Past Tense Acquisition by Less Successful Learners in the Korean EFL Classroom Setting

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The present study investigates the mode of past tense acquisition by Korean EFL learners who remain at a basic level after a long period of exposure to classroom English. Findings in second/foreign language (L2) acquisition have shown that L2 learners develop past tense system along a general route, similar to that of L1 children. In order to see if EFL learners showing a very slow rate of acquisition are also under basically the same universal constraints, written narratives by low-level university students were tested against two major models of past tense acquisition—the Aspect Hypothesis and the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis. The results showed that these learners' past morphology development was not affected by the influence of lexical aspect predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis. Meanwhile, the learners' use of past morphology was only partially affected by phonological salience, lending a partial support to the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis. The findings suggest that there are a large group of learners whose L2 acquisition is guided by principles other than the universal constraints attested in the majority of the second language literature. Possible pedagogical implications were suggested.

I. INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition is one of the fields that have achieved a remarkable growth during the last few decades. It has contributed to the change of attitude toward language learning and the role of the learner, leading to the current pedagogical approaches that emphasize interaction, learner initiative, and overall fluency rather than accuracy. However, the reality is that English teachers still find so many students who rarely progress after a long period of exposure to classroom instruction, with neither fluency nor accuracy. While these less-successful learners or "underachievers" account for no small portion of the total learner population, especially in the EFL setting, most of the studies have focused on learners who pass through a regular developmental route at a reasonable rate (Dulay &

Burt, 1974; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996).

Middle and high school English education in Korea has not been successful in taking care of these underachiever groups for many reasons. First of all, these learners are not easy to teach. Many of them are not properly motivated to learn English. More over, teachers' efforts hardly pay off. Schools are better off if they focus on more promising students. Meanwhile, as the less successful English learners grow up and enter into their adulthood, many of them are brought to reality: they become anxious to improve their English as they realize the importance of English as a necessity in the job market as well as its status as an international language. With renewed motivation, they look for ways to rebuild their English proficiency, many of them signing up for private English courses.

While college English courses and other language programs are offered to their low-level learners, who have now grown to adults, the courses and programs are not actually designed for this special learner population. Most of the homegrown and imported materials for adult beginners are for those who start learning a foreign language in their adulthood. The truth is, these learners who suffer extremely slow progress in learning a foreign language are not true beginners who have just started to learn a foreign language as adults: the majority of the latter group, although beginners at the moment, is more likely to progress forward, and eventually, to surpass the former group.

Putting it briefly, classroom underachievers form a unique group of learners, who are neither accurate nor fluent, and further, seem to show little sign of normal progress. In foreign language classrooms, these learners represent a fare portion of the total learner population, and thus deserve more attention. When we are to design a syllabus tailored to the needs of this special learner group, it is a prerequisite to understand the nature of their underlying learning mechanism. Yet we are not even beginning to understand them. Some of the basic questions are: whether the nature of their acquisition is essentially the same as that of more successful learners; whether the difference is just a matter of speed; and what qualitative differences, if any, separate them from the other (more successful) learners.

As a first step in seeking answers for these questions, the study will examine whether the adult low-level learners follow basically the same route of development as other learners acquiring English at a normal pace. Specifically, it will address the development of tense system by less successful Korean EFL learners, focusing on the acquisition of past tense marker.[1]

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[1] Past tense marker is a grammatical feature that is exposed to learners at quite an early stage of learning but takes time to master. Thus it was expected that low-level learners would still be in the ongoing process of past tense acquisition.

II.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Findings in second/foreign (L2) language acquisition have repeatedly shown that L2 learners' morpho-syntactic development passes through a general route, similar to that of L1 children (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). In the initial stage, learners use verbs in their base forms in most of the cases, as can be seen in the child data taken from Radford (1996) and Bloom (1970).

(1) want that (Radford, 1996)
(2) make arms (Radford, 1996)
(3) play it (Bloom, 1970)
(4) see window (Bloom, 1970)
(5) no go in (Bloom, 1970)

Only after the canonical word order (SVO) is stabilized, inflected verb forms become productive. According to the minimalist approach to SLA, the initial lack of inflection is due to the absence (or underspecification) of the functional category IP (Inflection Phrase), which is responsible for the tense and agreement system. Researchers of first language acquisition claim that the development of the IP categorical content is closely related to the drastic increase in verbal inflection and obligatory use of the subject in child English (Hyams, 1986). In terms of English, the developmental change can be summarized as follows.

<u>VP Stage</u>   →   <u>IP Stage</u>
   VO sequence   —
   No inflection   Inflection
   Null-subject allowed   Null-subject not allowed

A similar tendency has been reported in second language research. After the basic word order was stabilized, past tense inflection became productive in the learner language (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996).

Meanwhile, a careful look at the learner data as well as native child data shows that the transition from zero inflection to full inflection is actually gradual. As learners pass through the initial stage, where learners show no systematic use of verbal morphology (Schumann, 1987), their supply of verbal morphology gradually increases until they systematically mark tense and aspect. An important question then is how we can explain the gradual process of acquiring the tense/aspect system.

Acquisition of tense and aspect has been studied from a number of perspectives. Various

models have been proposed to explain the emergence of tense system in learner language, among which are the Aspect Hypothesis, the Discourse Hypothesis, and the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis.

