third and fourth year). The learners' L1 was English and none of them were exposed to Korean before they started studying in college. The average age of the Korean learners was 22. In addition to the experimental group, 15 Korean native speakers participated as a control group. They were ESL

students at a university in the U.S. and had not been in the U.S. more than a year. The average age of the Korean native speaker was 24.

4.3. Procedure

The participants completed the three different tasks in a quiet room. The tasks consisted of a written task, a translation task as well as two oral tasks, with a picture description task and a short answer task. Before the test, a questionnaire was filled out by the participants and the instructions for the tasks were explained.

4.3.1. Translation task (Written)

There were 15 questions for the written translation task (from English to Korean) with the goal of learning how correctly the participants use the case particles and how much they omitted. Among them, 17 tokens were used for nominative and accusative markers. Here are some example questions.

- If you go to the library, you will see the painting on your right. (painting:그림)
  _____
- Please read this book if you have time.
  _____

4.3.2. Picture description task (Oral)

There were two sets of pictures for the description task. The first set is about making a cake and giving it to the friend, and the second set is about someone working on a computer and a cat turns the computer off suddenly. Both sets had a situation in which an object is neccesary, so they would provide an opportunity for the participants to use the accusative case particles. As an example, for the cake set, subjects must use an object *cake* for the transitive verb *make* or *eat.* And for the latter one, they need an object such as *computer, work, homework* and etc. When the computer is turned off, they could use either an object DP with an accusative particle for the transitive verb *turn off,* or they can use a subject DP *computer* with a nominative particle when the sentence is passive. They were given 2 minutes for each picture to prepare before they described the pictures.

4.3.3. Short answer task (Oral)

The participants were presented with 12 questions for this task. Subjects were asked the questions in English but had to answer in Korean with a full sentence. The reason that the questions were asked in English is so that the participants would not be influenced by the case particles used in the questions. This task also was used in order to learn if the participants used the nominative particle and the accusative particle correctly and how much they omitted them. No preparation time was given for this task.

4.4. Results
4.4.1. Translation task

For the translation task, Korean native speakers did not make any mistakes with the particles as expected, but they omitted particles since the omission does not influence grammaticality of the sentences. For the omission rate, the native speakers used nominative and accusative particles 62% of the time and omitted particles 38% of the time. Korean learners also performed very well in this task. They used the correct particles 9% of the time. Out of the 7% of mistakes, wrong nominative particles were used only 4.7%, and wrong accusative particles were used 13% of the time, as in figure 1. On the other hand, L2ers did not omit particles as frequently as the native control group. L2ers omitted particles 6% overall; nominative particles are omitted 8% and accusative particles 4% as in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Translation task: frequency of correct particle use

