The interaction of politeness systems in Korean learners of French

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the French second person pronouns, *tu* and *vous*, are acquired by Korean learners of French. This is specifically approached from an interlanguage pragmatics research viewpoint, focusing upon the status of the learners' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (whether they are explicit or implicit). It is hypothesized that Korean learners of French will face difficulties acquiring *vous*, but not with *tu* due to the similarities between French and Korean second person pronoun use in requests, mediated by their implicit/explicit knowledge. Using a discourse completion task and an error correction task, the findings support the hypothesis, showing the interplay between language transfer and their second language developmental status. Moreover, this was detectible by using a combination of tasks which allows pinpointing of knowledge used. The implications for explicit/implicit knowledge status in relation to the use of pragmatic knowledge are discussed against the degree of control learners have over *tu* and *vous*.

1 Introduction

One has a full understanding of how to be polite in one's own language, however when acquiring another language it is often the case that the first (L1) and second language (L2) express politeness norms differently. Furthermore, as politeness is embedded within a language's grammar system, language learners must have the grammatical competence along with the pragmatic knowhow to select and use politeness expressions appropriately in the target language being acquired.

The focus of this article is to investigate the system of politeness surrounding French *tu* and *vous*, from a Korean learner of French's perspective. The acquisition of *tu*/*vous* is no easy matter; syntactically it may be straightforward to acquire two pronominal forms and use them grammatically, pragmatically however it is very difficult as your grammatical competence will not be much assistance to you in selecting the appropriate form for the situation you might find yourself in (to be discussed). Moreover, this may be compounded by influence from your first language which may not have the politeness concepts the target language has, as illustrated by the below examples (the meanings follow the English):

1a) Do you know what time it is?
1b) Vous avez l'heure?
    You have the time
1c) ø/nuh myutsiinji ah-seyo/-ni?
    ø/you what time-INT know-HON Q/non-HON Q

In addressing someone when making a request, the English example (1a) shows there are no *tu*/*vous* forms used to indicate politeness, rather politeness here can be framed via choice of structures (e.g., *Would you mind telling me…* versus the above). French on the other hand (1b), uses *tu*/*vous* to express politeness according to whom you are addressing (simplified, *tu* is 'friendly' while *vous* is more 'respectful' – to be discussed), while Korean has an alternation between *nuh* and the null pronoun (the latter for more polite situations) in

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similar circumstances to French.[1]

Thus, it appears that in requests, Korean and French follow similar patterns in that the pronominal is selected according to the context, allowing for a strong possibility of observing Korean L1 influence on Korean learners' L2 French. Formally, the research question pursued in this article is thus: will there be positive transfer from Korean regarding the acquisition of French *tu* (i.e., they will use it correctly early on given similarities with *nuh*), and negative transfer regarding the acquisition of *vous* (i.e., they will use it incorrectly early on given the parallels drawn with the Korean null pronoun)? To the best of our knowledge, studies on the L2 acquisition of *tu*/*vous* in French have been largely restricted to Anglophone speakers (to be discussed), and there have yet to be studies involving speakers of Asian languages with complex politeness systems (e.g., Korean) thus filling an obvious gap in the field.

Theoretically, this study fits within the research program of interlanguage pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), here specifically focusing on the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of learners surrounding *tu*/*vous*. Following the canonical definitions of Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), pragmalinguistic knowledge is concerned with the use of linguistic forms to produce speech acts, while sociopragmatic knowledge is concerned with the appropriate use of those speech acts in context. Moreover, the investigation involves interlanguage transfer (in terms of failure; Thomas, 1983) and considers the conditions that might promote them (Takahashi, 2000).

In sum, Korean learners of French *tu*/*vous* acquisition necessarily covers both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence, as the learner must successfully assess the situation in order to convey their intended intention in the L2 using the appropriately selected form, while dealing with possible language transfer from their L1 Korean.

