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AVOIDANCE OF THE RELATIVE CLAUSE BY KOREAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

MATTHEW J. BJERS AND BOB A. MASSICOTTE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the following paper is to explore the use of the English relative clause by Korean speaking students of English. It will investigate the claim made by previous researchers that Korean learners of English are prone to avoiding the English relative clause because of its complex construction. In order to do this, the construction of the relative clause in both Korean and English will be explored. From there, student written pieces will be analyzed in an attempt to identify the frequency of relative clause constructions, and to what extent – if any – avoidance has occurred. Afterwards, pedagogical implications for this avoidance will be detailed, and potential strategies for teachers will be explored.

1.0 Introduction

Although the Korean language shares some similarities with other Asian languages, many linguists believe it to be a “language isolate,” meaning that it does not share a significant *genealogical* (the most common term is “genetic”) relationship with any another language (Wikipedia). This uniqueness may affect the ability of native Korean-speakers to learn other languages. Differences in L1 and L2 subsystem constructions are a major source of student errors, a problem that can be magnified when there is a substantial difference between the L1 and the L2 (see Schachter, 1974; Li, 1996). Such may be the case with Korean and English, two languages which differ greatly in syntax and morphology. To analyze all of the differences between Korean and English would be quite beyond the scope of this paper, thus the research here will focus on one such subsystem that troubles students of both languages: relative clause construction.

Kim and Shin (1994) summarized the difference between the English and Korean relative clauses:

Korean has a systematically uniform Head-constraint, and thus the relative clause comes first and then the head NP immediately follows it. The syntactic structure of the Korean relative clause construction is a mirror-image of English relative clause construction. This configuration specific to Korean gives radically different tracks or passages, along which information is to flow in discourse.” (p. 491)

Given the completely opposite way the two languages conceptualize the relative clause, transfer issues are bound to occur. Grady, Lee, and Choo (2001) discussed the difficulties that native English-speakers had acquiring the Korean relative clause. They found that many of the students struggled with the clause’s construction, and were often unable to

even identify the major parts of speech contained within. Conversely, Cho (2004) discussed the conceptual problems that native Korean-speakers have with the English relative clause. Here, the author stated that because what is acceptable in English would be much too “heavy” in Korean, Korean-speakers tend to avoid the English relative clause altogether, instead opting to use multiple simple sentences instead.

Cho is not the only researcher to posit that different relative clause constructions between students’ L1 and L2s results in avoidance. Schachter (1974) documented this phenomenon amongst speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Persian, and Arabic speaking students. Li (1996) went a step further, researching the *type* of avoidance that Chinese students use to side-step the English relative clause. Since Cho’s article simply listed issues pertaining to Korean learners of English, this paper would like to further investigate the extent to which Korean ESL students avoid using the relative clause. First, construction of the clause in both languages will be examined in order to better understand the difficulties that students face. Next, a sample group of essays composed by Korean ESL students will be analyzed to better understand the extent to which this avoidance takes place.

2.0 The Korean Relative Clause versus the English Relative Clause

The relative clause sets itself apart from other subsystems in that it is dominated by a noun phrase (NP) (Koffi, 2010). “A relative clause is a clause that modifies a noun, called its *head noun*, to restrict the set of potential referents, or to provide an additional description about the chosen referent(s)” (Lee & Stromwold, 2007, p. 2). In English, the relative clause (RC) is most often fronted by a relative pronoun (*who*, *whose*, *that*, etc.). This pronoun refers back to the NP that dominates the RC (Koffi, 2010, p. 432). This is the most apparent difference between the Korean RC and English RC. Relative pronouns do not exist in Korean. Instead, Korean uses a mandatory suffix *-(nu)n* also known as an adnominal (Lee & Stromwold, 2007). Both relative pronouns and the Korean marker are known as “complementizers,” meaning they connect the relative clause with the NP. Furthermore, the Korean complementizer is mandatory while English complementizers can be optional, as in the case with the relative pronoun ‘that’ (Koffi, 2010). We can see how the Korean complementizer marker operates in the example below (the marker is in **bold**):

