

## L2 Acquisition of English Double Object Constructions: What Individual Analysis Can Tell Us

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### 0. Introduction

Recent research on L1 transfer has addressed the question of the level of the grammar at which transfer operates (i.e. transfer of syntax or transfer of morphology). For example, Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996) provide data in support of a *syntactic transfer* view, according to which the syntactic properties of a construction in the L1 transfer and influence the acquisition of the equivalent construction in the L2. On the other hand, Montrul (1997) provides data in support of a *morphological transfer* view, which predicts that morphological items in the L1 which lack equivalents in the L2 have a blocking effect on L2 acquisition of related syntactic structures.

Our previous study (Oh and Zubizarreta, in press) examined the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of English Double Object (DO) constructions by adult L2 English learners from three different L1 backgrounds: L1-Korean, L1-Japanese and L1-Mandarin. The English DO constructions are exemplified in (1) and (2).

- (1) a. John gave a book to Mary. (Goal Prepositional Dative (PP))  
b. John gave Mary a book. (Licit goal DO)  
c. John explained the answer to Mary. (Goal PP)  
d. \* John explained Mary the answer. (Illicit goal DO)
- (2) a. Mary baked a cake for John. (Ben(efactive) PP)  
b. Mary baked John a cake. (Licit ben DO)  
c. John finished the painting for Mary. (Ben PP)  
d. \* John finished Mary the painting. (Illicit ben DO)

In particular, we examined the role of morphological transfer in the domain of DO constructions. Similarities and differences in the verbal morphology associated with DOs in Korean, Japanese and Mandarin provide a good testing ground for the morphological transfer hypothesis. Unlike English, which always lacks any special morphology in the DO construction, these languages have explicit

verbal morphology for (some types of) DO constructions. To be more specific, overt morphology is required/preferred for ben DOs in Korean and Japanese while overt morphology is required for goal DOs in Mandarin. Given the different status of morphological licensing in Mandarin vs. Korean and Japanese, the morphological transfer hypothesis predicts different results for L1-Mandarin learners of English on the one hand and L1-Korean and L1-Japanese learners of English on the other.

We found that at the group level, all three groups preferred goal DOs to ben DOs (whether licit or illicit); the similar behavior of all three L1 groups provided evidence against the morphological transfer hypothesis. We proposed an alternative explanation for the results, which is based on the different grammatical status of goal verbs and benefactive verbs. As described in detail in Section 1.4, we accounted for the L2-English learners' behavior by arguing that L2-learners lack the Have Projection which is responsible for the DO constructions in native English speakers' grammar.

The group results clearly show that L2-English learners' grammar diverges from native English speakers' grammar: Native English speakers do not make a grammaticality distinction between goal DOs and ben DOs, while L2-English learners prefer the former to the latter. We need to be certain that this divergence holds at the individual subject level as well. Individual results inform us about whether all L2-learners have similar grammars for the DO construction, or whether there is individual variation. Furthermore, by checking individual results against the predictions of our hypothesis, we can re-evaluate the validity of our proposal. If individual L2-learners in fact follow the predicted patterns, this provides additional evidence in favor of our account, and informs us about the nature of interlanguage grammar.

The objective of the present study is to examine individual subject results in light of our proposal. We show that, as predicted, the L2 English learners treat goal DOs and ben DOs as fundamentally different, at the individual level as well as at the group level. Furthermore, we find that individual learners' errors with goal and ben DOs are not random, but follow particular patterns: Most of the learners' errors involve either overrejection of licit ben DOs or overacceptance of illicit goal DOs. This provides evidence that interlanguage grammars, even when they diverge from the target, have internal consistency.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 1, we briefly summarize the group results of our previous study. We first spell out the morphological transfer hypothesis and its related predictions. We then provide the experimental design of the study and examine the group results against the predictions of the morphological transfer hypothesis. Showing that this hypothesis is not supported, we then provide an alternative explanation of the group results. In Section 2, we turn to the individual subject analysis, describing the methodology and spelling out the exact predictions that follow from our proposal. In Section 3, we report and explain the individual results. Section 4 concludes the paper with suggestions for future research.

## **1. Background of the Study**

In Section 1.3, we report the results of a group study testing the morphological transfer hypothesis in the domain of the English DO construction. We briefly summarize the methods and group results below. See Oh and Zubizarreta op.cit. for details.

### **1.1. Morphological Transfer Hypothesis**

The morphological transfer hypothesis (Montrul 1997) predicts that morphological items in the L1 which lack equivalents in the L2 hinder L2 acquisition of related syntactic structures.