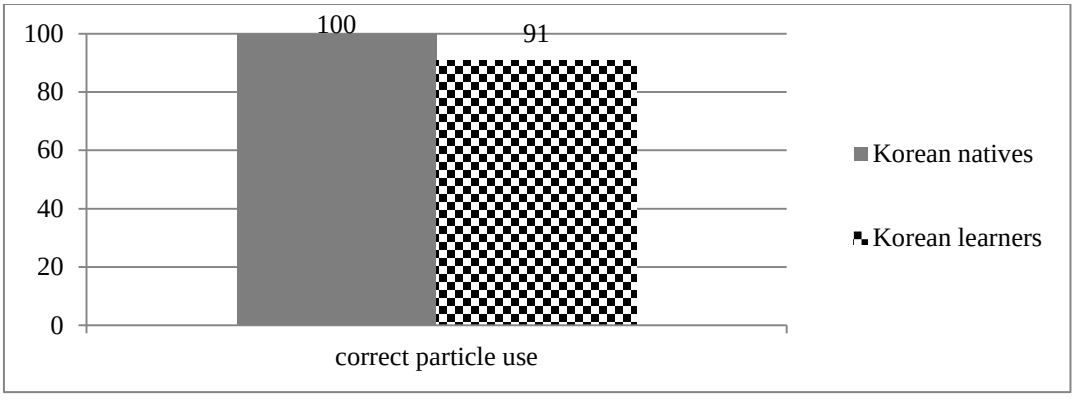
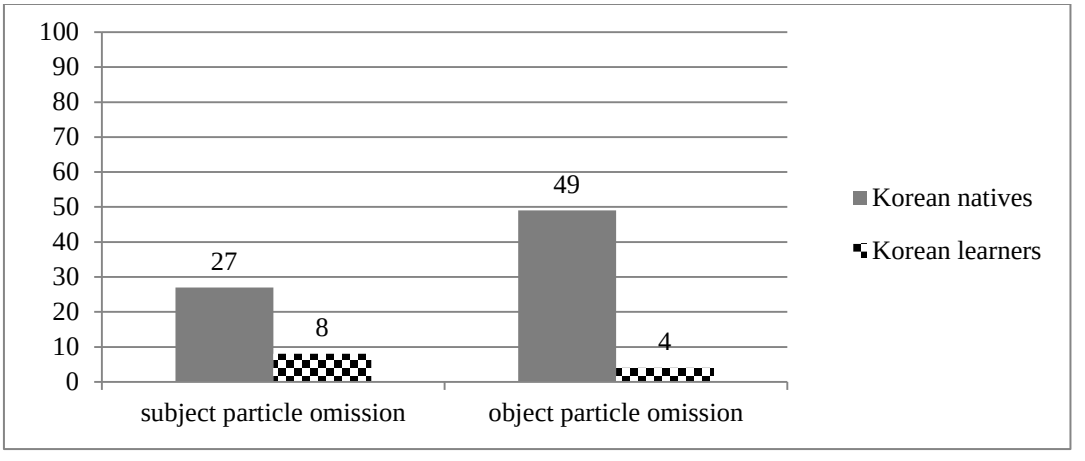
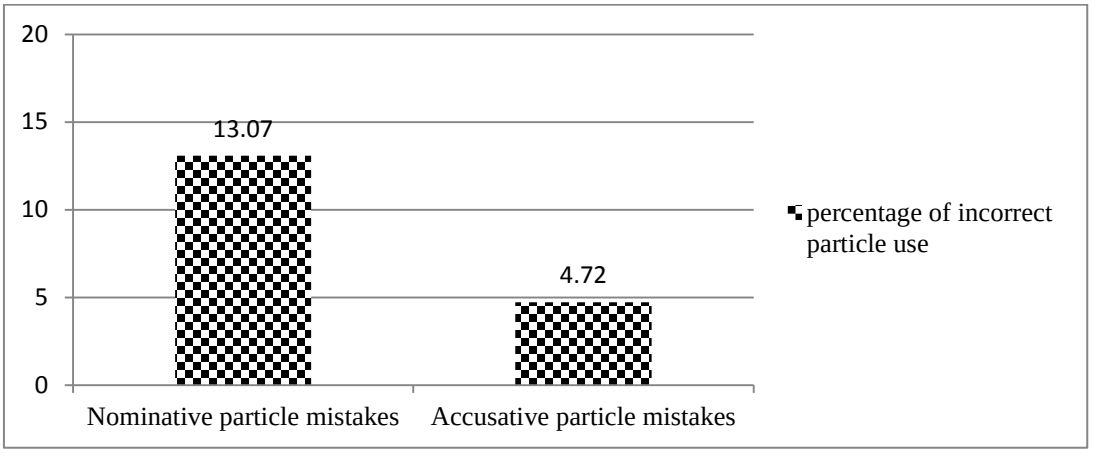


Figure 2. Translation task: frequency of particle omission



Unlike the Korean native speakers, learners made mistakes on using nominative and accusative particles in the translation task. Figure 3 shows the percentages of the mistakes. The learners made more mistakes on nominative particles than accusative particles. The average percentage of incorrect particle use, including both nominative and accusative, was 8.9%.

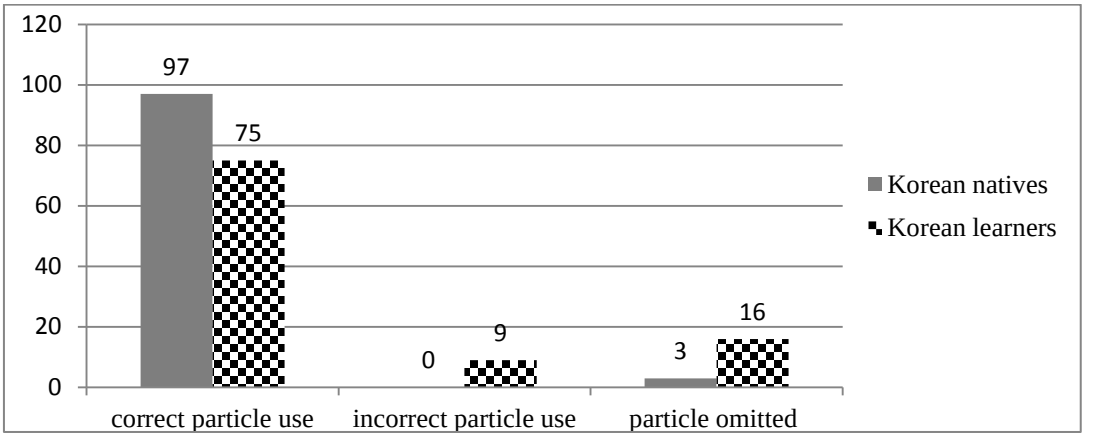
Figure 3. Translation task: L2 learner's percentage of incorrect particle use