(1) oli-lul nemettuli-**n** thokki-ka talamcwi-lul ccochaka-ss-ta

duck knock down rabbit squirrel chased

‘The rabbit that knocked down the duck chased the squirrel’

(Example from Lee & Stromwold, p. 5)

As we can see from this example, the marker is added to the predicate verb within the RC. In addition, another factor to consider is that this marker remains the same regardless of head noun qualities such as gender or animacy. It is also apparent from this example

that Korean uses head-final RCs (Shin, n.d.). This means that the NP that the RC modifies appears to the right of the RC. This is in contrast to the English RC construction in which the RC is found to the right of the NP being modified, or “head-initiated” RC construction (Shin). It can be inferred that the contrasting RC constructions between English and Korean, as well as the lack of relative pronouns in Korean, are of particular interest to English teachers teaching Korean English language learners (ELLs).

The “accessibility hierarchy” is key to understanding RC processing. “This notion suggests that it is easier to turn a noun phrase into a relative pronoun if that noun occurs in certain positions in the sentence than others.” (Koffi, 2010, p. 432). The NP that acts as the subject in both the main and subordinate clauses is the easiest to relativize for English language learners (ELLs) (Shin); however, relativizing an NP that lies in the object position of the main clause, subordinate clause, or both presents more of a challenge to speakers (Koffi, 2010, p.433). This is known as the “accessibility hierarchy.” Below are examples of the four types of RCs in Korean (subject-subject [SS], subject-object [SO], object-subject [OS], and object-object [OO]):

(6) SS

oli-lul nemettuli-**n** thokki-ka talamcwi-lul ccochaka-ss-ta

duck knock down rabbit squirrel chased

‘The rabbit that knocked down the duck chased the squirrel’

(7) SO

thokki-ka nemettuli-**n** oli-ka talamcwi-lul ccochaka-ss-ta

rabbit knock.down duck squirrel chased

‘The duck that the rabbit knocked down chased the squirrel’

(8) OS

talamcwi-ka thokki-lul nemettuli-**n** oli-lul ccochaka-ss-ta

squirrel rabbit knock.down duck chased

‘The squirrel chased the duck that knocked down the rabbit’

(9) OO

talamcwi-ka oli-ka nemettuli-**n** thokki-lul ccochaka-ss-ta

squirrel duck knock.down rabbit chased

‘The squirrel chased the rabbit that the duck knocked down’

(Examples from Lee & Stromwold, p. 5)

English uses strict constituent order to mark the different roles in which the RC operates in the four types of embedded clauses. Korean, on the other hand does not rely on word order, and instead uses case makers that are attached to the ends of the words, as demonstrated in the examples above. The Korean marker *-i/-ka* is added for nominative case and *-(l)ul* for accusative case (Kwon, Polinsky, & Kluender, 2006).

Examining the sentence structure in examples (6) through (9) reveals a striking structural difference between Korean and English sentences. Korean sentences are structured SOV and English sentences SVO. The head-final construction of the Korean RC lends itself well to SOV sentence construction. This is because placing too much distance between the object and the verb of the sentence make it difficult to process the sentence (Shin). The head-final structure in SOV sentences shortens the distance. Likewise, a head-initial RC is well suited to English because of its SVO sentence structure (Shin).

In summary, the differences in RC construction between English and Korean RCs highlight the difficulty Korean learners of English may encounter when forming sentences containing RCs. These fundamental differences can be found in the 1) use of complementizers, 2) head-final versus head-initial RC construction, and 3) case markers versus constituent order.

3.0 Avoidance of the Relative

Differences in the sub-systems of an L1 and an L2 have been shown to be an accurate predictor of student acquisition (Schachter). Similarities between the two can lead to an ease of learning, whereas differences between the two will lead to difficulties. If this is taken to be true, then analyzing the differences between the relative clause in an L1 and an L2, as we have done above, should yield insight into how easily learners will acquire it. That being said, acquisition of the relative clause is not always easily measured, the reason for this is because *avoidance* tends to skew data.