The acquisition of English DO constructions by L1-Korean, L1-Japanese and L1-Mandarin speakers provides a good testing ground for this hypothesis. The English DO construction lacks any special morphology: the DO is *lexically licensed*. Unlike English, Korean, Japanese and Mandarin have explicit verbal morphology for some types of DO constructions, which are hence *morphologically licensed*. Overt morphology is required (or strongly preferred) for ben DOs only in Korean and Japanese, while overt morphology is required for goal DOs in Mandarin. Given the different status of morphological licensing in Mandarin vs. Korean/Japanese, morphological transfer should lead to different results for Mandarin learners of English on the one hand and Korean and Japanese learners of English on the other. Namely, for the Korean and Japanese groups, preference of goal DOs over ben DOs is predicted (i.e., due to a blocking effect of overt benefactive morphology in the L1, Korean and Japanese learners of English are predicted to reject ben DOs (licit as well as illicit) in English). On the other hand, for the Mandarin group, there is no reason to expect goal DOs to be preferred to ben DOs (i.e., due to a blocking effect of overt goal morphology in the L1, Mandarin learners of English are predicted to reject goal DOs (licit as well as illicit) in English) (see Oh and Zubizarreta op.cit. for details).<sup>1</sup>

### **1.2. Experimental Design of the Study**

We describe the experimental design of the study below.

**Participants:** The participants of the study were 65 L1 Korean (mean age: 28.38), 52 L1 Japanese (mean age: 25.13) and 73 L1 Mandarin (mean age: 27.05) learners of English. 10 native speakers of English participated in the study as the control group (mean age: 28.64).

**Cloze test:** The participants completed a cloze test, which assessed their overall level of English proficiency (Oshita 1997, 2001).<sup>2</sup> This test contained three paragraphs in which every 5<sup>th</sup> word is removed, resulting in 75 blanks. The participants filled in the blanks with the most appropriate word for the context.

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<sup>1</sup> Benefactive verbs in Mandarin can only marginally appear in the DO construction; to the extent that they appear in the DO construction at all, they also require overt morphology as a licenser.

<sup>2</sup> We thank Hiroyuki Oshita for allowing us to use the cloze test that he designed for his dissertation (Oshita 1997).

According to their performance on the cloze test, the learners were broken down into beginners, low intermediates and high intermediates.

**Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT):** In the written GJT, 20 DO sentences with 20 PP counterparts were tested. Eight target constructions (i.e. licit and illicit goal DOs; licit and illicit ben DOs; and the PP variant of each DO type) each appeared with 5 different verbs (see Table 1 for the 20 test verbs).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 40 filler sentences were used as distractors. In the GJT, subjects were asked to evaluate the grammaticality of the sentences, using a scale from -3 (completely unnatural), through 0 (I am not sure), to +3 (completely natural).

Table 1: 20 test verbs

Licit goal (e.g., <i>throw</i> <i>someone something</i> )	Illicit goal (e.g., * <i>explain</i> <i>someone something</i> )	Licit benefactive (e.g., <i>buy</i> <i>someone something</i> )	Illicit benefactive (e.g., * <i>finish</i> <i>someone something</i> )
1. Throw	1. Say	1. Make	1. Hold
2. Show	2. Whisper	2. Buy	2. Keep
3. Bring	3. Repeat	3. Draw	3. Watch
4. Send	4. Explain	4. Find	4. Fix
5. Hand	5. Shout	5. Get	5. Finish

### 1.3. Group Results: A Brief Summary

Regardless of the L1, all three groups exhibited similar patterns of preferring goal DOs to ben DOs in English. More specifically, licit goal DOs were accepted more strongly than licit ben DOs at all proficiency levels. Moreover, illicit goal DOs were rejected less (thus, accepted more) than illicit ben DOs at all levels of proficiency. The differences in mean acceptance rates for goal DOs vs. ben DOs (licit as well as illicit) reached statistical significance for the low and high intermediates in all three groups (see Oh and Zubizarreta op.cit. for details). These results clearly argue against the morphological transfer hypothesis, which had predicted a preference for goal DOs on the part of the Korean and Japanese speakers, but not on the part of Mandarin speakers. An even stronger argument against the morphological transfer hypothesis comes from the comparison between the acceptance rates of goal DOs for Mandarin speakers vs. Korean and Japanese speakers. The morphological transfer hypothesis predicts higher acceptance rates of goal DOs for Korean and Japanese speakers than for Mandarin speakers. However, Korean and Japanese speakers in fact *rejected* goal DOs more strongly than Mandarin speakers. The results of one-way ANOVA show that the differences between the two reached statistical significance (for licit goal DOs,  $p$

<sup>3</sup> In the data analysis, we did not include results from target sentences involving *say*, the reason being that the control subjects rated the PP and DO forms of *say* ungrammatical (*The teacher said the answer to the student*; *The teacher said the student the answer.*) They reported that *tell* (rather than *say*) would be the appropriate verb in the context provided.