1. The Aspect Hypothesis

One of the most frequently cited in the literature on the acquisition of tense-aspect morphology is the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen, 1991; Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995), which states that second language learners initially use past morpheme as a means of expressing the lexical aspect inherent of the meaning of each verb.

In contrast to the grammatical tense such as present and past, and in contrast to the grammatical aspect such as progressive and perfect, lexical aspect (which is often referred to as "Aristotelian aspect") is a purely lexical, non-grammatical concept based on the theory of temporal semantics (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, p. 472). Temporal semantics classifies predicates according to the temporal meaning inherent of a verb/predicate. The most well known is Vendler's (1967) classification of predicates into four classes: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. States include predicates that do not involve dynamicity in its meaning but persist over time without change. Non-dynamic verbs such as *seem, know,* and *want*, which have inherent duration and persist over time, are included in the class of state predicates. On the other hand, dynamic verbs/predicates are further divided into activities, achievements, and accomplishments. Activities refer to dynamic predicates that have inherent duration and involve neither a change nor a natural endpoint. Examples include *walk, swim,* and *rain.* Achievements are those that can be thought of as reduced into a point (Andersen, 1991), such as *begin*, *arrive*, and *end*. Accomplishments share features with activities on the one hand in that they have inherent duration, and with achievements on the other hand in that they have an endpoint. Examples include *build a house* and *sing a song* (For more examples, see Andersen (1991) and Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds (1995)). The four-way distinction can be best captured if we use Vendler's lexical aspectual semantic features of punctuality, telicity, and dynamicity.

TABLE 1
Lexical Aspectual Classes Based on Semantic Feature Distinction

Features	States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
Punctual	-	-	-	+
Telic	-	-	+	+
Dynamic	-	+	+	+

As Table 1 shows, the feature [Punctual], which refers to instantaneousness or lack of duration, isolates achievements from the rest of predicates. States are distinct from the other categories in that only states are [-Dynamic]. Accomplishments and achievements are both [+Telic] (i.e., they have an inherent endpoint) and thus can be differentiated from the other two categories.

In the studies on first language acquisition of tense and aspect, Antinucci and Miller (1976) found that children initially associated past morphology with achievements and accomplishments, progressive with activities, and base forms with states. Based on the findings, they proposed that children's initial use of what appears to be a past tense marker is in fact the expression of the lexical aspect inherent of verbs and predicates. Similar findings were reported in other studies on children's acquisition of tense/aspect morphology (Bloom, Lifter, & Hafitz, 1980; Bronckart & Sinclair, 1973).

The Aspect Hypothesis posits four stages of past tense acquisition; the past form first emerges with achievement verbs, spreads to accomplishment verbs, and is later extended to activity verbs, and finally to state verbs. To further generalize the findings, children initially associate the telicity (i.e., completeness) of the verb with the past morphology. In other words, achievement verbs and accomplishment verbs, which have inherent endpoint (and thus are [+Telic]), are the first verbs that emerge with the past marker. As children later reanalyze the morpheme as a grammatical tense marker and the early association with lexical aspect is overcome, the verbal marking approximates the target system: gradually, past marking on activity verbs and state verbs become productive.

The hypothesis is a semantically-driven acquisition model of past morphology. Slobin (1985) proposed that lexical aspectual semantic features are universal semantic notions that children bring to the language acquisition task. According to Slobin, these features are part of a prestructured semantic space that contains a universal set of semantic notions. The salient semantic notions that children will primarily associate with a past morpheme are change of state and telicity, and have precedence over others for mapping onto a past morpheme. It is thus inferred that telic verbs that involve change of state and telicity will emerge earlier than atelic verbs.

The Aspect Hypothesis in second language acquisition is an offshoot from first language studies on the acquisition of temporal morphology (Andersen, 1991; Andersen & Shirai, 1994; Bardovi-Harlig, 1994; Robison, 1990). Based on a study of preterit inflection by children learning Spanish as a second language, Andersen (1991) argued that in the beginning stages of language acquisition, only inherent aspectual distinctions, not tense or grammatical aspect, are encoded by verbal morphology (p. 307). Four stages were posited for the acquisition of Spanish perfective past: from achievements, to accomplishments, to activities, and finally to states.

The hypothesis has been also supported in the studies of adult L2 learners. In a study of

an adult learner of English, Robison (1990) concluded that the second language verbal morphemes are first used to mark aspect, independent of their grammatical tense. He found that the learner used the past marker to mark punctual verbs and used *–ing* to mark durative verbs. Collins (2002) also reported that adult Francophone ESL learners were significantly more successful in using simple past with telics, and struggled most with states. The general sequence was confirmed by research on both naturalistic and instructed contexts, through various learner data from oral interviews, oral and written story retell tasks as well as cloze passage tasks of more experimental nature (Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995).

In the Korean ESL/EFL context, Shin-Hye Kim (1998) examined the past marking by Korean adult learners of English who were studying in the U.S. after years of EFL experience in Korea. The study showed that there was a strong affiliation of past morphology with telic verbs, although quite a high rate of past marking was observed with state verbs as well. The tendency was consistent in both written and spoken data although the learners used past morphology more accurately in written forms.

