

The English Article Use by Non-Native English Teachers in Korea: Task-Type Variability in Interlanguage Performance and its Pedagogical Implications

Hyunah Ahn
(Seoul National University)

Ahn, Hyunah. 2009. *The English Article Use by Non-native English Teachers in Korea: Task-type Variability in Interlanguage Performance and its Pedagogical Implication*. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* 8, 43-58. This study examines the English article use of incumbent primary and secondary English teachers in Korea. As learners of English as a foreign language themselves, the 17 participants showed statistically significant discrepancy between their metalinguistic knowledge and their actual English article use in real-time oral production. A multiple-choice written test on the English articles was given for the metalinguistic knowledge assessment and their videotaped demo lessons in English were used for the real-time oral production data. The implications such discrepancy has on the current English education policy of Teaching English only through English are discussed. (Seoul National University)

Keywords: English article use, task type variability, teacher training, English education policy

1. Introduction

The English article system always poses a problem to L2 learners whether their first language has an equivalent article system or not (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999). The present paper investigates the English article use by Korean EFL learners in Korea. One thing noteworthy in this study is that the participants are incumbent English teachers in Korea. Korean EFL learners' notorious poor performance in productive skills has been pointed out as a flaw of the Korean English education system for a long time. Thus, if there is any discrepancy between different task types (a fill-in-the gap task and a real-time production task) will be investigated and discussed.

Some studies looked at the development of the L2 English article

system from a perspective of language transfer (Sharma 2005, Ionin et al. 2008) while others have maintained the position that L2 learners go through developmental stages of comprehending the semantic classification (Tarone 1988, Master 1997, Butler 2002, Park 2004). The current study follows the tradition of the latter by using the semantic wheel of dichotomous specificity and definiteness, and by comparing the participants' performance in terms of the semantic noun phrase types.

To find out any possible performance variability in terms of task types and the semantic Noun Phrase (NP henceforth) types, the following two research questions are to be dealt with.

1. Can Korean speaking non-native English teachers in Korea use the English articles invariably well regardless of task types?
2. Can Korean speaking non-native English teachers in Korea use the English articles invariably well in different semantic NP environments?
3. If there is any discrepancy found with regard to either task types or NP environments, are the patterns of discrepancy consistent across groups of different proficiency levels?

By investigating the two major issues, this study will have important pedagogical implications and will shed a new light on the current Korean English education policy.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Coding

Dividing noun phrase types according to the binary features of specificity ([±SR]/Specific Reference) and definiteness ([±HK]/Assumed to be known to hearer; Hearer's Knowledge) is now a part of the English article research protocol. Started by Bickerton (1981), and modified by Huebner (1983), adding Type 5 named 'conventional use,' the categorization of the four semantic NP types requiring different articles has been widely used or at least cited by many researchers (Tarone 1988, Master 1997, Young 1995, Butler 2002, Jarvis 2002, Liu and Gleason 2002).

While Bickerton (1981), the proponent of the idea, did not include idiomatic expressions or conventional uses of the English articles into

Table 1. The NP categories based on Huebner's Semantic Wheel.

	Assumed to be known to Hearer (+)	Assumed to be known to Hearer (-)
Specific Reference (-)	Type 1 (a/an, the, \emptyset) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A tiger is a fierce animal. - The tiger is a fierce animal. - \emptyset Tigers are fierce animals. 	Type 4 (a/an, \emptyset) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He is a teacher. - I want to buy a car. - If there were a chance, would you give it a try?
Specific Reference (+)	Type 2 (the) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I bought a Toyota yesterday, and the car is a real beauty. - Pass me the pen please. - I was at the bar yesterday. 	Type 3 (a/an, \emptyset) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I bought a car yesterday. - Go to the last door, a girl will show you to your seat. - There is a girl he's got a huge crush on. - He made \emptyset new friends at school.

analysis, researchers who adopted the idea modified the system and created Type 5 for 'conventional use.' (Butler 2002, Park 2004) However, the current research proposes that conventional uses or idiomatic expressions all be classified into one of the four traditional types established by Bickerton (1981) and Huebner (1983). Following are how the NPs classified into Type 5 in previous studies are re-classified into one of the original four NP types and why the new classification is required.

