L2 ACQUISITION OF CASE PARTICLES IN KOREAN: A DISCREPANCY IN SYNTACTIC FEATURES AND MORPHOLOGICAL FEATURES

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1. Introduction

This study seeks to address the question of whether L2 learners are able to acquire morphological features not found in the L1 by testing the acquisition of Korean case particles by English speakers. Two research questions are: 1) Are uninterpretable syntactic features residing in the L1 and L2 fully transferred, and 2) Are different morphological features acquired?

Both English and Korean are languages with nominative/accusative case. Therefore, if we assume that the case features in L1 English are transferred, learners of Korean would be able to fully acquire the Korean case. However, unlike English, Korean has overt morphological suffixes for case particles, which suggests that the acquisition of the case particles in Korean requires not only the acquisition of the syntactic processes but also the morphological framework. Therefore, looking at the acquisition and performance of case particles by L2 learners would give us a clear understanding of the roles of syntax and morphology in L2 acquisition.

2. L1 Transfer of Syntactic Features and Morphological Features

The Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH, Hawkins & Chan 1997; Hawkins 1998, 2000), which evolved from the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH, Hawkins & Chan 1997), argues that L2 learners are incapable of acquiring uninterpretable features of an L2 if their L1 does not have the same features. According to this view, it is argued that Chinese L1 speakers learning English as an L2 cannot acquire a tense feature in English because of absence of the same feature in the L1 (Hawkins & Liszka 2003). Therefore, they argue that learners may omit morphology when it is required in the sentence or wrongly substitute another form instead of the right one. Likewise, Franceshina (2001) argues that English L1 speakers learning Spanish are unable to acquire gender features because of 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.

It is also necessary to look at morphological transfer in order to understand the acquisition process of Korean case by English speakers. The study of morphological transfer has been discussed in Montrul (1997, 1999, 2000; Morphological Transfer Hypothesis, MTH). According to her, such a morphological discrepancy in the L1 and L2 would impair the acquisition of the features in the L2. Moreover, she argues that L2 learners have an innate default template and L1 syntactic transfer does not occur in the initial state of the L2 acquisition. Montrul tested the L2 acquisition of the causative/inchoative alternation by Spanish, English, and Turkish speakers. In her studies, she investigated the role of the L1 and interlanguage in the initial state of L2 acquisition.

The participants included Turkish speaking and Spanish speaking English learners, Spanish speaking and English speaking Turkish learners and Turkish speaking and English
speaking Spanish learners. Her study showed that beginning learners failed to reject ungrammatical sentences even though their L1 does not allow the ungrammaticality. She argues that the initial state of the L2 acquisition is not transferred from their L1 in terms of syntax. According to her, learners overgeneralize ungrammaticality in L2 when “learners fail to reject sentences whose analogues would be ungrammatical in their native languages” (Montrul 2000 in Whong-Barr 2005: 276). According to her, it is not because of the syntax, but the morphological transfer is a modular phenomenon, which seems to transfer in early L2 acquisition. Furthermore, in her 2001 work, she also proposes that L1 morphological transfer to an L2 occurs when this morphological marking is infelicitous in the L2. The morphological discrepancy in the L1 and in the L2, therefore, can result in the failure of the acquisition or performance of the morphological element in L2. You need to clarify this paragraph.

Beyond the MTH, there is another approach to look at the L2 acquisition of morphology? by observing the entire process of mechanism of features. The Feature (Re)assembly Hypothesis (FRH) proposed by Lardiere (2008), who argues that L2 acquisition actually occurs through a more complex process that involves not only uninterpretable features but also interpretable features or the way of checking and realizing the features. In other words, the process of acquiring features in an L2 requires serious effort and is a complicated process. Learners utilize relevant features and the function of the features to acquire the elements in the L2. Her study of Patty, whose L1 is Chinese and L2 is English, shows that L2 acquisition requires a complicated process of targeting features due to reassembled features. In other words, even though the L1 has similar features to the L2, learners show both success and failure in the process of acquisition since the features in L1 are reassembled in the L2 learning process. The FRH then focuses on not only the syntactic features themselves but also the different process of assembling the features for in each language. Therefore, regardless of the fact that the L1 and the L2 have the same features, the learners might still have difficulty to acquire the whole process of the features assembly.