4.4.2. Picture description task

There were two different picture sets. Figure 4 shows the results for both of the two picture sets combined. For this task, the Korean control group neither used any incorrect particles nor omitted particles. On the other hand, the Korean learners used incorrect n particles 9% of the time and omitted particles 16% of the time. They used correct and proper particles 75% of the time. They not only used incorrect particles but also omitted particles much more on this task than their translation task. Interestingly, Korean speakers did not drop any particles on this task, unlike on the translation task.

Figure 4. Picture description task: overall results



4.4.3. Short answer task

Finally, figure 5 shows the results of the short answer task. Here, Korean speakers used correct particles 85% of the time, omitted particles 14%, and used a wrong particle 1% of the time. Korean learners used correct particles 36% of the time, incorrect particles 12.6%, and dropped particles 51%. Thus, for this task, learners omitted particles much more frequently than they used them.

Figure 5. Short answer task: overall results

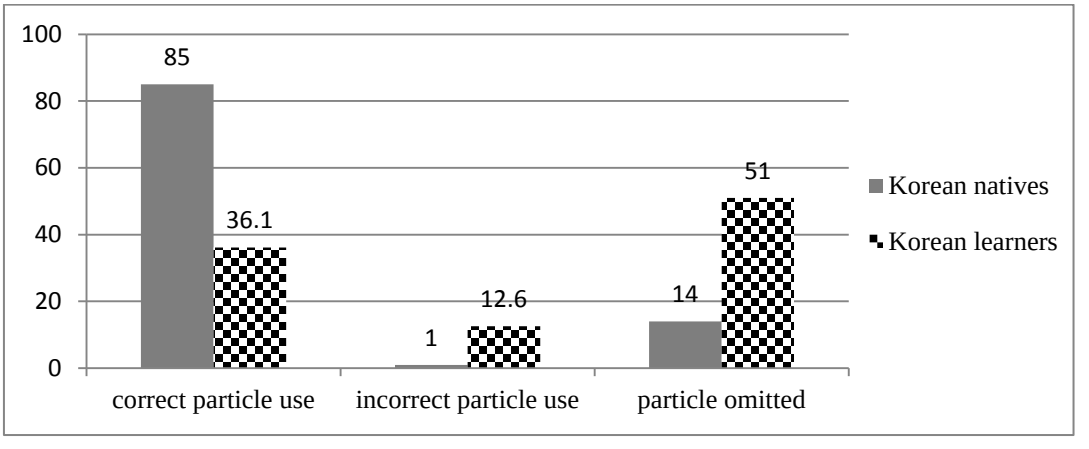
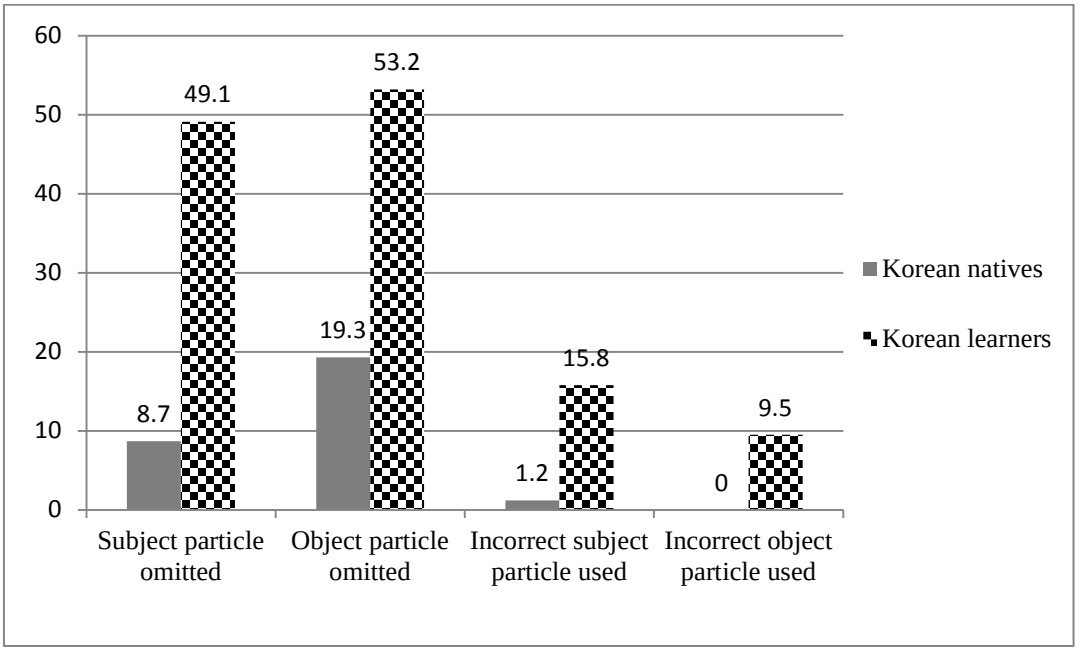