2.2 The zero vs. null articles

When a noun phrase is used alone without a preceding determiner, \emptyset is used to mark the empty spot among language teachers and linguists. According to the traditional categorizations (Bickerton 1981, Huebner 1983, Master 1987), the sign above can be used for Types 1, 3 and 4. This, the zero article, is used before a plural count noun or before a mass noun, as you see from Table 1, while the null article is used before a noun with such complete familiarity that a definite article is no longer required (Jespersen 1949). While they are both marked with the sign \emptyset , the ones already belonging to the original classification, the zero article

in Type 1, 3, and 4 will be marked \emptyset 1, and the null article will be marked \emptyset 2. Studies that used the new categories like Type 5 or 'Conventional Use' put the null article into the new category; however, incorporating Jespersen's (1949) three stages of familiarity, the null article was classified as Type 2 in this study. The rationale for classifying the null article into Type 2 is that the null article indicating complete familiarity and the definite article with both specific reference and hearer's knowledge share the same characteristic of 'familiarity of the noun phrase to both parties of interlocutors.' For an illustration, following are some examples of the null articles from the demo lessons given by the participants in the study:

- (1) As you see, there are seven new words and the first five ones belong to the clue 1 and clue 5.
- (2) Look at the worksheet number 1.
- (3) I think you are sleeping now. Yeah, because right after the lunch, right?
- (4) Uh, in those pages, there is lyrics, lyrics of the Vincent.

If you see (1), the speaker is using the definite article 'the' when, in fact, no article is required in front of 'clue 1.' This is the case of the null article usage, where, in this particular example, the speaker is supplying an unnecessary article. The same mistakes were repeated throughout the demo lessons across almost all the participants and (2) is another example of the same mistake. In (3), 'lunch' does not require an article either since regular meals such as breakfast, lunch and dinner are so familiar that they need not be determined by an article. Also, a proper noun in (4), 'Vincent' is one NP for which the null article is used since we assume that those referred to by proper nouns are all unique entities. Still, the four examples show that such rules that govern the English article use in different NP environments are not followed by L2 learners.

2.3 Idiomatic expressions and word chunks

Previous studies categorized the English article uses in idiomatic expressions and word chunks into Type 5 (Butler 2002, Park 2004) or left them out of analysis (Bickerton 1981, Huebner 1983). However, the

present study classifies them into one of the four categories since a closer look at the article use in those noun phrases in idiomatic expressions or word chunks all can be explained by Bickerton's (1981) system. For example, in a classroom conversation, a teacher's instruction as follows (5) is commonly heard but the teacher rarely refers to any 'specific' look, not to mention the students do not know or care what 'look' the teacher is talking about. Thus, 'a' in take a look is classified as Type 4 in this case.

(5) Everyone, please take a look at the handout I just gave out.

Therefore, instead of creating a separate category that cannot be explained by the binary features of [\pm SR] and [\pm HK], the noun phrases and their accompanying articles will be all put into the original system of four semantic noun phrase types. This coding system can be justified in that even idiomatic expressions and the noun phrases whose use or nonuse of the articles is considered 'cultural' provide L2 learners with environments to make errors. If all L2 learners perform invariably well in terms of the 'conventional' article use, the category Type 5 should be created and learners' article use regarding that type should not be taken into consideration. However, L2 learners struggle with their null article use, or other article uses in idiomatic expressions or word chunks because they lack the knowledge that NSs use to choose proper articles or no articles in given contexts. Hence, the present study will use a new semantic wheel modified from previous studies mentioned above.

Table 2 clearly illustrates the NP classification of the present study. First, sentences like (7) - 4 and (7) - 5 would have been classified into Type 5 in Butler (2002), and Park (2004). However, even the cultural notion that such names of a country or a geographical place are considered to be known to the hearer or to be uniquely identifiable is also something an L2 learner must learn just as much as he or she should learn the rule that you use the indefinite article a/an before a noun that is singular and countable, not specific, and not known to the hearer. Secondly, (9) - 4 includes an idiomatic expression 'get a crush on,' which is expected to be learned by L2 learners as a chunk without considering the referentiality of the noun 'crush.' This would also have been put into Type 5 in previous studies (Butler 2002, Park 2004). In the present study, as was briefly mentioned in 'Idiomatic expressions and word