< .0001; for illicit goal DOs,  $p = .025$ ). No statistically significant difference was attested between Korean and Japanese speakers for licit DOs ( $p = .624$ ) or for illicit DOs ( $p = .965$ ).

#### 1.4. An Alternative Explanation: *Shallow Grammar*

Showing that the morphological transfer hypothesis is not supported, we have proposed an alternative explanation: namely, that the asymmetric treatment of goal DOs and ben DOs by L2-English learners stems from the different grammatical status of goal and ben DOs. The different status of English DOs has been previously addressed by constructionists (Jackendoff 1990, Goldberg 2002). The first DP in goal DOs is an argument of the verb, while the first DP in ben DOs is not an argument of the verb, but rather an argument of the structure (“construction” in constructionist terminology). This implies that goal verbs are inherently ditransitive but benefactive verbs are inherently transitive. We hypothesize that adult L2 English learners are sensitive to this underlying difference between goal DOs and ben DOs and that they (initially) assume that they can generate DOs by means of a *shallow* mapping from verbs with two arguments (i.e. goal verbs, but not benefactive verbs) onto the DO structure. If adult L2 English learners have this *shallow grammar*, they should accept both licit and illicit goal DOs but disallow both licit and illicit ben DOs – precisely the pattern that we found. However, one question immediately arises from this hypothesis. Why should L2 learners assume that DOs are possible only when both DPs are arguments of the verb? In order to address this question, a brief discussion of the syntax and semantics of English DOs is needed.

Previous research on the grammatical properties of the English DO construction has shown that there is a subtle semantic distinction between DO and PP constructions (Oehrle 1976). On the one hand, the DO encodes the notion of prospective possessor or a more general prospective Have relation: the referent of the first object must be a potential possessor of the referent of the second object. This semantic constraint on the DO construction accounts for the contrast between (3a) and (3b). On the other hand, the goal PP construction encodes “physical transfer,” which requires that the referent of the theme undergo movement from one physical location to another, brought about by the referent of the subject. This semantic constraint on the PP construction accounts for the contrast in (4). (4b) is unacceptable because *headache* is not a thing that can be physically transferred, but (4a) is acceptable because *Mary* is the potential possessor (in a metaphorical sense) of the headache.

- (3) a. John sent Mary a package  
b. \*John sent New York a package.
- (4) a. John gave Mary a headache.  
b. \*John gave a headache to Mary.

The semantic distinction between DOs and PPs has been attributed to an intermediate projection between a higher VP (also known as  $vP$ ) and the lower VP. We refer to this projection as the HAVE projection (HvP) (cf. Marantz 1993). HvP is present in the DOs (goal DOs as well as ben DOs) but absent in PPs. We argue that HvP is a hallmark of a native-like analysis of the English DO construction.

Despite the fact that both goal and ben DOs have a HvP, there is a crucial structural difference between the two. In the goal DO, the first DP (i.e. the prospective possessor) undergoes movement from within the lower VP to [Spec, HvP]: It is thus an argument of both the verb and Hv. On the other hand, in the ben DO, the first DP does not undergo any movement and is base-generated in the [Spec, HvP] position. As a result, it is an argument of Hv only. If HvP is lacking in the grammar, this means that there is no position for the first DP in ben DOs to originate in. Accordingly, the presence of HvP is crucial in generating ben DOs.

Going back to the question of L2-learners' grammar, we hypothesize that the learners initially lack HvP in their interlanguage grammar. In the absence of HvP, ben DOs cannot be derived. Despite the lack of HvP, the learners are able to generate goal DOs since they are aware that goal verbs are inherently ditransitive (i.e. they are sensitive to the underlying grammatical difference between goal verbs and ben verbs).

## 2. Individual Subject Analysis

We now move on to a discussion of the individual subject analysis, which is designed to provide a further test of our proposal.