2. The Discourse Hypothesis

The proponents of the Discourse Hypothesis claim that L2 learners as well as children learning their first language use verbal morphology as a means of marking discourse organization: past tense marking for foreground events, and unmarked base form for background events (Flashner, 1989; Kumpf, 1984). While the Discourse Hypothesis is one of the major models of past tense acquisition, it is not always easy for analysts to distinguish the foreground events from the background events of a text because the distinction lies in the communicative intent of the writer. The analysis of what is in the writer's mind is thus likely to lead to subjective judgment, endangering the reliability of data interpretation. For this reason, the Discourse Hypothesis will be excluded from the main concerns of this study.

3. The Perceptual Salience Hypothesis

Another competing hypothesis, the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis (Bayley, 1996; Lardiere, 2003), states that the phonological salience of past verb forms contributes to the sequence in which the past forms are acquired. The basic premise of the hypothesis is simple: what is more salient is acquired earlier than what is less salient. In terms of past morphology, irregular past forms are the most salient in that it involves the change in the vowel of the verb stem that receives the primary stress (e.g., *begin-began, swim-swam*). Regular syllabic past forms with the /Id/ ending are less salient than irregular past forms in

that they only involve an addition of an unstressed vowel /I/ followed by /d/ (e.g., *wanted,*
ended). Regular non-syllabic past forms with /d/ or /t/ are the least salient because they
involve neither the vowel change in the stem nor the vowel insertion in the suffix (e.g.,
finished, envied). Therefore it can be predicted that irregular past forms will emerge earlier
than regular syllabic forms, and that regular syllabic past forms will emerge earlier than
non-syllabic past forms (i.e., irregular > syllabic regular> non-syllabic regular).

In a study of adult learners with different L1 backgrounds, Solt et al. (2003) reported
that the syllabic /Id/ was perceived to a significantly higher degree than its non-syllabic
allomorphs. Klein et al. (2003) argued that the syllabic/non-syllabic distinction overrides
any lexical aspect effects. In the Korean EFL context, Hyun-Seok Kang (2004) found that
acquisition of past morphology has more to do with phonological salience than with the
aspectual class of predicates.[2] While most versions of the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis
focus on the difference between the syllabic and non-syllabic allomorphs, the present study
will include irregular verbs in our scale of salience.

So far, we have overviewed some of the major studies that have attempted to identify the
principles that lead to the acquisition of past tense system. While the Aspect Hypothesis
and the Phonological Salience Hypothesis may seem to be two competing hypotheses, they
are not necessarily conflicting with each other. The Aspect Hypothesis is an attempt to
account for the acquisition of temporal morphology from a semantic point of view, while
the Phonological Salience Hypothesis is one from a phonological point of view. It is
therefore quite plausible that both of the factors are at work or even conspire to shape the
distribution of tense morphology in developing learner language. The present study thus
assumed the Aspect Hypothesis as a major semantic principle and the Phonological
Salience Hypothesis as a major phonological principle that guide the acquisition of first
and second language past morphology.

4. The Role of L1

The role of first language has not been much discussed so far. Shin-Hye Kim (2001)
investigated the relevance of first language by comparing English tense use by Korean
learners and Chinese learners. From the finding that the Korean learners' supply of past
morphology was significantly higher in comparison to the Chinese learners, Kim suggested
that the Korean learners' active use of past forms is attributable to the presence of the tense

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[2] Kang also identified surrounding phonological environment as an important factor that determines
the use/non-use of past morpheme. Surrounding phonological environment, however, is a variable for
use, not for acquisition: even if a learner has internalized and thus has knowledge of the past form of
a certain verb, the past morpheme can still be deleted in the course of production simply because of
the problems with implementation.

system in the Korean language. In Collins (2002), adult Francophone ESL learners' use of tense/aspect markers was studied to determine the degree to which the L1 temporality affects L2 acquisition of tense. While the prediction of the Aspect Hypothesis was generally supported, French as their L1 was found to play a role in their use of perfect, where French-influenced perfect forms were associated with telics.

While the above research investigated L1 influence in terms of abstract tense system at a macro-level, few are known about the subtle cross-linguistic differences in temporal aspect at the lexical level. Many researchers claimed that lexical aspects are universal. On the other hand, it is quite possible that the lexical aspect of a predicate in one language is not necessarily identical to that of a matching predicate in another language, in which case, first language interference can be invited. For example, *build a house* in the Thai language, whose literal translation is *house build*, is rather a state than an accomplishment.[3] In the previous studies conducted on Korean learners of English, such interlingual transfer at a micro-level was not examined. While the transfer of the aspects of L1 lexical items is not the major concern of the present study, a few such cases will be reported in our discussion in order to identify its possible role in determining the developmental pattern of past morphology in the emergent grammar of less successful learners.

III.   RESEARCH DESIGN

Most of the studies in the Korean EFL/ESL contexts have been on adult learners at intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency level (Hyun-Seok Kang, 2004; Yusun Kang, 2005; Shin-Hye Kim, 1998, 2001). The present study is distinguished from the previous ones, in that it focuses on the past tense acquisition by low-proficiency EFL learners who remain at a basic level after an extended period of classroom instruction. In order to see whether there exists any developmental pattern in the tense system of these EFL learners and whether these learners are also under the universal constraints proposed by any of the above hypotheses, samples of diary entries were collected from low-level adult Korean learners of English.