Table 2. The NP classification of the present study

	Assumed to be known to Hearer (+)	Assumed to be known to Hearer (-)
Specific Reference (-)	Type 1 (a/an, the, \emptyset 1): Generics (6) - 1. A tiger is a fierce animal. (6) - 2. The tiger is a fierce animal. (6) - 3. \emptyset Tigers are fierce animals.	Type 4 (a/an, \emptyset 1) (9) - 1. He is a teacher. (9) - 2. I want to buy a car. (9) - 3. If there were a chance, would you give it a try? (9) - 4. There's a girl he's got a huge crush on. (9) - 5. I need to be given another chance.
Specific Reference (+)	Type 2 (the, \emptyset 2) (7) - 1. I bought a Toyota yesterday, and the car is a real beauty. (7) - 2. Pass me the pen please. (7) - 3. I was at the bar yesterday. (7) - 4. He went to the U.S. (7) - 5. He climbed the Himalayas. (7) - 6. No, take the other one. (7) - 7. Let's ask \emptyset mom. (7) - 8. Open you book to \emptyset page 5.	Type 3 (a/an, \emptyset 1) (8) - 1. I bought a car yesterday. (8) - 2. Go to the last door, a girl will show you to your seat. (8) - 3. There is a girl he's got a huge crush on. (8) - 4. He made \emptyset new friends at school. (8) - 5. She gave me another chance.

chunks,' conventional uses of such kind will be analyzed in given contexts and put into a proper category among the four. One more thing noteworthy is the inclusion of 'another / the other + NP' in the analysis. While 'the other' will be considered Type 2 invariably, 'another' will be classified either into Type 3 or Type 4 depending on the context. Here, (8) - 5 indicates that there is a specific reference when the speaker mentions 'another chance'; however, 'another chance' used in (9) - 5 does not refer to any specific chance. Since L2 learners' understanding of the English article system is reflected in the differentiation of 'another / the other' dichotomy, this will also be included in the analysis.

2.4 Suppliance in obligatory contexts, and target like use

Between the two methods explained in Gass and Selinker (2008), one of which counts only the correct suppliance in obligatory contexts and the other of which considers the incorrect suppliance in non-obligatory contexts as well, the present paper uses the second method to see the degree to which the participants can use the English articles. With only the obligatory contexts considered, L2 learners' target-like English article use cannot be measured accurately (Gass and Selinker 2008). However, caution should be exercised when counting the 'correct article use' in obligatory contexts. According to the NP classification summarized in Table 2, NP environments for the zero article and the null article can be considered obligatory contexts for such articles, which can lead a researcher to count all the empty spots in front of either of the two 'no-article' required NPs and consider them as 'correct use.' This practice may distort the information about L2 learners' internalized grammar in relation to the English articles since one cannot tell mere avoidance from informed decision of not using an article in a given context. While the NP environments for the zero article and the null article were still considered 'obligatory contexts,' the present paper did not consider no-suppliance of articles in such environments as correct use. Only when an unnecessary article was provided in such environments, were they counted as incorrect uses in obligatory contexts. The no-article suppliance in no-article required NP environments was left out of the analysis. In brief, the number of correct article suppliance in obligatory contexts was divided by the number of all obligatory contexts combined with the number of instances where an article was provided in non-obligatory contexts.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Seventeen primary and secondary non-native English teachers in Korea (1 male and 16 females) participated in this study. The participants were incumbent teachers who were enrolled at an Intensive In-service Teacher Training Program at a major university in Kyonggi, Korea at the time

of study. Their overall proficiency varied within the population from quite advanced to low intermediate levels. The information on their English language proficiency is based on the results of the placement test they took at the beginning of the training program. Appendix shows the background information such as the participants' English proficiency, experience in learning and teaching English, length of residence in an L2 country, and the school level they belong to.

3.2 Tasks

To address the first research question, two different tasks were given to the participants. One was a cloze test in which participants were asked to fill in blanks with one of the four options: a, an, the, \emptyset (the test material was borrowed from Azar (1999)). The other task was a requirement for their training program: the teachers were asked to give demo lessons in English twice throughout the semester and the videotaped demo lessons were used as data to analyze the English article use of the participants.

3.3 Procedure

The participants were first given a survey sheet asking their background information from majors in college to English teaching and learning experience. After filling up the survey sheet, participants were asked to work on a cloze test including 5 sample items and 97 test items. There was a thirty-minute time limit imposed. After the in-class session, the participants were interviewed regarding the answers they gave on the cloze test, which will not be discussed in the current paper. Demo lessons were videotaped throughout the semester. Approximately eight weeks after the training started, the participants were scheduled to give a demo lesson each for 30 to 45 minutes and the second round was scheduled for the end of the semester. The videos, which were made to analyze and give tips on their lessons in English in one of the training courses, were collected under their consent and transcribed. Because of the great variability in their language proficiency and the amount of time they used to give demo lessons, some spoke no more than 1000 words even when their lessons were finished while others took no more than 15

minutes to speak 1000 words. To make the comparison easier, only the first thousand words each participant spoke were transcribed and analyzed. The corpus made out of the transcripts of the demo lessons given by the participants were studied in terms of the number of obligatory contexts, correct and incorrect suppliance of the English articles in obligatory contexts, and incorrect suppliance in non-obligatory contexts. They were counted in total and also by the semantic NP types.