2   Politeness in French and Korean

The politeness systems of Korean and French are vastly different, yet there appears to be similarities in use surrounding the use of singular second person pronouns in both languages to express politeness.[2] To be very clear, we do not claim the systems are the same, and we do not focus on other areas of politeness (such as terms of address, honorifics, etc.) – our targeted focus is on the politeness alternations in singular second person pronouns.

Drawing from the literature (Gardner-Chloros, 1991; Peeters, 2004; Liddicoat, 2006; Coveney, 2010), the basic facts about *tu* and *vous* in French are that they are singular second person pronouns (*vous* is also plural). In a simplistic sense, *tu* is understood (by language learners at least) that it is used in informal situation (such as with friends), while *vous* is used in formal situations (such as talking to a police officer). In other words, following Brown and Gilman (1960), there is a power versus solidarity dimension (*vous* related to the former, *tu* to the latter). However, scholars such as Morford (1997) and Van Compernolle (2013) have pointed out that this is an overly simplistic understanding of *tu*/*vous*, as there are deep and complex social indexes that *tu* and *vous* are related to, which Brown and Gilman (1960) fail to capture (e.g., use of *vous* to create distance with someone familiar). Moreover, the factors that affect the use of *tu*/*vous* include age, sex, and gender of the interlocutors of the conversation, among others (see Morford, 1997, for further discussion).

The Korean system on the other hand has different social indexes to that of *tu*/*vous* in French; however, it does alternate between two address forms according to who is being addressed. These two forms are the null pronoun, basically used for formal situations, and *nuh*, used for informal situations (Sohn, 1999; Oh, 2011; Lee, 2014). The indexes underlying their use will obviously be different to French, but as pointed out earlier both languages share similarities between how they perform requests, in that in a formal

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situation *vous*/null pronoun are likely to be used, while *tu*/*nuh* appear more frequently in informal situations.[3]

3 Challenges acquiring *tu* and *vous*

Firstly, there have been no studies done on Korean learners of French acquiring *tu*/*vous*, hence the review draws from the literature that mainly focuses on Anglophone learners of French. These studies' main focus is on the sociolinguistic aspects of *tu*/*vous*, namely the sociopragmatics concerning their appropriate use in context, and how that is developed within a classroom/learning abroad environment. Moreover, many studies take a qualitative approach to understanding *tu*/*vous*, using interviews and learner reports to understand the learner thinking behind their *tu*/*vous* use. Thus, through reviewing important works in this area will we come to appreciate what difficulties Korean learners of French might face and how this will help inform our research focus.

The basic theme underlining these studies is that the acquisition of *tu*/*vous* is not straightforward, it is difficult to control and it needs to be addressed specifically in the learners' French language program if they hope to improve their simplistic understanding of *tu*/*vous*. This is multiplied by the fact that textbook treatment of *tu*/*vous* is usually limited to (along the lines) '*tu* is used among friends/people you know and *vous* is used with people you don't know/ more formal situations', noted in the literature (e.g., Van Compernolle, 2014). To check if this is indeed the case of French textbooks used in Korea, three popular textbooks (*Campus 1*, *Festival 1* and *Le Français Contemporain*) were surveyed and found equally to have the same issues.

The problems with acquiring *tu*/*vous* were noted at least two decades ago, for example an early study by Swain and Lapkin (1990) found that French immersion students studying in Canada had significantly different use of *tu*/*vous* compared to that of native speakers – attributed to the restrictions of a classroom environment. This was further supported by Lyster (1994) who pointed out that the classroom is limited in assisting the

acquisition of sociolinguistic features of *tu*/*vous*, which requires native speaker interaction. In this vein, there have been studies in learner abroad contexts which trace the development of *tu*/*vous* of students in France (e.g., Kinginger and Farrell, 2004) noting the obvious improvements (given the native speaker input) while noting the struggles of the learners.