3. Korean Case Acquisition

3.1. Korean Case

In Korean, the subject is realized with an overt nominative case marker –i or –ka1, while the object is realized with an accusative case marker –ul/lul2, as in (1).

(1) Nae-ka bob-ul mek-ess-ta.
   I-NOM rice-ACC eat-PAST-DECL
   ‘I ate rice.’

Following the case-checking system in a minimalist approach (Chomsky 1995, 1998), I assume that nominative case and accusative case are checked by the functional heads T and v, respectively, and uninterpretable features must be checked by interpretable/valued features in order to prevent the derivation from crashing (Chomsky 1995). The functional categories T and v have interpretable nominative and accusative case features, respectively. They check the uninterpretable case features on DPs so that the DPs are then realized as having nominative and accusative case. Accusative case is only assigned by a strong vP in transitive sentences. In other words, a transitive sentence has a strong vP because when vP is a strong phase, the vP assigns accusative case (Chomsky 1998).

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1 The case particles -i and -ka are realized following a word-final consonant and a vowel respectively.
2 Like a nominative case, accusative –ul is used when it follows a word-final consonant and –lul is used for a vowel counterpart.
Intransitive sentences, on the other hand, do not have a strong vP and so vP cannot assign accusative case, which results in no accusative case particle occurring in the sentence. Korean intransitive sentences can have intransitive verbs or adjectives as predicates as in (2a-b) as opposed to the transitive verb in (2c).

(2)  a. Jangmi-ka arumtap-ta (adjective)  
    rose-NOM beautiful-DECL  
    ‘The rose is beautiful.’
  b. Jangmi-ka tele-jet-ta (intransitive verb-unaccusative)  
    rose-NOM dropped-DECL  
    ‘The rose dropped.’
  c. Sooni-nun Jangmi-lul tele-telie-ta (transitive verb)  
    Sooni-TOP rose-ACC dropped-DECL  
    ‘Sooni dropped rose.’

When the predicate is an adjective or an unaccusative verb, the argument is realized with a nominative case marker and not with an accusative case marker since there is no strong vP to assign accusative case and no object DP. In other words, the theme of unaccusatives in Korean gets nominative, just as in English.

There are some predicates which are intransitive verbs or adjectives for which the English counterparts are transitive verbs. Here are some examples in (3). The experiencer must be marked as a topic and the theme with nominative case.

(3)  a. I need a friend.
  b. (Na-nun) chingu-ka pilyo-ha-ta.
    I-TOP friend-NOM need  
    ‘I need a friend.’
  c.*(Na-nun) chingu-lul pilyo-ha-ta.
    I-TOP friend-ACC need

In (3), pilyohata is an adjective so it cannot take an object, as in (3c). This can be one of the differences between Korean and English and also difficulties to the learners.

As discussed above, case checking (Chomsky 1995) is a cross-linguistic phenomenon. In English and Korean nominative case is assigned from T and accusative case is assigned from v. However, case in English and Korean are realized in substantially different ways in that English does not have a morpheme such as a case particle to show the case on lexical DPs. Also, some predicates are not consistent in both English and Korean with regards to subject case. In English, DPs are not realized with any morphology since English does not have an overt morpheme for case.3

In addition, these case particles in Korean can drop in certain situations.4 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 nominative and accusative case assignment. In addition, the overt case particles in Korean can optionally drop. Even though there is in real usage the deletion of the case particles, their optional deletion is not generally taught in classes; rather, it seems to be expected that L2 Korean learners will understand the phenomenon of structural case. From this perspective, the question is whether the syntactic features are transferred to the L2 Korean. There is another

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3 Except for nominative and accusative pronouns (e.g., he vs. him).
4 However, there is some 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.
possibility that the learners either have impaired usage of the morphological parts, particles, or omit them unnecessarily due to the lack of the overt morphological particles in English. This study seeks to investigate whether the similar uninterpretable case features are transferred in L2 acquisition or if the morphological differences are an impediment to the acquisition of Korean by English L1 learners.