3.4 Analysis

To see the performance difference by task type, a paired t-test was conducted. For the NP type variability, first, a Friedman test was conducted for the percentage of correct uses in each NP type in both the gap-filling task and the real-time oral production task. The Friedman test was used because the population and the data in the present paper did not meet all the criteria for parametric repeated-measure ANOVA. The Friedman test was conducted on the data divided by task types. The NP type variability separated by task type was analyzed using a paired t-test since the Friedman test alone did not provide the information regarding the exact location where difference lies. Finally, to see if there is any consistent pattern found between different proficiency groups, the participants were grouped into two proficiency levels and a repeated-measure ANOVA was conducted although no post-hoc analysis was possible because of the small number of groups.

4. Results

The quantitative analysis of the collected data shows that the null hypotheses to address the research questions can both be rejected. The first null hypothesis was that there was no difference in learners' English article use between two different task types. A repeated measure t-test shows that there is a significant difference in learner performance between the two different task types: a gap-filling task and a real-time oral production ($t = 10.879$, $df = 16$, $p < .000$).

Table 3. Mean percentages of correct article use in two different tasks

	Means	SD
% of Correct Article Choice in gap-filling task	80.05	8.79
% of Correct Article Use in real-time oral production	59.07	10.92

Unlike the results from Tarone and Parrish (1988), the results from the current study shows that the percentage of correct article use in a spontaneous speech is significantly lower than that in the gap-filling task. This proves a layperson's assumption that Koreans are good at exams but not as good at productive skills when it comes to a foreign language. Thus, the answer to Question 1 was yes. There is a significant difference in L2 learners' performance between the two different tasks.

In rejecting the second null hypothesis, caution should be exercised since the hypothesis that there is no difference among different types of NPs turned out to be true with the data from both tasks combined. A Friedman test showed that there is a significant difference in learner performance among the four semantic NP types ($\chi^2 = 32.082$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). Still, more interesting observations were made when the two task types were separated and the learner performance was analyzed by tasks and by proficiency levels. First, the participants' performance was significantly lower only in Type 1 in the cloze test. Figure 1 shows that the learner performance in Type 2, 3, and 4 was not significantly different. A paired t-test shows that the differences exist between Type 1 and Type 2 ($t = -2.487$, $df = 16$, $p = .024$), Type 1 and Type 3 ($t = -2.508$, $df = 16$, $p = .023$), Type 1 and Type 4 ($t = -3.392$, $df = 16$, $p = .004$) but a Friedman test on the three types (2, 3, and 4) shows that there is no significant difference among the three types ($\chi^2 = .824$, $df = 2$, $p = .662$).

Secondly, the participants' performance in the real-time oral production, that is, in the speech data, a statistically significant difference was found among the four semantic NP types from a Friedman test ($\chi^2 = 18.657$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). Following is Figure 2, which shows that the participants performed significantly well in Type 2 NPs.