1. Participants

The participants were composed of non-English-major university students taking a college English course offered by a university in Chung-Cheong area. All of them were in their second year of college. They had been exposed to at least seven years of classroom

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[3] Private communication with Dr. Sudaporn Luksaneeyanawin of Chulalonkorn University, Thailand.

English instruction in Korea, including one semester of English conversation course with native English-speaking instructors at college. Their overall proficiency was low, ranging roughly from Novice-Mid to Novice-High on the scale provided by the ACTFL guidelines for speaking.

While many studies use a standardized test as a criterion for proficiency description (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995), the scores of a standardized test give us such diverse information, from the test-takers' knowledge of vocabulary to their ability to read between the lines, that they rarely give us any useful information about the learners' current developmental stages. As past morphology is developmental in nature (Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Hyams, 1986; Radford, 1990), the learners' level—especially that of low-level learners—should be measured against other developmental features that are known to develop around the emergence of the past morphology. The present study adopted two developmental criteria mentioned earlier in Section II:

[+/- SVO]: whether the learner has acquired the canonical word order of English
[+/- Subject]: whether the learner has acquired the obligatory nature of the subject

Based on the analysis of their written narratives in terms of the above two syntactic criteria, the participants were further divided into three level groups as shown in Table 2. The students who had acquired neither the SVO sequence nor the obligatory subject were labeled Group 1. Those who had acquired either the SVO sequence or the obligatory use of the subject were labeled Group 2. Those who had acquired both the SVO sequence and the obligatory use of the subject were labeled Group 3. Following Dulay & Burt (1974), eighty percent accuracy was taken as the operational definition of acquisition.

TABLE 2
Group Division Based on Developmental Stages

Subgroups (N)	Syntactic features
Group 1 (11)	[-SVO, -Subject]
Group 2 (21)	[-SVO, +Subject] or [+SVO, -Subject]
Group 3 (23)	[+SVO, +Subject]

Sample texts from Group 1 and Group 2 are provided in the Appendix.

2. Data Collection

Samples of written narratives were collected from the above-mentioned university students. As Bardovi-Harlig (1994) points out, the collection of written narratives from classroom foreign-language learners has some advantages, especially in a study of

low-level learners, in that (a) learners who are unable to produce a stretch of discourse in speaking may be able to sustain a longer narrative in writing, and (b) written narratives may prove informative in the cases where pronunciation difficulty can cause lack of regular past tense use, as in the case of English (Wolfram, 1985, 1989). Added to that, research findings show that both oral and written learner data reveal basically the same tendency although the overall accuracy increases in written data (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998; Shin-Hye Kim, 2001).

The learners were asked to write diary entries in English. The major source for tense/aspect analyses so far has been story retell, where learners had been asked to recall a story after watching a silent film or reading a wordless picture storybook. However, in narratives like this, it is legitimate for native English speakers to adopt either a present tense framework or a past tense framework (Berman & Slobin, 1994). As Yusun Kang (2005) reports, narrative data elicited this way can result in predominant use of present tense and few tokens of past use, especially in the case of low-proficiency learners. On the other hand, diary as a personal narrative was considered a useful source for the analysis of L2 learners' past tense use because it is a record of what happened to the writer during the day. It was also expected that abundant samples of state verbs would be found in the past contexts, as the writer's personal emotional state is frequently mentioned in this genre.

While the topic of their writing was not strictly controlled, the learners were encouraged to write about what they did in the English class, how they felt, and what extra efforts they made outside the class. In the case when they had some special events during the week, they were allowed to write about them, too. The learners were asked to submit one diary entry per week for five consecutive weeks. They were not asked to attend to grammatical accuracy.

3. Data Analysis

Out of over four hundred diary entries collected from the learners, 257 entries written by 55 learners were selected for data analysis (4.7 entries per person). The rest of the collected entries were eliminated mainly for the following three reasons. First, some learners submitted only a few diary entries, which made it difficult to place them in one of the above-mentioned three level groups. Second, some written entries were so unstructured that it was virtually impossible to generate a meaningful interpretation, let alone a meaningful analysis in terms of lexical aspect or perceptual salience (e.g., *Went first from worry when begin first time, became familiar now. Is good seeming to know gradually about English...*). Also, some learners consistently dealt with their learning strategies, self-analysis, and future plans as topics. As a result, the tokens of past tense use were too scarce to be considered as proper data for the analysis (e.g., *Study English is hard for me.*

See the movie, read a English book… but I can study English because I go to America and meeting for my friend…). Finally, the college English classes accidentally included some quite advanced learners. Samples from these learners were also eliminated.

A total of 1005 tokens of predicates were identified as having been used in obligatory past contexts. The predicates were coded for verbal morphology (i.e., past or non-past) and lexical aspects (i.e., state, activity, accomplishment, and achievement). In order to determine the aspectual class in ambiguous cases, the test devised by Dowty (1979) was used, along with other tests as supplementary measures (Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström, 1996; Foley & Van Valin, 1984). The predicates were also coded for their phonological characteristics (i.e., irregular past with phonological change in the stem, regular past with the syllabic suffix /Id/, and regular past with the non-syllabic suffix /d, t/).

Distributional analyses were performed for lexical classes, for different degrees of phonological salience, and for learner levels. The distributional patterns were compared across lexical aspects and different degrees of phonological salience respectively, by performing ANOVA procedures in SPSS Version 11.0.