3.2 Previous Research on Acquisition of Korean Case

Most studies on the acquisition of Korean case particles have been done on the L1 acquisition of Korean by children. Kim (1997) shows that Korean children acquire the accusative marker later than the nominative marker using oral production data. As a result, these 3 year old Korean children used nominative particles in a context requiring accusative particles, since they had not yet acquired the accusative particles. She also argues that this kind of error persisted to some degree even after they had fully acquired accusative particles. (4 & 5) are examples of these errors.

(4) aka-*ka (=lul) ep-ullay.
   baby-*NOM(=ACC) carry on the back
   ‘(I) would like to carry the baby on my back.’ (Kim 1997: 361)
(5) kepuxen-*i-ka (=ul) Yangpay-hyeng-i mantul-ess-e, kepuxen-*i (=ul)
   Turtleship-*NOM(=ACC)Yangpay-brother-NOM make-PAST-DECL turtleship-*NOM
   ‘Brother Yangpay made the turtleship, the turtleship.’ (Kim 1997: 361)

In (4), a nominative marker is wrongly used instead of the accusative marker. And in (5), ‘turtleship’ not only has an incorrect case particle, nominative, it is also focused a repetition of the two different nominative case particles. Also the children drop many more accusative than nominative particles.

Her study indicates that children acquire accusative markers later than nominative case marker, but they are not the only ones to drop accusative particles more than nominative particles. She shows that mothers omit accusative particles more than nominative particles. She claims that this omission may influence children’s acquisition of case particles, so children learn nominative particles earlier than accusative case particles and make more errors in accusative particles. Therefore, she argues that an input frequency effect seems to play a role in determining the order of acquisition between nominative and accusative particles.

Given these data of the L1 Korean children, this research project add another area of investigation: to test whether L2 learners of Korean acquire nominative and accusative case differently from L1 learners of Korean or not, and how they are different or similar. This will be discussed in the next section.

4 The Study

4.1 Research questions

The study started with the following research questions.

1) Are uninterpretable syntactic features residing in the L1 and L2 fully transferred?

This question asks whether the uninterpretable features in the L1 would only influence the acquisition of the abstract case features that in principle directly transfer, or whether both the morphology and the process of feature checking would play roles together. The
Representational Deficit Hypothesis and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis would predict different results for this question, which will be discussed in details in the next section.

2) Are different morphological features acquired? In other words, if they fail to perform fluently despite the same syntactic features in the L1, how do the morphological approaches account for the problem?

If learners’ proficiency is not as high, the RDH, which only deals with syntactic features, cannot account for the low accuracy, but this may be accounted for by the morphological differences in the L1 and the L2. The morphological approaches including MTH and FRH may be able to account for learners’ lower competence with case particles.

3) Is the L2 case acquisition similar to those of the L1 acquisition? In other words, would the L2 learners make more mistakes on using accusative particles just as Korean children in Kim’s study?

There have been studies on the L2 morpheme sequence (Pienemann 2005) especially on English morphemes. Since Kim (1997) looked at the errors on case particles with Korean children and discussed the sequence of learning the particles, it would be interesting to compare the errors of the L2ers and their learning sequence compared to the Korean children.

4.2. Participants

The participants were 26 university students who had learned Korean more than 2 years. 16 learners were in the intermediate (second year) class and 10 were in an advanced class (third and fourth year) placed by a pretest. The learners’ L1 was English and none of them was exposed to Korean before they started learning in the 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 an American university 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 conducted four different tasks in a quiet room. Two written tasks were used for the study, including a grammatical judgment task and a translation task, as well as two oral tasks, with a picture description task and a short answer task. The data collection consisted of two parts: (i) 20 to 30 minutes grammatical judgment task, (ii) 10 to 20 minutes translation task, (iii) 10 to 20 minutes a picture description task and finally (iv) an oral interview task. Before the test, the questionnaire was filled out by the participants and instructions of the tasks were explained.