A teaching intervention study by Liddicoat (2006) found that beginner learners' of French understanding of *tu*/*vous* was poor, but after a 7 week course on *tu*/*vous* their knowledge increased greatly. Van Compernolle (2013) found similar results in learners' *tu*/*vous* development from a rigid rule based system to a flexible context dependent system. In another study by Van Compernolle et al. (2011) through a synchronous computer-mediated communication course of 12 weeks, it was noted that the grammatical competence of the learners was not related to their pragmatic competence surrounding *tu*/*vous*. This was seen by a degree of alteration between *tu*/*vous* use, showing at least the learners were not fully aware of the sociopragmatic effects of *tu*/*vous* use (further supporting what McCourt, 2009, found). Thus, it is possible to improve learners' *tu*/*vous* understanding in class conditions by giving students the needed pragmatic focus.

It can be seen that learners' control of forms is related to their pragmatic/sociolinguistic knowledge they have. Then, it is natural to consider how stable this knowledge source is given their *tu*/*vous* use variation. Dewaele (2002; 2004) studied learner reports of when they use *tu*/*vous* and found much more variation than native French speakers. In considering this lack of control, Dewaele hypothesized that learners must have a degree of grammatical competence before they have the relevant sociolinguistic knowledge developed. Moreover, Dewaele noted that learners' knowledge is necessarily explicit in the beginning, thus leading to the inconsistency. Implicit knowledge is well known for its role in automated language production, its development essential for L2 learners' development towards native-like proficiency (Ellis, 2009), as from the outset L2 knowledge is first explicit. This division of knowledge seems to suggest that it is a major factor that learners must develop in order to obtain native-like competence in *tu*/*vous* use.

It is this distinction that this study seizes

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[3] This will be examined briefly with our own data in the results section.

upon, however not concerned with the grammatical knowledge but the knowledge state of the aforementioned pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic divisions. That is, if Deweale is on the right track in attributing the explicit/implicit knowledge distinction to the learner's inconsistent use of *tu*/*vous*, then we can investigate this in-depth by considering their knowledge state of the pragmatic realm. Moreover, as the study is focused on interlanguage pragmatics, how language transfer interacts with the status of these knowledge sources is another key factor, as Deweale (2004) noted that even though some of his learners' L1 had a *tu*/*vous* system, this in fact did not assist very much with their understanding of *tu*/*vous* in their L2 French. These factors in acquisition will be the focus in the discussion after the results have been analyzed.

4 Methodology

This study utilizes two tasks to elicit *tu*/*vous* use and interpretation, a traditional discourse completion task (DCT) and an error correction task (ECT). These two tasks are used to elicit both the productive and receptive skills of the participants. This breaks from sociolinguistic orientated investigations (such as Belz and Kinginger, 2002; Kinginger and Farrell, 2004; Kinginger and Belz, 2005) using learner reports and learner interviews in order to provide a quantitative approach to whether or not language transfer is affecting their L2 French (more in line with Deweale, 2002; 2004).

The DCT consists of 8 situations (4 of which are distracters), two of which target a *vous* elicitation, and the other two elicit *tu*, an example of this below in (2):

(2) David est perdu dans Paris. Il veut aller à la tour Eiffel. Il veut demander son chemin à un monsieur en costume. Qu'est-ce qu'il dit?
David is lost in Paris. He wants to go to the Eiffel tower. He wants to ask the direction to a gentleman in suit. What does he say?

The second task is an error correction task, which specifically focuses on pragmatic appropriateness. Namely, participants are provided with a grammatical sentence (12 situations, 6 being distracters), however with an in/appropriate

tu/*vous*, as (3) below.[4]

(3) David voit que son ami a l'air préoccupé. Il veut lui demander à quoi il pense: *À quoi pensez-vous?*
David sees that his friend is anxious. He wants to ask what he's thinking: *What are you thinking?*

There are 54 Korean learner of French participants (age range 20-30). They completed a standardized proficiency test, indicating their levels range from A2 to C1.[5] A French (N=30, age range 19-69) and Korean (N=30, age range 19-58) control group were established to understand the politeness strategies used in these two L1s.[6]

The DCT was scored as receiving '0' for a correct use of *tu*/*vous*, '1' for an incorrect use (or missing the pronoun, which is incorrect), and '0.5' for a use that was almost correct, e.g., the verb was modified for *tu* but the pronoun did not occur. If the participant avoided *tu*/*vous* use, this was excluded from the marking process (to be discussed). In the error correction task, '0' was given for a correct change to *tu*/*vous*, and '1' for an incorrect change. The test was completed in a lab-like setting, taking roughly 30 minutes to complete overall.