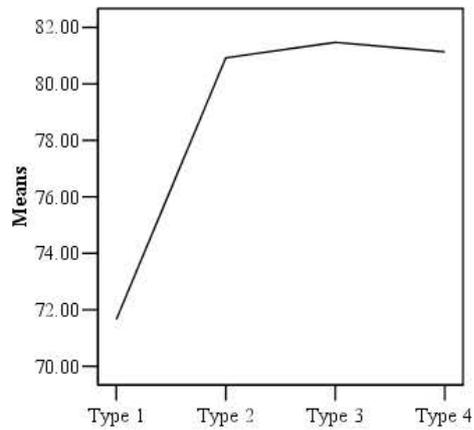


Figure 1. Mean differences among the four semantic NP types in the cloze test

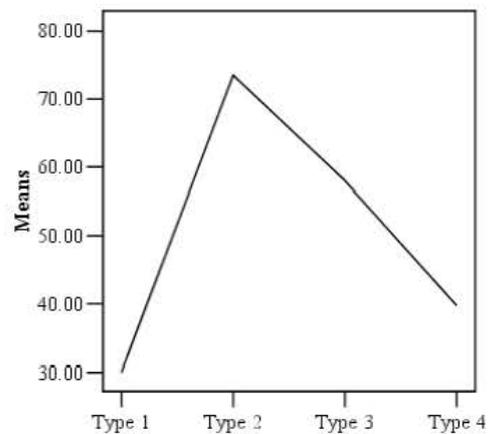


Figure 2. Mean differences among the four semantic NP types in the speech data

Also conducted was a paired t-test to locate the differences: only between Type 2 and 3 was no significant difference found ($t = 1.518$, $df = 16$, $p = .149$) while there were significant differences everywhere

else (T1-T2: $t = -6.259$, $df = 16$, $p = .000$; T1-T3: $t = -3.556$, $df = 16$, $p = .003$; T1-T4: $t = -2.369$, $df = 16$, $p = .031$; T2-T4: $t = 8.044$, $df = 16$, $p = .000$; T3-T4: $t = 2.650$, $df = 16$, $p = .017$).

Dividing the participants into two different proficiency groups (low and high) resulted in more interesting findings that the patterns of NP type variability found in the two groups are not consistent across task types. The high proficiency group ($n = 7$) did not show any significant differences among the four different NP types while the low proficiency group ($n = 10$) did show significant performance differences in Types 1 and 3 ($t = -2.256$, $df = 9$, $p = .050$) and Types 1 and 4 ($t = -2.747$, $df = 9$, $p = .023$).

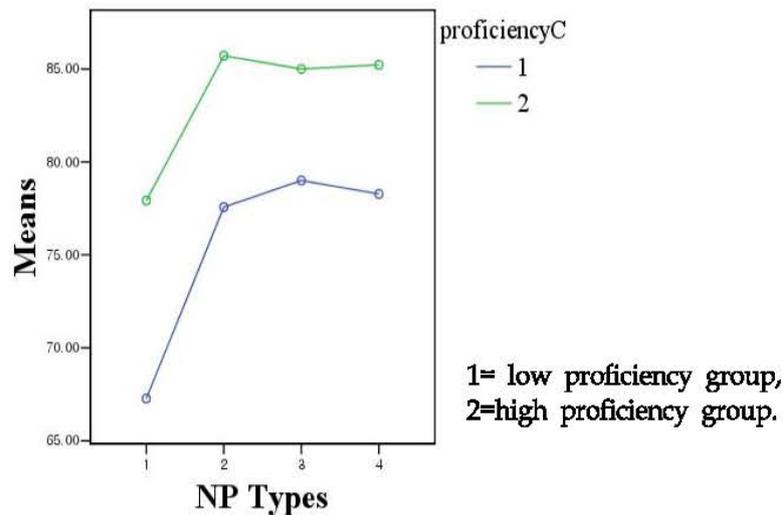


Figure 3. NP type variability in the gap-filling production task by proficiency group

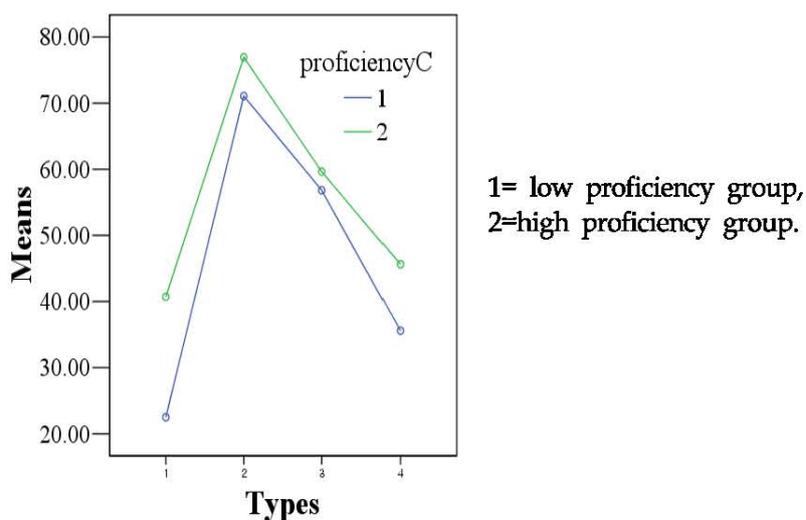


Figure 4. NP type variability in the real-time oral task by proficiency group

In the real-time oral production task, the participants showed the same pattern of performance differences in terms of NP types. Both groups showed significant differences in NP type 1 and 2 (high: $t = -2.553$, $df = 6$, $p = .043$; low: $t = -3.613$, $df = 9$, $p = 0.006$) and in NP type 2 and 4 (high: $t = 4.019$, $df = 6$, $p = .007$; low: $t = 6.964$, $df = 9$, $p = .000$). Unlike in the gap-filling task, significant differences in performance were not found between the two proficiency groups.