A. Written tasks

The participants were asked to finish the two written tasks before they conducted the oral tasks.

1) Grammatical judgment task

There were 19 sentences including 5 grammatical sentences and 14 ungrammatical sentences. Out of the 14 ungrammatical sentences, 5 sentences had a nominative case marker in the argument instead of an accusative case particle, and the other 5 sentences had an

5 The pretest was administered with a short interview.
accusative case particle instead of a nominative counterpart. The remaining 4 sentences had errors related to other grammatical concerns, such as word order to distract the participants. Participants had to judge the grammaticality of each sentence by choosing ‘Y’ ‘N’ or ‘I don’t know’. To avoid the situation that the participants always judge sentences ungrammatical when they were not sure, they were instructed to correct the ungrammatical parts. In this way, it would be clearer what the participant knew correctly. If the participant knew that the sentence was ungrammatical but did not know where the wrong part was or how to correct the error, s/he did not have to correct them. For this type of situation, the subjects were instructed to select ‘I don’t know’. Here are examples of the task questions.

- 나는 더운 여름이 좋아해요 (Y, N, I don’t know) (I like hot summer.)
I-Top hot summer-NOM like

- 점심을 나 먹고 왔어 (Y, N, I don’t know) (I ate lunch and came.)
Lunch-ACC I eat come

2) Translation task
There were 15 questions for the translation task (from English to Korean). Among them, 17 tokens were used for nominative and accusative markers. This task could tell us how correctly the participants use the case particles and how much they omitted. Here are sample 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.

B. Oral task
After the written tasks, the participants were instructed to conduct the oral tasks including the picture description task and the short answer interview task.

1) Picture description task
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 working on a computer and having a cat turning the computer off. Both sets had a situation in which learners needed to use an object, so it will give a chance for the participants to use the accusative case particles. For example, for the cake one, subjects must use an object cake for the intransitive 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 5 minutes to prepare before they described the pictures.

2) Short answer task
The participants were presented with 12 questions in 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 that the participants would not be influenced by the case particles used in the questions. This task will also see if the participants used the nominative
4.4. Result

4.4.1. Written Task

As Figure 1 shows, for the grammatical judgment task, Korean learners were accurate 64% of the time when finding incorrect use of nominative particles and 54% of the time for incorrect accusative particles. Therefore, overall, Korean learners show a 70% accuracy rate for the grammatical judgment task but show 58% accuracy rate for case. This result is consistent with the Korean L1 acquisition by children who made more mistakes on the accusative particles than the nominative particles.

There was a different result in advanced learners (73%) and intermediate learners (64%) in the judgment task.

For the translation task, overall both groups did not make many mistakes. Korean native speakers omitted particles 38% overall. Learners omitted less than Korean speakers. They omitted particles 6% overall; nominative particles are omitted 8% and accusative particles 4% as in the figure 2.

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6 The questions were simple and were about the daily-life. None of the participants was a beginner of Korean so the preparation time was not given.
7 Errors on nominative particles meant that accusative particles are wrongly used instead of nominative case particles. Likewise, the percentage of the error on accusative particles shows that nominative particles were wrongly used instead of accusative particles.
8 The total score includes not only questions on particle errors but also distractors including word-order and correct sentences.
4.4.2. Oral Task

For the first task, picture description task, Korean learners used incorrect nominative particles 9% of the time, incorrect accusative particles 10%, 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. Korean speakers did not miss any particles on this task, unlike their translation task.
Figure 3. Picture description task

Figure 4 shows how much both Korean natives and learners omitted subject and object particles and how much learners used wrong particles on the subject and object.

Figure 4. Picture description task

Finally, figure 5 shows the result 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 particles 36% of the time, wrong particles 12.6%, and missing particles 51%. For this task, interestingly learners omitted much more than they used.

