Abstract
The Chinese classifier system is one the most challenging linguistic features for L2 learners of Chinese. This is mainly because not only do learners need to memorize these classifiers— for which no equivalents are found in their first languages—, but also the guiding principles of using the classifiers are often unclear or illogical to L2 learners. While much work has been dedicated to the exploration of L1 children’s acquisition of Chinese classifiers which examined children’s understanding of different aspects of the classifiers and the developmental progress at various ages, little, if any, has been dealt with on how L2 adult learners acquire this linguistic feature. The current study aims to understand how learners from a non-classifier-language background acquire this linguistic feature by employing an experimental design using a production test that explores the acquisition of 10 special classifiers denoting various objects or events. The subjects are 29 English-speaking and 29 Korean-speaking adults with various Chinese proficiency levels who were taking Chinese language classes in Taiwan. They are first presented with ten pictures of various objects or events one at a time. Their task then is to produce an appropriate classifier that can denote the object/event shown in the picture. I categorized these objects/events into ANIMACY, FUNCTION, or EVENT for further analysis. L2 subject production is then compared with L1 subject production and the results show that 1) there is a positive relationship between subjects’ Chinese proficiency levels and their performance in this task; 2) this positive relationship only applies to ANIMACY and FUNCTION objects but not to EVENT category; 3) the Korean subjects outperformed their English counterparts throughout the three CPL levels; 4) a developmental progression is observed; 5) the general classifier 個 is used pervasively in most situations. Future research to complement the findings of the current study is discussed and pedagogical implications based on the results are also suggested.