Figure 6 shows the details of the subject and object particle use in the short answer task. While Korean native speakers omitted object particles much more than the subject particles, Korean learners omitted particles (51%) and also made more errors on case particles.

Figure 6. Short answer task: detailed results



5. Discussion

The data show different results from the written and oral tasks in terms of case particle use. In the written task, learners' proficiency was at celing (91%) in terms of case particle use. It is also noticeable that learners not only performed very well but also omitted few case particles (8%) omission for the nominative case and 4% omission for accusative case particles) while native speakers dropped more case particles (27% for nominative and 49% for accusative particles). In contrast, Korean learners omitted particles much more frequently for the oral task (16%) than the written task (6%). Perhaps the learners dropped particles because omission of the case particles does not affect grammaticality in the sentence

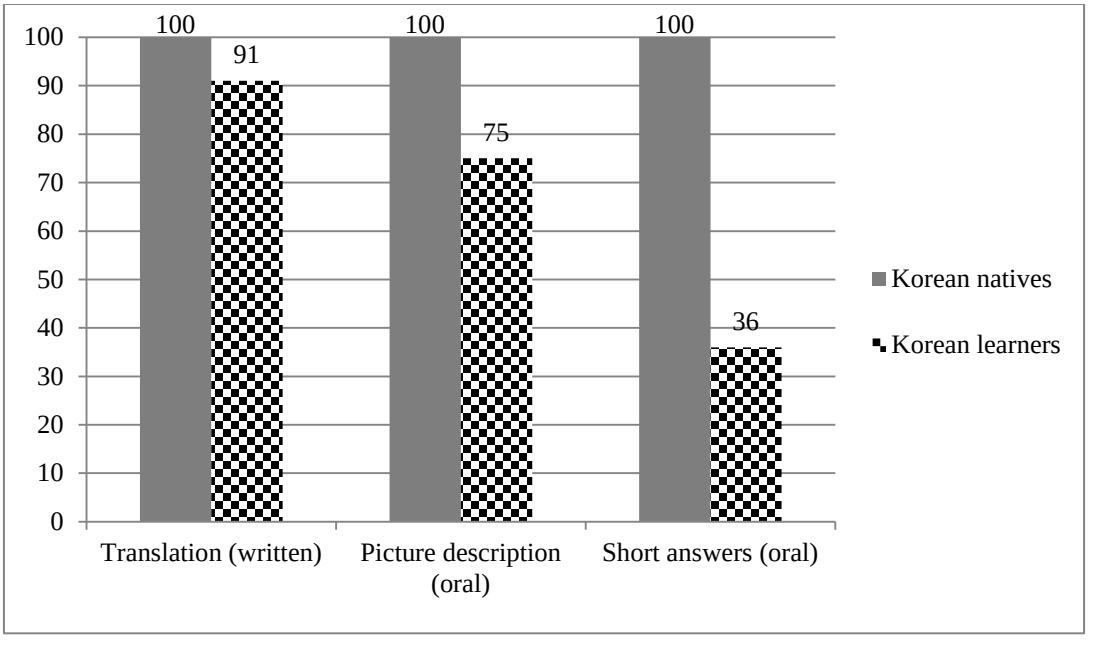
Moreover, it could be the case that the absence of the overt morphemes for English case would influence the usage in speaking. This can be due to a reliance on the grammar of the L1 which is more familiar to them (White 1991, Juffs 1996, Izumi & Lakshmanan 1998). In other words, this can imply that even though they acquire particles, it is more difficult to overtly realize in oral production due to the absence of the particles in their L1.