<Figure 5. Short answer task>

4.5. Discussion

L2 learners had a 70% accuracy rate on the grammatical judgment task. Since the learners were above intermediate levels who had learned Korean more than 2 years, this score is not satisfactory compared to their levels. Also, since English has uninterpretable nominative and accusative case features, the learners are believed to have acquired the case features in the initial state prior to learning Korean. Therefore, the RDH, which would predict a direct transfer of the uninterpretable features for the learners if their L1 has the same features, cannot provide an explanation for this result. Nevertheless, based on the high proficiency of translation task with correct usage of nominative and accusative particles, English speakers should have acquired the case features and the case features are uninterpretable features. However, they were not very successful in judging the grammaticality of the sentences. Learners certainly showed inconsistent competence and made some mistakes finding errors.

Nevertheless, the learners showed a high proficiency for the translation task. Also they rarely made mistake on either of the case particles (8%). This is likely due to the fact that the task was relatively easy, but the purpose of the questions was to be able to observe their particle use, not to simply have them translate a sentence. For this reason, we need to focus on how much they made mistakes with or omitted particles. The results show that they did not make a lot of errors on particles. This could mean that they have acquired case particles even though they do not show this ability very well in the judgment task since they might have been distracted with other grammatical parts.

Note that the learners had been studying Korean for at least 2 full years at the college level. Most of the advanced learners were in the third year or the fourth year class.
Some learners used a correct nominative particle -i/ka for the intransitive verb (or adjective) ‘to need’ in the translation task but they failed to find an incorrect accusative particle for the same verb in the judgment task. This shows that while they may have acquired it, the features of case are reassembled in their cognitive process based on the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH). FRH proposes that the L2 acquisition process occurs by reconfiguring the sets of lexical features in the learner’s native language (L1) into features appropriate for the L2 (Lardiere 2005, 2008, 2009). In other words, since English has nominative and accusative case features, learners of Korean must have acquired the case features.

Therefore, the case features in English are involved in acquiring case features in Korean. And as a result, the learners perform well in Korean case particles in the task. On the translation task, Korean native speakers omit particles quite often (38%), while Korean learners omit them less frequently (6%) they correctly used them at a rate of 93%. This would show that these Korean learners not only acquired the case particle but also overtly used them in the written task. Korean speakers omitted more in this task since it is also grammatical without particles and they might have wanted to finish the task as early as possible.

For the spoken task, the Korean speakers and learners particle omission patterns were nearly opposite of the written tasks. For the picture description task, Korean natives did not omit particles very much (3.6%). This can be explained with two possible reasons; first, in this task they usually introduced the elements in the story for the first time in story-telling. Therefore, in the discourse, case particles which have focus interpretation and must have been used to introduce the noun as a first time rarely drop. In addition, the atmosphere of the recording for the task would be a formal setting, where they would be more likely to use particles. On the other hand, Korean learners omitted particles much more frequently for this task than the written task. Korean learners omitted particles 16% but native speakers omitted only 3.6% in the picture description task. Learners omitted particles 51% in the short answer task but native speakers omitted 14% of the same task. Both tasks are spoken tasks. On the other hand, learners only omitted particles 6% while native speakers omitted 38% in the translation task which is a written task. With the fact that omission of certain case particles does not affect grammaticality in the sentence, the learners might have wanted to drop particles to lighten the cognitive load for the speaking tasks. Moreover, it could be assumed that absence of the morphemes for case in English would influence the usage in speaking. This can be due to the learners’ desire to use the grammar of their L1 (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 produce them in oral production due to the absence of the particles in their L1. Here, the Morphological Transfer Hypothesis (MTH) seems to be supported, since the absence of case morphemes in L1 English would interfere with the oral production of the L2 counterpart. Thus, the set of features in the L2 are constrained when the features in L1 and in L2 are different (Cowper 2005, Harley & Ritter 2002).