### 2.1. Methodology

The original rating scale in the study contained positive numbers (1 through 3: acceptance), 0 (I am not sure), and negative numbers (-1 through -3: rejection). Bonnie Schwartz (p.c.) has pointed out to us that this is a potential problem due to a (potential) canceling (or averaging) effect: The group results of the study may arise from an averaging effect of some subjects giving a high positive rating and others giving a low negative rating. To address this potential problem regarding the scale, in the individual subject analysis, we converted the original rating scale into a binary correct/incorrect scale. That is, we checked whether each subject judged the sentence correctly or not. If the subject judged the sentence correctly (i.e. rated a licit DO sentence positively, or rated an illicit DO sentence negatively), then s/he received a 'correct' score of +1. If the subject misjudged the sentence (i.e. rated a licit DO sentence negatively, or rated an illicit one positively), or gave the 0 ("I am not sure") response, then s/he received an "incorrect" score of 0.<sup>4</sup> Once the subject's score for each sentence had been thus computed,

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<sup>4</sup> The rationale for including 0 "I am not sure" into the "incorrect" category is that in terms of the binary correct/incorrect scale that we have adopted for the individual subject analysis, the "0" response is an incorrect (and unexpected) response. Native English speakers never gave a 0 response – i.e. it is incorrect from a native speaker's perspective.

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the total number of correct responses for each construction was divided by the number of test items for this construction type. This gives us a ratio of the number of correct responses to the total number of test items for each construction. We term this ratio the R-score, defined in (5).

$$(5) \quad \text{R-score (for a given category)} = \frac{\text{\# of correct responses for this category}}{\text{Total \# of test items in this category}}$$

The maximum R-score for a given category is +1 (when the subject judged all test items in this category correctly) and the lowest R-score is 0 (when the subject misjudged all test items in this category). On the basis of their R-scores for licit and corresponding illicit DOs, we classified the subjects into two categories: native-like and non-native.

- (6) Native-like: R-score of licit DO > 0.5 and R-score of illicit DO > 0.5  
Non-native: Otherwise

Before spelling out the specifics of this classification, it is necessary to define what it means to be “native-like.” “Native-like” L2 English learners are the ones who show an ability to distinguish between the licit and corresponding illicit DOs with more than 60% accuracy (i.e. correctly judging at least 3 test items out of 5): unlike other L2 learners, they show an awareness of whether the DO is licit or illicit. The rationale behind adopting the 60% criterion rather than the 100% one is that there are almost no L2 learners who meet the 100% accuracy criterion. This, in turn, indicates that what we get from these subjects is “native-like” behavior, but not truly “native” behavior.

We compute the scores separately for goal and ben DOs. We then further sub-classify the “non-native” category into 3 subcategories. In doing so, we compare the R-score of licit DOs with the R-score of illicit DOs and check which one is more native-like.

- (7) Sub-classification of the Non-native category  
a. Fully nonnative-like: R-score of licit DO  $\leq$  0.5 and R-score of illicit DO  $\leq$  0.5  
b. Overrejection: R-score of licit DO  $\leq$  0.5 but R-score of illicit DO > 0.5  
c. Overacceptance: R-score of licit DO > 0.5 but R-score of illicit DO  $\leq$  0.5

Subjects belonging to the *Fully nonnative-like* category misjudge licit DOs as ungrammatical and also misjudge illicit DOs as grammatical. To the extent that we get any subjects under this category, we expect them to be subjects whose English is too poor for them to perform in a target-like manner. Subjects belonging to the *Overrejection* category correctly judge illicit DOs as ungrammatical but also misjudge licit DOs as ungrammatical. In other words, they reject all DOs, which in turn means that they *overreject* licit DOs. Subjects belonging to the last category, *Overacceptance*, correctly judge licit DOs as grammatical but misjudge

illicit DOs as also grammatical. In other words, they accept all DOs, which in turn means that they *overaccept* illicit DOs.

## 2.2. Predictions of the *Shallow Grammar Hypothesis*

*Shallow grammar* has clear predictions for the 4 categories discussed above. To recapitulate, *shallow grammar* predicts a general rejection of ben DO constructions (both licit and illicit) while it predicts a general acceptance of goal DO constructions (both licit and illicit). With respect to ben DO constructions, our theory predicts that the *Overacceptance* should not occur at all, while *Overrejection* should (due to a general tendency of rejection of ben DOs). On the other hand, with respect to goal DO constructions, our theory does predict overacceptance of illicit goal DOs (due to a general tendency of acceptance of goal DOs), but little or no *overrejection* of licit goal DO constructions. The predictions that follow from *shallow grammar* are summarized below.