In addition, for short answers Korean native speakers omitted particles only 14% of the time, while learners used incorrect particles 12.6% and omitted particles 51% of the time. Even though both are oral tasks, the omission of particles was much more common in the short answer task than the picture description task. This might be due to the fact that they were not given any preparation time for this task, so they dropped many more particles. For this task, the learners had to consider a variety of elements. In addition to the processing the syntax and lexical items they had to promptly produce the answers with the proper pronunciation and intonation, while for translation and picture description tasks they had enough time to think of the contents without any burden of phonological presentation. The more frequent omission and errors on the case particles can be evidence that an online task, especially one like the interview task, without any preparation time is more demanding than offline tasks. This shows that the learners' performance is sensitive to the time constraint (Sagarra and Herschensohn 2010). McDonald (2006) found that even native speakers make some errors in online tasks with time constraints as a stressor. The current study also shows consistent results in that L2 learners of Korean not only unnaturally dropped more case particles but also made more errors when they had more time constraints. In this study, learners dropped more case particles in a short answer

task in which learners were not given any preparation time than in a picture description task for which 5 minutes were given to prepare before speaking. The translation task, however, was a self-paced written task and learners performed with a high fluency comparatively, which is a phenomenon that has been observed in previous studies (Sagarra and Hershensohn 2011, De Mulder 2006, Sabourin, 2003).

Since the RDH contends that L2 learners would fail to acquire uninterpretable features of an L2 if their L1 does not have the same uninterpretable features, L2 learners should not have difficulty acquiring the same uninterpretable features in an L2 which also reside in their L1. Figure 7 shows the total scores for the judgment task and the overall proper usage of case particles for other tasks. In the written task, the learners show a much more use of particles than in the oral task. This could support the RDH but not entirely because they still exhibited mistakes in the written task as well as substantial omission in the oral tasks. The RDH cannot entirely account for the more complicated process of Korean case particle acquisition even though the learner's L1 has the same uninterpretable features of case.

Figure 7. Percentage of proper particle use for all tasks



On the translation task, Korean native speakers omit particles quite often (38%), while Korean learners omitted less frequently (6%) and L2ers correctly used them 91% of the time. This shows that the Korean learners have acquired the case particle and overtly used them in the written task[6]. If they had not learned the case and case particles, they could not have used them perfectly. Moreover, Lardiere (2008b) has already mentioned that nominative case is related to tense, since the functional head T can assign nominative case. Therefore, a high proficiency of case particle use would indicate the presence of the functional projections of T and v in the learners' interlanguage grammar.

However, different results are shown for the oral tasks, especially when there were more time constraints. The inconsistent error and omission of particle rates can support the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis and Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis. As the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis argues, the missing morphology of the case particles does not mean the impairment of the projection of the case features (T and v). In other words, it is not the case that the learners have not acquired the syntax of case in L2 Korean (which is similar to their L1), since some of the tasks present their

[6] Korean L1s omitted more in this task since it is also grammatical without particles as they might have wanted to finish the task as early as possible.

successful performance (the translation task). The absence of the case particle use does not mean the failure of the accessibility of the target features (Haznedar & Schwartz 1997, Prevost & White 2000a,b). It is the case that the L2ers's acquired features in the interlanguage grammar are present but weak (Ionin & Wexler 2002, Epstein et al 1996). The existing features are sometimes properly used but other times the do not surface due to the difficulty of the task or a lack of preparation time. Thus, it might be the case that high omission rates in the oral tasks cannot be evidence of an absence of abstract features. L2ers omission of morphological elements has been shown in previous studies. Omission is not due to the absence of the knowledge of the features but due to the absence of more abstract connections between syntactic features and morphological features (Lardiere 1998a,b, 2003; White 2003; Goad and White 2004).

6. Conclusion

The inconsistent results between the high proficiency shown on the written task and the high omission of case particles on the oral task suggest that L2 learners face difficulties with the overt realization of surface morphology, even though they have acquired the abstract syntax. The overall imbalanced results do not support the Representational Deficit Hypothesis since the learners failed to correctly use in the particles for the spoken tasks. Learners also showed a stronger proficiency for using the correct particles in the written tasks than in the oral tasks. The Feature Reassembly Hypothesis which argues that not only uninterpretable features but also interpretable (lexical) features of morphological realization are involved in the learners' acquisition seems to be supported in this study.

The Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, which argues for the independence of morphological realization from the syntax, would also be supported by this study. This suggests that the morphological presentation should be separated from the acquisition of syntactic features. Also, learners show mapping difficulties between the syntax and morphology especially when they have more time constraints or stress. This seems to be due to the differing morphological realizations in the L1 and the L2.

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Proceedings of the 12th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2013)

edited by Jennifer Cabrelli Amaro, Tiffany Judy, and Diego Pascual y Cabo

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2013

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Ahn, Hyunjung and Julia Herschensohn. 2013. Anglophone Acquisition of Case Particles in L2 Korean. In *Proceedings of the 12th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2013)*, ed. Jennifer Cabrelli Amaro et al., 1-10. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #2978.