IV. RESULTS

1. The Effect of Lexical Aspect on Past Marking

The results showed that the learners' use of past morphology increased gradually as they advanced in levels, as Figure 1 shows. The mean difference among the three groups was found significant (F=40.131, p< .01).

FIGURE 1

Past marking by Level Group
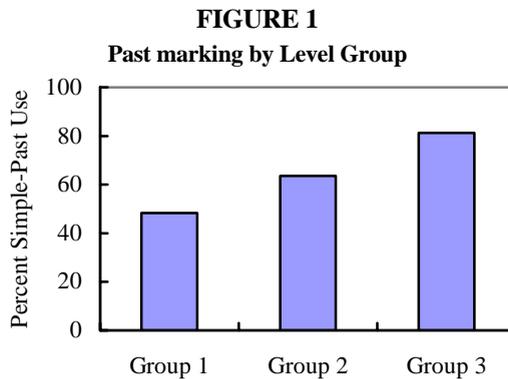
On the other hand, the lexical aspect of the verbs was not found to exert any meaningful influence on the emergent temporal morphology. The descriptive data in Table 3 tells us

that the learners as a whole supplied past markers most frequently for states, and least frequently for activities.[4]
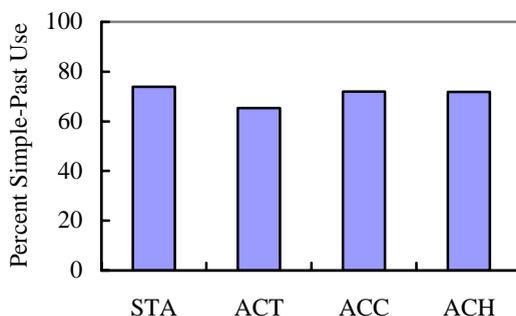
   State > Accomplishment > Achievement > Activity

The above sequence derived from the learner performance of the present study does not coincide with the sequence predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis (i.e., Achievement > Accomplishment > Activity > State). Further, the effect of lexical aspectual classes was not found to be statistically significant ($F_{(3, 972)}$ =2.027, p=.108).

TABLE 3
Past Marking Across Aspectual Classes (Whole Group)

Lexical aspect	Past marking (%)	SD	N
State	73.84	44.010	361
Activity	65.32	47.676	297
Accomplishment	71.98	45.035	182
Achievement	71.54	45.585	130
Total	70.59	45.585	976

FIGURE 2
Comparison of Past marking Across Aspectual Classes (Whole Group)

Note: STA=state, ACT=activity, ACC=accomplishment, ACH=achievement

   In fact the Aspect Hypothesis was not supported in any of the three level groups. Table 4 presents the rates of proper past use for each lexical aspectual class by the three level groups.

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[4] One reviewer pointed out the lack of inter-rater reliability check in the present study, which might admittedly reduce the strength of subsequent data interpretation.

TABLE 4
**Past Marking Across Lexical Aspects by Group**

Level group	Lexical aspect	Past marking (%)	SD	N
Group 1	State	47.73	50.526	44
	Activity	48.28	50.407	58
	Accomplishment	46.43	50.787	28
	Achievement	52.63	51.299	19
Group 2	State	64.81	47.977	108
	Activity	62.04	48.756	108
	Accomplishment	67.24	47.343	58
	Achievement	58.33	50.000	36
Group 3	State	83.72	37.004	215
	Activity	75.57	43.131	131
	Accomplishment	82.29	38.374	96
	Achievement	82.67	38.108	75

Group 1's performance displayed the highest rate of past marking on achievement verbs, while the rate of past marking on accomplishments was the lowest. However, the mean difference was not significant among the lexical aspectual classes ($F_{(3, 145)} = .061$, $p = .980$).

While Group 2 shows a slightly different pattern of past marking, the Aspect Hypothesis was not supported by the performance of this group. The past tense was most frequently marked for accomplishments, followed by states, activities, and achievements. The difference in performance was not statistically significant among the lexical categories ($F_{(3, 306)} = .316$, $p = .817$).

Group 3 was composed of learners who acquired both the canonical word order and the obligatory use of the subject. Accordingly, the group showed a much higher rate of past marking compared with the other two groups. Still, the expected tendency was not obtained in Group 3. States were most frequently marked for the past context, whereas activities were the least frequently marked. Again, the effect of lexical aspectual categories was not found significant ($F_{(3, 513)} = 1.266$, $p = .285$).

FIGURE 3
Group Comparison of Past Marking Across Lexical Aspects
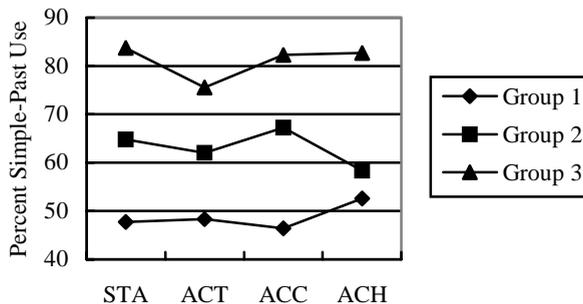
As seen in Figure 3, a slope tilted leftward, i.e., a slope that is predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis, was found in none of the three levels. There was no consistent pattern among the three groups.