5 Results

The results of the DCT and ECT can be seen in Figure 1 below, for the Korean learners of French only. It shows three important pieces of information, the proficiency level, DCT and ECT overall performance, which can be tracked per participant. The left x-axis represents the scoring for the proficiency test, while the right x-axis lists the total percentage correct for the DCT and ECT. As a guiding example, participant 37 scored 66 in the language proficiency test, and performed at ceiling level in the DCT and ECT. Turning to the

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[4] The participants were also tested in English in similar situations to understand their politeness strategies used. In fact, English is their L2 while French is their L3; however L2 refers to here as any language acquired after their first.
[5] Test provided by *Language Trainers*.
[6] The French and Korean native speaker groups performed as expected, at ceiling level. That is, both groups used the pronouns as described previously.

results, firstly, the DCT shows significant differences between the Korean learners of French (KLF) and French native speakers (FNS), KLF m = .07, sd = .14; FNS m = .00, sd = .00; t = 3.38, p = .001. FNS perform at ceiling level, while the KLF perform well but show some difficulties are present. The difference between the two groups are much more marked in the ECT, KLF m = .42, sd = .30; FNS m = .07, sd = .12; t = 7.52, p < .001. Thus, these results show that there is a definite difference between the two tasks which will be discussed.

Upon further investigation, the *vous* conditions in the DCT are done worse than the *tu* conditions when avoidance is factored in. What this means, is that currently in the above figure for the DCT cases where the pronoun is not used, this is not scored. Avoiding a piece of language one has difficulty with is a classic strategy, and to be sure this is not the adopted strategy by our FNS who clearly prefer using a pronoun. Therefore, recoding all avoidance cases to incorrect yields significant mean differences (*vous m*= .17, *tu m*= .07, *t*= 2.142 *p*= .035). Thus, avoidance of the *vous* form and its incorrect use occur more than with such cases involving *tu*. This will be further discussed.
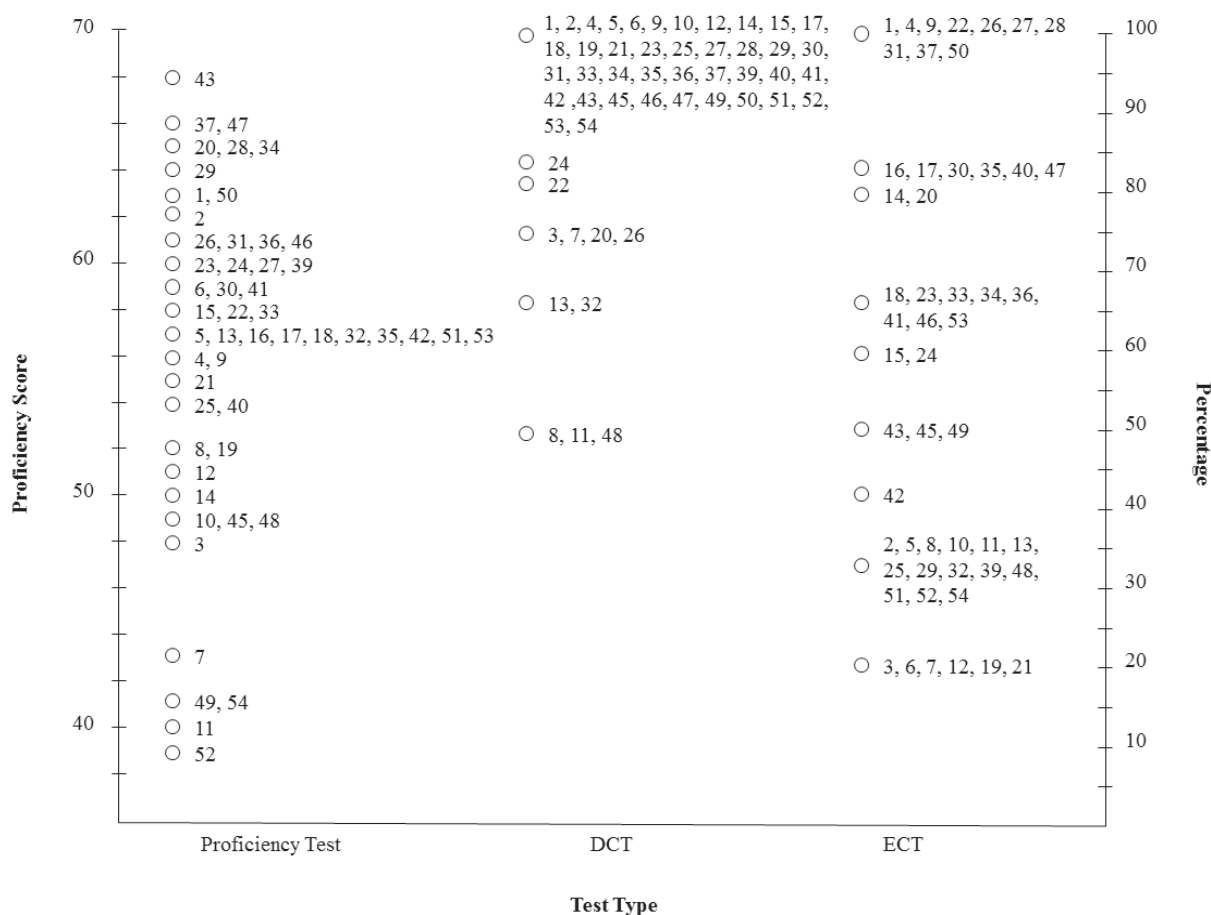