- (8) a. With regard to goal DO constructions,  
*Overacceptance* is predicted. *Overrejection* is not predicted.  
 b. With regard to ben DO constructions,  
*Overrejection* is predicted. *Overacceptance* is not predicted.

## 3. Results of the Individual Subject Analysis

We now examine the individual results in light of the above predictions.

### 3.1. Results of the Individual Subject Analysis: Ben DO Constructions

We first present the individual subject results for ben DO constructions. The results presented below are obtained after collapsing the results of the three groups. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the same picture persists for each L1 group when results are computed separately. The results are shown in Table 2. The results of the L1 English controls are also included, for comparison.

Table 2: Subjects' performance on ben DOs: 4 categories of subjects

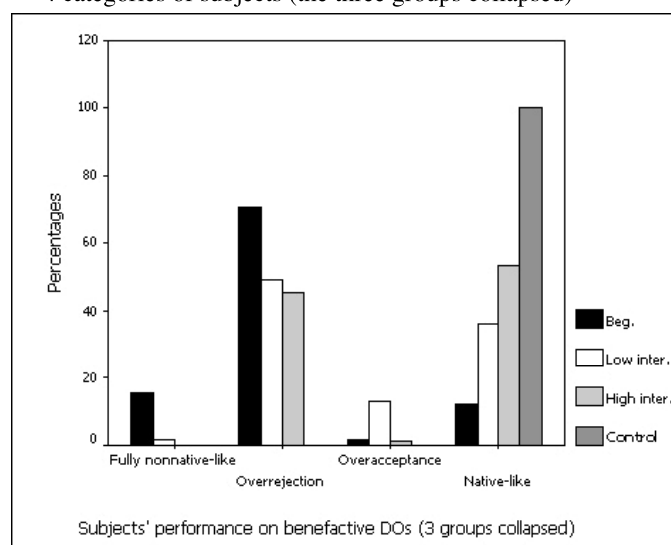
Group	Fully nonnative-like	Overrejection	Overacceptance	Native-like
Beginners ( <i>n</i> = 58)	9/58* (15.52%)	41/58 (70.69%)	1/58 (1.72%)	7/58 (12.07%)
Low inter. ( <i>n</i> = 55)	1/55 (1.82%)	27/55 (49.09%)	7/55 (12.73%)	20/55 (36.36%)
High inter. ( <i>n</i> = 77)	0/77 (0%)	35/77 (45.45%)	1/77 (1.3%)	41/77 (53.25%)
Total # ( <i>n</i> = 190)	10/190 (5.26%)	103/190 (54.21%)	9/190 (4.74%)	68/190 (35.79%)
Control ( <i>n</i> = 10)	0/10 (0%)	0/10 (0%)	0/10 (0%)	10/10 (100%)

\* # of subjects falling into the category within the proficiency level / total # of subjects within the proficiency level.

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The patterns are clear. Overrejection of licit ben DOs is a problem, rather than overacceptance of illicit ben DOs. This is predicted by the theory. Commenting on each category, for the *Fully nonnative-like*, most of the subjects in this category are beginners. This is to be expected, since beginners' English is poorer than that of the other subjects. For the *Native-like* pattern, the results suggest that there is an effect of proficiency. As proficiency increases, the number of native-like subjects also increases. Not surprisingly, the controls all belong to this category. The vast majority of the L2-learners belong to the *Overrejection* category. In striking contrast, *Overacceptance* is rarely attested for the ben DO constructions.

Figure 1: Subjects' performance on ben DO constructions:  
4 categories of subjects (the three groups collapsed)<sup>5</sup>



To sum up, the main reason for subjects' failure to distinguish licit ben DOs vs. illicit ben DOs is their overrejection tendency.

### 3.2. Results of the Individual Subject Analysis: Goal DO Constructions

The results of the goal DO constructions are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. The results are not as robust and clear as the results of ben DO constructions.

<sup>5</sup> All figures in this paper display percentages, not raw numbers. The rationale behind using percentages is that using the raw numbers can be misleading given the different numbers of subjects at different proficiency levels. Suppose that all 10 controls fall into the *Native-like* category and 13 high intermediate learners fall into the same category. If we use the raw numbers, it appears that the high intermediate learners performed better than the controls, which is not true at all – it simply means that there were fewer controls than high intermediates.

