Grammatical Agreement Errors in Korean University Students’ English Compositions: A Corpus-Based Study*

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I. Introduction

It has been widely accepted that grammatical agreement has a significant role in parsing and language comprehension, particularly in richly inflected language since it carries important and necessary information when grammatical dependencies between the different elements of a sentence are computed. Furthermore, it also contributes to discourse cohesion, establishing long-distance references across sentences.

In spite of the importance of grammatical agreement in English, many Korean EFL students produce various incorrect inflection patterns of nouns, verbs, and anaphoric pronouns since the Korean language does not utilize grammatical agreement actively as much as English does. In the light of this argument, the present study attempts to assess Korean EFL learners’ ability to produce correct forms of number and gender agreement to get some idea about their transfer competence in English compositions, to identify the difficulties that

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they face in all the stages of EFL compositions, and to describe their patterns of grammatical agreement errors.

Unlike previous research that focuses on either a specific type of grammatical agreement errors (i.e., subject–verb agreement, noun plurality agreement) or general error types (misuse of articles, prepositions, verbs, and so on), this study comprehensively examines errors only caused by grammatical agreement (Gressang 2010; Kim, H. 1987; Lee 2001). Given this, this paper classifies grammatical agreement errors into three categories: (1) subject–verb, (2) noun plurality, and (3) antecedent–pronoun.

The present study investigates whether or not Korean students learning English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) compute grammatical (i.e., number and gender) agreement correctly and further identify what error of grammatical agreement occurs most recurrently, varying on their English level. Through the identification and description of errors by 137 compositions written by university students majoring in Humanity and Arts, this study tries to show that (1) depending on the students’ English ability, a different error type in grammatical agreement emerges as the most frequent one and (2) grammatical disagreement can be caused by the negative transfer from learners’ first language, Korean.

II. Review of the Literature

2.1 Interlingual vs. Intralingual Errors

It has been a well-known argument that learners’ L1 has a great influence on their L2 learning processes. Therefore, the elements in L2 similar to the ones in L1 are easily acquired, while the elements in L2 alienated from the ones in L1 are difficult to be mastered (Lado 1957): the errors caused by the native language are defined as interlingual errors. On the other hand, intralingual and development errors are the