Figure 1. Participant Results in Three Tests

Finally in Korean, the null pronoun/*nuh*/term of address (such as 'teacher') used in Korean, our DCT results show that while null pronouns and terms of address are spread around in both 'tu' and 'vous' conditions, *nuh* is used in the less formal 'tu' condition, and does not occur in the 'vous' condition (Fisher's Exact, *p*< .001). Thus, Korean has the option to express 'closeness' with *nuh* and has been shown to be used to that effect, paralleling the use of *tu* in French.[7]

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[7] The exact conditions of when null pronoun/*nuh*/term of

6 Discussion

The data analysis has revealed two important issues:

1. Why is there a performance difference between the DCT and ECT?
2. Within the DCT, why is there a difference between *vous* and *tu* treatment?

The latter issue is dealt with first, as it is relatively straightforward. As discussed previously, French and Korean are similar in the manner that both languages use a pronoun of address in familiar request situations (*tu* and *nuh* respectively). Learners with a lower proficiency perform well with *tu*, which can be attributed to their L1 strategies. This is also seen at the advanced levels as well (the border between transfer residue and full acquisition of *tu* is difficult to tell), thus it appears that the L1 transfer has been positive in nature, facilitating the acquisition of *tu*.

Applying this logic to *vous*, the transfer is instead negative in nature due to two patterns observed. Firstly, there are more cases of avoidance occurring at the lower levels than the higher levels (*r*= -.336, *p*= .016), being that no pronoun is used – in line with the Korean L1 strategy of polite request. Interestingly, in lieu of subject pronoun-dropping (which would result in ungrammaticality in French), some lower-level participants instead opt to establish reference via a strategy present in their L2 English (and L1 Korean), using something like 'Excuse me sir'. The higher proficiency groups have the pronoun occurring, but vary between *tu/vous* use, before *vous* use is stabilized at the highest proficiency level. In sum, using a null pronoun is ungrammatical in French, ruling out L1 transfer of this as the learners advance. Thus, in the 'vous' condition we see more use of terms of address before *vous* is more fully acquired, while in the 'tu' condition more use of *tu* is attributed to the availability of *nuh* due to the similarity of the L1 Korean politeness strategy *nuh* use in the same situation.