The omission of particles is much more common in short answer task than the picture description task. This might be due to the fact that they were not given any preparation time for the short answer task. In this task, the learners had to consider a variety of elements to construct a proper answer. First, they had to think about the answer in Korean, so it requires the proper lexical items. Also, they had to think about the structure of the sentence. Moreover, they had to promptly produce the answers with the proper pronunciation, while for translation and picture description tasks they could have much more time to think of the content. This may be evidence that the MTH can account for the difficulty of morphologically-realized case particles again, as learners may just drop particles when they have difficulty.

Phonological difficulty has been discussed in Goad and White (2006, 2008). They claim that L1 prosodic representations of morphology which are different from those in the L1 might constrain the oral production of the morphological inflection in the L2. Therefore, the
different L2 morphological elements can be a barrier for spoken production, which MTH and FRH might account for.

The results of this study do not entirely support the RDH, especially when taking the oral tasks into account. While the RDH contends that L2 learners would fail to acquire the uninterpretable features of an L2 if their L1 does not have the same uninterpretable features, the L2 learners should not have difficulty acquiring the same uninterpretable features in the L2 if they reside in their L1. According to the RDH, L1 English speakers should succeed in acquiring Korean case particles because English has the same uninterpretable case features. The RDH cannot entirely account for the more complicated process of Korean case particle acquisition. It seems that case features shared by the L1 and L2 do not always facilitate acquisition of overt case particles.

Finally, in Kim (1997)’s research, the Korean children incorrectly used the nominative particles in contexts that required accusative particles; this was argued to be due to the late acquisition of accusative case particles and frequency of input effects. According to her, the acquisition of nominative case prior to accusative case by children is due to their mothers’ frequent omission of accusative case particles. In this study as well, the learners made more mistakes on accusative particles than nominative particles. In the grammatical judgment task, the learners were only able to identify the wrong accusative particles 53% of the time, while for nominative particles they were more successful (64%). Also, in the translation task and the picture description task, learners made more frequently omitted and made mistakes with the accusative particle.10

This can suggest that at a specific moment, the L2 learners show a similar pattern as the Korean L1 learners.11 Kim argues that this pattern is due to frequency effects. These Korean learners also appear to learn the nominative particles earlier than the accusative particles12 just as Korean children. In addition, the nominative particles are used more than the accusative particles since every sentence has a subject DP but not an object DP, unless the sentence has a transitive verb.13

5. Conclusion

It is evident that the learners’ fairly inaccurate performance and unstable omission rates are related to the morphological issue. The learners have to consider both syntactic features and the overt morphological realization for the case. Absence of the same morphological features must be challenging to the learners. Therefore, the absence of case morphemes in L1 English would interfere with the acquisition or process of the Korean case. If this is true, then the Morphological Transfer Hypothesis (MTH) will be supported. That the L2 learners cannot perform like Korean native speakers can be explained by the constraint of the morphological features. Then, it can be assumed that it is not the uninterpretable features alone that matter but the set of features, including morphological features as well as the process of the uninterpretable and interpretable features checking in the specific language, Korean can be

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10 In the interview task, however, they show slight more errors on nominative particles (16%) than accusative particles (10%) but this can be statistically ignored.
11 Kim’s study was longitudinal but this study is not, so it is hard to compare the proficiency of L2ers and the children.
12 The institute where these participants learned Korean, teaches nominative particles in the second week in the first quarter of the first year and accusative particles in the fifth week in the first quarter.
13 Even for the direct object, the accusative particles drop more often than the nominative particles. The oral interview task which is not included in this paper show that the native speakers drop more accusative particles (19%) than the nominative particles (8%).
limited to acquire, even though the basic uninterpretable features are accessed by influence of the L1.

The overall inconsistent result would not support the Representational Deficit Hypothesis since the learners did not fail to perform the correct particle use, which would be predicted by RDH. Learners also show a stronger proficiency in using the correct particles in the overall written tasks than in the oral tasks. This suggests that the morphological presentation should be separated from the acquisition of the syntactic features because the learners gradually develop the target features throughout learning due to the different morphological realization in the L1 and the L2 (MTH) and very complicated process of reassembling features in the intergrammar (FRH).

References