The Aspect Hypothesis was not supported in terms of telic/atelic distinction, either. The affiliation of past morphology with telic verbs (i.e., achievements and accomplishments), which has been strongly held by most of the previous studies, was not observed. The difference in the past use between telic and atelic predicates was not significant ($F_{(1, 974)}$ =.318, p=.573).

The descriptive data in Table 5 shows that the rates of past inflection on telic and atelic verbs are almost identical at all levels. The effect of telicity was not found significant in any of the three level groups.

TABLE 5
Past Marking on Telic and Atelic verbs

Level group	Telicity	Past marking (%)	SD	N
Group 1	Telic	48.94	50.529	47
	Atelic	48.04	50.208	102
Group 2	Telic	63.83	48.307	94
	Atelic	63.43	48.276	216
Group 3	Telic	82.46	38.146	171
	Atelic	80.64	39.572	346
Total	Telic	71.79	45.072	312
	Atelic	70.03	45.847	664

To sum up, none of the level groups displayed a pattern predicted by the Aspect Hypothesis. No pattern attributable to lexical aspect was observed, and no consistent tendency was found among the three level groups. The findings show that the semantic principle of aspect-driven past morphology acquisition does not successfully explain the learning process of the underachievers of the present study.

## 2. The Effect of Perceptual Salience on Past Marking

The findings regarding phonological salience are less straightforward. While the overall performance by the whole group appeared to be affected by phonological salience, the pattern did not neatly fit into the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis. The learners used more past forms for irregular verbs (e.g., *ate, became, began, bought, came, did, found, gave, had, heard, met, said,* etc.) than for regular verbs, but the less salient non-syllabic past marker (/d, t/) was more actively provided than the more salient syllabic marker (/Id/). The distributional difference in terms of degrees of phonological salience was significant ($F_{(2,}$

$_{972)}$=5.021, p<.01).

TABLE 6
Past Marking by Degree of Perceptual Salience (Whole Group)

Salience	Past marking (%)	SD	N
d,t	66.42	47.316	268
Id	58.21	49.694	67
irregular	73.59	44.118	640
Total	70.56	45.599	975

FIGURE 4
Comparison of Past Marking by Degree of Perceptual Salience
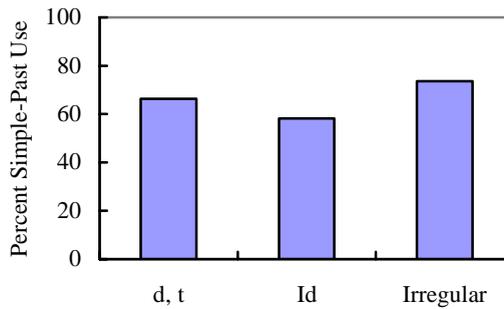
On the other hand, when past tense use by level group was considered, the tendency of the whole group was maintained only in Group 3. As shown in Table 7, Group 1 used past forms most frequently for regular verbs with syllabic /Id/, followed by irregular verbs, and least frequently for regular verbs with non-syllabic /d, t/. The difference among the three categories, however, was not found statistically significant ($F_{(2, \ 146)}$=.95, p=.909), suggesting the derived sequence of accuracy (i.e., /Id/ > irregular > /d, t/) was rather accidental.

The learners in Group 2 used past forms most productively for regular verbs with non-syllabic /d, t/, contrary to the prediction of the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis. Again, the mean difference was not statistically significant ($F_{(2, 307)}$=.448, p=.639).

While the distribution of past morphology in Group 1 and Group 2 does not generate a clear pattern in any meaningful way, the analysis of the data from the learners of Group 3 indicated that there exists a pattern in their use of past forms in terms of phonological salience. The learners in Group 3 used past forms most productively for irregular verbs and least productively for verbs with a syllabic past suffix. The difference in phonological salience was found to have had a significant effect on their performance ($F_{(2, 513)}$=7.511, p<.01), deriving the following sequence:

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Irregular past > Regular past with /d, t/ > Regular past with /Id/

TABLE 7
Past Marking by Degree of Perceptual Salience

Group	Perceptual Salience	Past marking (%)	SD	N
Group 1	d,t	46.81	50.437	47
	Id	53.33	51.640	15
	Irregular	48.28	50.260	87
Group 2	d,t	66.00	47.610	100
	Id	55.00	51.042	20
	Irregular	63.16	48.365	190
Group 3	d,t	74.38	43.845	121
	Id	62.50	49.187	32
	Irregular	85.12	35.634	363

In short, it is only Group 3 that represents the total population of the learners examined in the present study, whereas the performance of learners in Groups 1 and 2 was not influenced by phonological salience. Figure 5 shows that the three groups' past marking patterns differ from one another.