Moving back to the first question, it is hypothesized the difference in performance can be attributed to how the tasks tap the relevant knowledge sources, as well as the implicit/explicit status of this knowledge. The two knowledge sources dealt with are the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge surrounding *tu/vous*, whereby the DCT (productive) taps both knowledge sources more while the ECT focuses more on the sociopragmatic competence.

Concentrating on the ECT first, the responses are more variable than the DCT. Therefore, it can be argued that the knowledge source the learners draw upon is not implicit in nature, as implicit knowledge is needed in order for consistent language use (Ellis, 2009). This knowledge is thus explicit in nature, resulting in variable performance. Those learners that performed better (reliably correct) were at a higher proficiency level, furthering this hypothesis that the knowledge drawn upon is explicit at the lower levels. This knowledge source has been identified here as the sociopragmatic competence of the learner, which this task draws more from. Compared to the DCT, the ECT is not a productive task and therefore does not 'engage' the learner as much as the DCT does. What this means is that the ECT simply provides the form for the learners to read, without them having to produce it. In this way, their pragmalinguistic knowledge is not being assessed as much as the DCT because they do not have to choose from a variety of forms in order to produce the relevant piece of language. The sociopragmatic knowledge use is more focused on in the ECT because the learner should take into account more the situational context and assess the presented sentence against that context. It is clear from the DCT that all the learners have the grammatical knowhow surrounding *tu/vous* (in that sentences are not subjectless), but the ECT makes it very clear that many of the learners are not able to identify whether or not the *tu/vous* usage is correct against the presented situation. Therefore, the sociopragmatic knowledge is relied on more in the ECT task, and the consistency of responses can be attributed to the implicit/explicit nature of that sociopragmatic knowledge.[8]

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address occurs go beyond the scope of this article and should be a target of future research.

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[8] If the sociopragmatic knowledge is indeed explicit, then this would help explain the cases of variability seen in the DCT. On another note, the pragmalinguistic knowledge status has

To summarize the differences seen between the DCT and ECT, the DCT engages both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge more due to its productive nature.[9] The ECT on the other hand relies more on the sociopragmatic competence of the learner as it focuses more upon the contextual appropriateness of the sentence to the situation. This has resulted in more varied answers (learners have not noticed the errors as their awareness is not at a high level), allowing us to conclude that their sociopragmatic competence is not at the same level (lower) as their pragmalinguistic competence, which appears to be the case and finds support from the literature discussed.

So far, language transfer and knowledge source have been discussed, however the disconcert between implicit and explicit knowledge requires further discussion in how our observations reconcile with that of the literature. Dewaele (2002) in his research of *tu*/*vous* acquisition commented that L2 learners rely much more on their declarative memory system (equated to explicit knowledge), which can be seen more in the early stages of acquisition. Moreover, explicit memory use is related to variability in answers, as consistent production is related to implicit knowledge (Ellis 2009). Deweale's observations fall along the lines of Paradis (2004; 2009), who argues strongly for a non-interface division of knowledge types in L2 learners. Generally taken, implicit competence is understood through Paradis (2004; 2009) as knowledge that learners are unaware of yet that leads them to systematic language performance while explicit knowledge is understood as the knowledge that learners are aware of but not leading to the same systematic performance.

Thus, Dewaele (2002; 2004) hypothesizes that grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge of *tu*/*vous* at the beginning of acquisition is explicit, and at the later stages of acquisition this knowledge shifts to implicit knowledge, based in the implicit memory. In relation to the data

yet to be mentioned – if it is explicit at the lower levels, coupled with language transfer, then the product is inconsistent selection of forms, which is seen.
[9] Learners have the opportunity to bring both their implicit and explicit knowledge to the fore in both tasks.

gathered here, some amendments are made to deal with the pragmatic-orientated data. Regarding the lower proficiency levels, both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge are explicit. At the intermediate levels, the pragmalinguistic knowledge shifts to the implicit mode, while sociopragmatic knowledge is explicit. Finally, at the advanced levels both knowledge types used are implicit.