Nevertheless, they are suggestive. The results of the goal DOs, considered together with the results of the ben DOs, unequivocally suggest that the vast majority of the L2 English learners treated the two constructions as fundamentally different.<sup>6</sup> While overacceptance is virtually nonexistent in the ben DO constructions, it does exist in the goal DO constructions. This is what the theory predicts. The results are due to learners' general tendency to accept all goal DOs (whether licit or illicit).

Table 3: Subjects' performance on goal DOs: 4 categories of subjects

Group	Fully nonnative-like	Overrejection	Overacceptance	Native-like
Beginners ( <i>n</i> = 58)	15/58 (25.86%)	20/58 (34.48%)	12/58 (24.14%)	8/58 (15.52%)
Low inter. ( <i>n</i> = 55)	3/55 (5.45%)	13/55 (23.64%)	26/55 (47.27%)	13/55 (23.64%)
High inter. ( <i>n</i> = 77)	1/77 (1.3%)	16/77 (20.78%)	28/77 (36.36%)	32/77 (41.56%)
Total # ( <i>n</i> = 190)	19/190 (10%)	49/190 (25.79%)	68/190 (35.79%)	54/190 (28.42%)
Control ( <i>n</i> = 10)	0/10 (0%)	0/10 (0%)	0/10 (0%)	10/10 (100%)

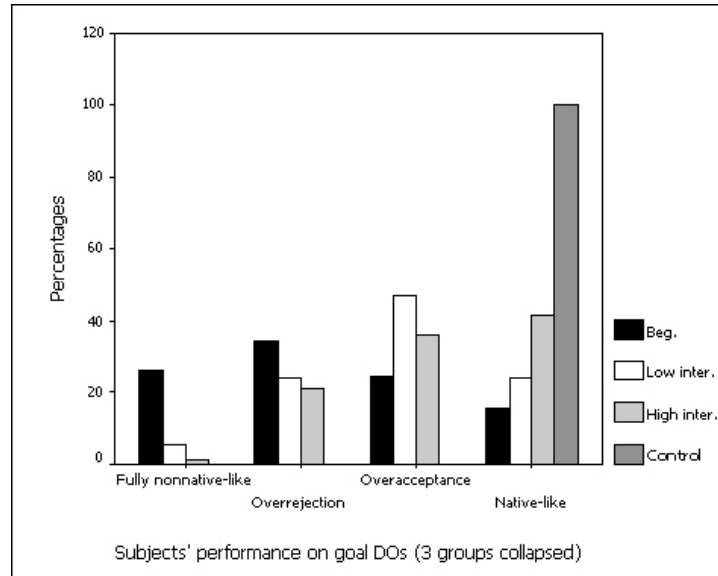
Commenting on the remaining categories, subjects belonging to the *Fully nonnative-like* are primarily beginners (probably a result of their overall poor English skills). For the *Native-like* category, we can observe only a mild effect of proficiency. We can't see much improvement as proficiency increases. The effect of proficiency is more clearly attested in the ben DO constructions. What remains as a puzzle is that a relatively large number of subjects belong to the *Overrejection* category, which the theory does not predict. The result clearly indicates that overrejection of licit DOs occurs for goal DO constructions as well as for ben DO constructions. We interpret this as an indication of subjects' (initial) conservatism when they are confronted with a new construction.

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<sup>6</sup> There was a small group of L2 English learners who overrejected both goal and ben DOs.

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Figure 2: Subjects' performance on goal DO constructions:  
4 categories of subjects (three groups collapsed)



To summarize the individual results, we can draw the following conclusions. First, the vast majority of the L2 English learners treated the goal and ben DO constructions as fundamentally different, at the individual level (as well as at the group level). Secondly, individual learners' errors with goal and ben DOs are not random, but follow the predicted patterns from the *shallow grammar*: Most of the learners' errors involve either overrejection of licit ben DOs or overacceptance of illicit goal DOs.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The individual results provide additional evidence in favor of our account, while revealing more about the nature of L2 English learners' interlanguage grammar.

However, there are questions that still remain as a puzzle. We leave these questions for future research. First, overrejection of goal DOs by the intermediates merits further research since it cannot be explained on the view of "initial conservatism" (intermediates are no longer in the initial stages of acquisition). Second, the effect of proficiency is more clearly attested for ben DO constructions than goal DO constructions. Where does this difference come from? This question is worth considering. Lastly, we have proposed initial conservatism as a possible explanation for the overrejection tendency for the beginners. However, more investigation of where this initial conservatism comes from is required.

For now, we conclude that L2-English learners, unlike native English speak-

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ers, have a *shallow grammar* which distinguishes between goal and ben DOs in a non-random way.

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