FIGURE 5
Past Marking by Degree of Perceptual Salience
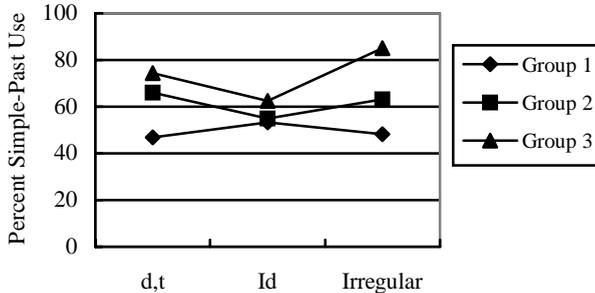
On the mean hand, even when we consider Group 3 only, their data lend only a partial support to the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis in that the rate of past marking was lower in syllabic regular verbs in comparison to non-syllabic regular verbs. A post-hoc test procedure showed that the mean difference was significant between irregular past and syllabic regular past, and between irregular past and non-syllabic regular past at the .05 level, but not statistically significant between syllabic and non-syllabic regular past verbs. This suggests that only the difference caused by the change in the verb stem may be salient enough for the learners to notice. On the other hand, the same learners may not be as sensitive when a mere suffix is added, be it syllabic or non-syllabic.

According to Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1995), adult learners and child learners pay

attention to different parts of language input: while adults pay attention to full words such as auxiliary, child learners pay attention to inflectional paradigm. Further, it has been claimed that children's sensitivity to subtle phonological differences in inflectional affixes is one of the keys to successful morpho-syntactic development and that this phonological plasticity diminishes rapidly after the age of seven (Platzack, 1996; Walsh & Diller, 1986). Considering phonological sensitivity as a critical element in L1 acquisition, we might be led to a tentative conclusion that less successful learners are those who lack sensitivity to subtle phonological differences.

3. The Role of L1 and Input Frequency

So far, we have seen that our data does not match the findings in most of the L1 and L2 studies on the acquisition of past morphology. The use of past morphology by the less successful learners of the present study lent no support to the Aspect Hypothesis, while it was only in partial conformity with the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis. Bardovi-Harlig once proclaimed that we now have more than enough data and that the findings are robust in support of the Aspect Hypothesis (2002). The low-level learners of the present study, however, do not seem to have been under the influence of the natural semantic principle of aspect-driven tense acquisition: the overall results show that states are most actively inflected for the past, whereas activities are the least frequently marked. The reason why students' performance was the highest in state verbs is not clear.[5]

A further analysis of the data revealed that some deviant uses of English predicates by the learners were caused by the fact that Korean predicates are not always in one-to-one lexical aspectual relationship with their English counterparts. For example, the Korean predicate *al-ta* means "to know" when used in the present tense.

  (6) Na-nun   John-ul   a(l)-nta.
      I-NOM   John-ACC know-PRES ("I know John")

But when the same predicate is used in the past tense, it can mean either "to know" as in (7), or "to find" as in (8), or even "to learn" as in (9), according to the context.

  (7) Na-nun   John-ul   cal al-assta.
      I-NOM   John-ACC well know-PAST ("I knew John well")

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[5] Note that Shin-Hye Kim (1998) also found that Korean EFL students applied past morphology quite actively with states, which indicates that at least some of the Korean counterparts of English state verbs may belong to some other lexical aspectual classes than state.

(8) Na-nun   [John-i   puca-ranun] sasil-ul al-assta.
      I-NOM   [John-NOM rich is that] fact-ACC find-PAST ("I found that John is rich")

(9) Onul   uwri-nun manun kes-ul   al-assta.
      Today we-NOM many thing-ACC learn-PAST ("Today we learned many things")

Know, *find*, and *learn* are distinct in their lexical aspects, although they share a semantic core, i.e., "know." The aspectual classes of the three verbs are presented below with their logical structures, based on Foley and Van Valin (1984, p. 39).

Verb	Aspectual class	Logical structure
know:	State	know (x, y)
	e.g., John knows a fact	know (John, a fact)
find:	Achievement	BECOME (know (x, y))
	e.g., John finds a fact	BECOME (know (John, a fact))
learn:	Accomplishment	f CAUSE [BECOME (know (John, a fact))]
	e.g., John learns a fact	[do (John, something)] CAUSE [BECOME (know (John, a fact))]

Therefore, when Korean learners of English literally translate their verbs into English, they are likely to choose inappropriate target verbs with unintended lexical aspects. The examples (10-15), taken from the learner samples, suggest that the learners of the present study were actually affected by their first language lexical aspects. Learner acronyms and their respective levels are provided in parentheses.

(10) I did know about honey and bees. (YH, Group 3)
      "I learned about honey bees"
(11) But I know many thing in class. (LT, Group 3)
      "But I learned many things in the class"
(12) I know that was about a novelty fact. (JH, Group 1)
      "I learned about a novel fact"
(13) I knew expression in conversation in English is different. (DW, Group 2)
      "I found that expressions used in conversation are different"
(14) I found a words in lesson 3. (SH, Group 1)
      "I looked up the new words in Lesson 3 in the dictionary"

(15) I had a mind hardly study allow to return to school. (YH, Group 3)
   "I made up my mind to study hard if allowed to go back to school"

This type of lexical aspectual asymmetry between L1 and L2 predicates may distort the overall picture of learner performance. In an effort to minimize the possible misinterpretation caused by L1 verbs and their surface transfer, the present study coded the lexical aspects of verbs/predicates by reconstructing their actual meaning in the context rather than their verbatim meaning taken out of the context. Still, there is a possibility that low-level learners' performance might have been influenced by the aspectual differences between Korean and English. Further research is required on cross-linguistic differences in temporal semantics at the lexical level.