Such a differentiation in knowledge at the implicit/explicit level neatly captures three different groups as can be seen in Figure 1; explicitly the higher proficiency learners have 100% correct performance in both the DCT and ECT, leading to the suggestion that both sources of knowledge are implicit. The intermediate and lower proficiency levels on the other hand share inconsistent answers in the ECT, but not in the DCT, thus the intermediate learners have implicit pragmalinguistic knowledge (like the advanced group) but their sociopragmatic knowledge is explicit (like the lower level learners). With the lower level learners, due to their inconsistency in the DCT, it is suggested that their pragmalinguistic knowledge is explicit (given the variety of strategies used, and inconsistent *tu*/*vous* use).

However, this might not be a completely correct characterization of the sociopragmatic knowledge along implicit/explicit grounds. Importantly, as it has been oft discussed in the literature (as reviewed) it is difficult to develop sociopragmatic knowledge in the classroom, especially with *tu*/*vous* given their complex social indexes. Thus, the best way to develop this implicit knowledge of *tu*/*vous* is to live in a native French speaking environment for some time. Therefore, at this stage we cannot rule out that the advanced proficiency learners' sociopragmatic knowledge is in fact explicit – however this needs to be reconciled with the explicit knowledge of the lower proficiency learners which leads to variability not seen in the advanced learners.

The answer may lie with Paradis (2004: 35-36), who argues that explicit knowledge may resemble implicit knowledge at an advanced stage. What this means is that learners have sped-up access to their explicit knowledge to the degree its processing resembles that of implicit knowledge. While appealing, explicit knowledge use is associated with inconsistency, and it is not clear that this 'advanced' explicit knowledge is related to

consistent language use as implicit knowledge is.

7   Pedagogical Implications

The question of how to teach *tu*/*vous* in the classroom has been discussed by scholars such as Lyster (1994), Liddicoat (2006) and Van Compernolle (2014). Clearly, *tu*/*vous* are not just mere pronouns of reference but encode extremely important sociolinguistic information that must be used carefully in communication. It does not appear from the literature that there is an advantage of having a T/V system in a learner's L1 in their quest to acquire the L2, as demonstrated here. In the case of Korean learners of French, it is advisable to explicitly cover the preference for a *tu*/*vous* pronoun in a request, noting that request strategies transferred from Korean are not likely to encourage successful communication in French – especially surrounding *vous*. Our data shows that the sociopragmatic understanding of *vous* is successfully acquired at the advanced level (and *tu* earlier on), however this surely should occur much earlier on as if one cannot address someone with the most suitable pronoun in a request, then there is a chance for the request to fail its communicative function due to the addressee's perception of the pronoun's politeness suitability. In more general SLA terms, there needs to be a stronger focus in the classroom on such important phenomena as surely speaking somewhat ungrammaticality will be overlooked as long as a learner is able to address someone using the correct term. Of course, whether one would want to adopt a Sociocultural Theory methodology as espoused by Van Compernolle (2014) depends on one's classroom training and resources at hand; for this we provide no insight apart from the call that pronominal systems encoding important sociolinguistic information need to be consistently addressed in the classroom in order to facilitate their earlier understanding.

8   Conclusion

The politeness system behind *tu* and *vous* is undeniably complex, and presents clear difficulties to learners from any language due to the complex variables involved. However, the focused approach taken by this study unravels a little more of this complexity involving L2 learners; with Korean learners of French, it is clear that the acquisition of *tu* presents little difficulty due to positive transfer, while *vous* acquisition is clearly more problematic due to negative transfer. Moreover, the explicit/implicit state of the learners' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge are further factors affecting the use and interpretation of *tu*/*vous* – discovered using different task types. In conclusion, the *tu*/*vous* investigation presented here represents a piece of the puzzle regarding learner acquisition of these forms, the approach here adding to the literature from a non-Anglophone point-of-view.

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