5. Discussion

When the task types and the NP types were both taken into consideration, interesting results were observed. There was one NP type that did not vary in terms of learner performance between two different task types: Type 2. Learners performed invariably well when it came to NP Type 2. While the participants performed invariably well in all NP types in the cloze test except Type 1, the number of the NP types in which they showed poorer performance increased in the speaking task. Since the participants were incumbent teachers in a country where grammar lesson

had been emphasized for a long time, they must have showed greater knowledge when it came to answering multiple-choice questions. Still, the lack of experience and opportunities to communicate in English could be a possible cause for their poorer performance in using the English articles in the real-time production.

This study examined the learner performance variability in terms of the English articles by task types and noun phrase types. L2 learners were found to perform differently when they were required to do different tasks and when they encountered different noun phrase types. These results have very important pedagogical implications in that the participants are incumbent teachers and the lower performance in real-time oral production skills that some of the participants showed seem to testify that a lot of teachers who are currently asked to teach English only through English in the near future might not be all ready as the policy makers hope them to be.

References

- Azar, B. S. 1999. *Understanding and using English grammar*. Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall Regents.
- Bickerton, D. 1981. *Roots of language*. Ann Arbor, Karoma Publishers.
- Butler, Y. 2002. Second language learners' theories on the use of English articles. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 24(4): 451-480.
- Celce-Murcia, M. and D. Larsen-Freeman 1999. *The grammar book : an ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Boston, MA, Heinle & Heinle.
- Gass, S. M. and L. Selinker 2008. *Second language acquisition : an introductory course*. New York, Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group.
- Huebner, T. 1983. *A longitudinal analysis of the acquisition of English*. Ann Arbor, Karoma.
- Ionin, T., M. L. Zubizarreta, et al. 2008. Sources of linguistic knowledge in the second language acquisition of English articles. *Lingua* 118(4): 554-576.
- Jarvis, S. 2002. Topic continuity in L2 English Article Use. *Studies in Second Language Studies*. 24(3) 387-418.
- Master, P. 1987. A cross-linguistic interlanguage analysis of the acquisition of the English article system. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Los Angeles.
- Master, P. 1997. The English article system: Acquisition, function and pedagogy. *System* 25(2): 215-232.
- Park, T. 2004. English article use by advanced Korean EFL learners. Doctoral

- Dissertation. Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea.
- Sharma, D. 2005. Language transfer and discourse universals in Indian English article use. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 27(4): 535-566.
- Tarone, E. 1988. *Variation in interlanguage*. London: Baltimore, Edward Arnold.
- Tarone, E. and B. Parrish 1988. Task-Related Variation in Interlanguage - the Case of Articles. *Language Learning* 38(1): 21-44.

Hyunah Ahn
hyunah1@hotmail.com

Appendix

#	Prof.	Yrs of LE	LOR in L2 country (mo.)	Yrs of TE	Age	Degree	MAJOR
P01	89	10	0	5	27	BA	Eng. Ed.
P02	89	10	0	10	33	BA	Eng. Ed.
P03	86	10	10	6	34	BA	Business/Eng. Ed.
P04	85	10	60	18	45	PHD	Eng. Ed./social work
P05	84	13	1	11	43	MA	ELL/Eng. Ed.
P06	84	10	0	12	43	BA	Eng. Ed.
P07	81	10	0	12	34	MA	Eng. Ed./Special ED
P08	75	10	1	21	41	MA	Eng. Ed./Psychology
P09	69	10	30	2	47	BA	Fashion Dedsign
P10	68	12	2	4	27	BA	Elementary Ed
P11	67	7	0	3	36	BA	Elementary Ed
P12	67	7	1	2	37	BA	Elementary Ed
P13	66	7	1	6	38	BA	Elementary Ed
P14	66	7	1	8	37	MA	Counseling
P15	64	10	1	28	48	MA	French Ed./Eng. Ed.
P16	64	8	0	3	32	BA	Elementary Ed
P17	63	9	2	6	34	MA	Elementary Ed