Another role of L1 in the acquisition of past tense is worth mentioning at a macro-level. Korean is a language with a tense system, as is English. As the learners have already developed a past tense system in their mother tongue, it seems that slow learners also transfer the past tense system of the native language. Note that the lowest level learners (Group 1) applied past morphemes quite actively (about 50% accuracy), even before the English canonical word order was stabilized. This is in stark contrast to the general consensus that inflection on the verb emerges after the learners acquire the head direction of the verb phrase (Hyams, 1986; Radford, 1990; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996). It is interesting to note that L1 transfer results in more target-like verb forms in view of past tense system, while the same process of L1 transfer results in non-target-like structures when it comes to the object-verb sequence and null subject. In this respect, the underachievers of the present study, especially learners in Group 1 and 2, are those who heavily rely on transfer as a learning mechanism and/or a communication strategy.

In terms of perceptual salience, the learners in Group 1 and Group 2 were not really influenced by phonological salience. Only the highest-level group of the three bore a slight resemblance of the pattern reported in other ESL/EFL studies. That is to say, Group 3 appeared to have perceived and acquired irregular past forms more easily than regular ones. On the other hand, the distribution of past forms in regular verbs hardly showed difference between syllabic and non-syllabic past forms. This indicates that a mere addition of unstressed syllable was not salient enough for these learners to notice.

Note, however, that irregular verbs in English are also high frequency verbs. Also note that the learners used even more past forms when the suffix was non-syllabic /d/ or /t/ than when it was /Id/, although the difference in means was not statistically significant. Therefore, the learners' active use of irregular past forms may in fact be attributable to the frequent exposure to and intensive practice of the irregular forms in the class, rather than their salience.

V.   CONCLUSION

From the findings so far, we can derive some characteristics of unsuccessful EFL learners. First, from the fact that these learners were not affected by the lexical aspect of predicates, we can construe that they do not base their L2 acquisition on the semantic universals as is proposed by the Aspect Hypothesis. Second, the finding that the learners did not follow the natural sequence dictated by the Perceptual Salience Hypothesis suggests that they are not discriminative to subtle phonological differences, which are believed to be critical in morpho-syntactic development. Third, with neither semantic nor phonological guiding principle, these learners seem to rely heavily on L1 transfer and word-to-word translation as their learning strategies. Finally, the EFL underachievers seem to require repeated exposure to a linguistic form and sustained practice thereof, in order to internalize it.

While the above generalizations are tentative and are far from being exhaustive, some pedagogical implication can be suggested based on these generalizations. Although the 6th and the 7th curriculums put emphasis on spoken language, many classroom activities are still centered on the written mode. Many students still study English through the traditional word-to-word translation and vocabulary learning at the individual word level. This could have had a harmful effect on the learners, especially at their early stages, encouraging them to resort to surface transfer as their main learning strategy, and taking their attention away from how words are used within the context. In order to help the learners to get access to more abstract temporal meaning ingrained in the predicates of the target language, words should be studied in combination with other words in proper contexts.

The findings also suggest that the learners' insensitivity to subtly enhanced phonological salience may be one of their major weak points that keep them from advancing along the normal developmental route. Activities devised to sensitize these learners to subtle phonological differences, especially differences due to inflectional morphology, may help them in this respect. Our traditional focus on the written form of language seems to be detrimental, especially to our less successful learners, in that it blocks the learners from opportunities to take advantage of the phonological clues that may guide them along the natural route of development. Continued exposure to spoken forms might be vital to prevent EFL learners from finding themselves unsuccessful learners after years of efforts exerted to learn English.

The present study has some limitations. As it is based on the learners' written data, the rate of past use could have been exaggerated. The findings, especially those related to perceptual salience, should be supplemented by findings on oral narratives produced by learners remaining at a low level. As the present study is only a first tiny step toward understanding the learning mechanism of less successful L2 learners, further studies are

required on their acquisition of past morphology and other developmental features.

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APPENDIX
Sample Diary Entries

Note: Brackets represent null subjects, and underlines indicate SVO violations.

1. Group 1

Sample A
Second time [ ] attend a lecture. I was <u>English study</u> form a group. Study alone better than, and a

team divide into two play a game. [ ] <u>The contents of a lecture better understand</u>. next time in expectation.

Sample B
Last week [ ] learn to pop song. English so absorbable than study English only book. I want to the learn pop song again. I like music. But [ ] <u>only Korea music hear</u>. Because <u>pop song is can't understand</u>. But now I know not Korea music but also pop song is good. So I think remember pop song is much bester study English. Sing a song pop song, learn word and so so…

2. Group 2

Sample C
[ ] Spent a weekend as is so bored. [ ] Watch TV alone or listened to music. While [ ] watch TV, [ ] conducted English program in EBS accidentally. It was English program for children. Cartoon characters [ ] could learn easily. [ ] Thought that [ ] become many helps in children's teaching of English. It is good program.

Sample D
[ ] Go and bought a TOEIC book in the bookstore. [ ] Tried to find a book that [ ] recommended, but did not find. So, [ ] selected one book among a good book. I am elated after [ ] buy a book. Now [ ] talked to elder that [ ] is going to take TOEIC 800 points. Then elder laughs and spoke "Do you know that TOEIC is so easy? Then [ ] spoke that [ ] award a scholarship if [ ] get more than TOEIC 800 points. So I planed to study TOEIC steadily 30 minutes in a day.

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