Schachter studied the use of the *restrictive* relative clause by native-speaking Japanese, Chinese, Persian, and Arabic ESL students. It was found that, while the Arabic and Persian speaking students produced just as many relative clauses in their writing as native speakers of English, the Chinese and Japanese used them more accurately. However, the Chinese and Asian speaking students were found to produce much fewer instances of the clause, opting instead to simplify or paraphrase. The author concluded that these students were avoiding the relative clause for fear of making mistakes. Avoidance, Schachter concluded, must be taken into account when assessing student ability, particularly in the case of the relative clause.

Similarly, Choi (2004) discussed the tendency of Korean students of English to avoid the English relative clause. Choi wrote:

They say, "I really want to meet the sportsman and I sent a letter to him" rather than, "I sent a letter to the sportsman who I really want to meet." It is partly because Koreans are unaccustomed to the post-modification of relative clauses and partly because they know that the indirect object will become too heavy when they follow the Korean word order. (p. 33)

Here, as was the case in the Schachter study, significant differences between the L1 and L2 relative clauses seem to result in avoidance. Choi posited that Korean students opt to construct two shorter sentences rather than risk making a mistake with the more complicated relative clause.

In analyzing the Schachter study, Li (1996) made the distinction between "conscious" avoidance and "subconscious" avoidance. Li describes conscious avoidance as:

A situation when a second language learner knows the existence of the rules of a certain structure but is not sure about the details, and therefore when there is a need to use this structure, he/she tries to use another structure or other structures to serve the same or similar communicative purpose. (p. 172)

This conscious avoidance is different from subconscious avoidance, which Li describes as a group of students "under-producing" a structure without realizing they are doing it. This puts the burden on researchers to try to determine whether students are intentionally or unintentionally avoiding structures. Li found that pragmatic reasons—not syntactic ones—were responsible for Chinese students under-producing the English relative clause in their compositions. She also identified common elements in the English writing produced by these students that indicated that students seemed to be unaware that a mistake in translation was occurring. For these reasons, Li concluded that Chinese students seemed to be subconsciously avoiding the relative clause.

In the following section, student-written essays will be analyzed in an attempt to determine whether or not Korean students do, in fact, avoid using the English relative clause as Choi suggested. If avoidance is found to occur, the type—conscious or subconscious—will be identified. As was the case in the Li study, a common approach to avoidance will be taken to mean that the avoidance is occurring subconsciously.

4.0 Student-written Pieces

In order to analyze Korean students' use of the relative clause, a sample group of student essays will be studied. Eleven student essays written by intermediate-level students of English were randomly chosen. The compositions were on a variety of topics

and are of various lengths. Most essays were written by a single student, but at least one was written by a pair. The essays were analyzed in order to determine the frequency with which the students writing them attempted to construct the relative clause. Table 1 contains information pertaining to the composition of the essays.

Although a low frequency of the relative clause was found to occur, students displayed various levels of comfort with constructing them. The following are indicative of attempted relative clause constructions in the pieces (all errors have been copied):

It is the beauty contest the test the beauty. – “Beauty Contest”

In addition, there is a team that has attracted attention in Korea Speed Festival 2014. – “Race Festival of the City.”

Many students who go to college do not make it through the four-year bachelor’s degree program in even six years. – “Is a College Education Worth it.”

Number of Papers	Number of Sentences	Attempted Relative Clauses
11	225	26

Table 1: Sentence Analysis

Although the figures in Table 1 indicate that the students attempted the relative clause at a rate of about two per piece (or once every ten sentences) this is not enough to prove that avoidance occurred, though it may indicate “under-producing” as Li called it. Thus, the distribution of the relative clause across the eleven essays analyzed must be looked at. Within the sample group, four essays attempted the relative clause four or more times. At the same time, five of them attempted them once or zero times. Far from indicating a common approach to the relative clause, this shows that in a limited sample group, Korean students of comparable English proficiencies have varying degrees of comfort with regard to the relative clause. This is similar to the situation found in the Schachter study, which found that Chinese and Japanese students attempted the relative clause much less than Persian and Arab students of comparable English abilities. As a reminder, Schachter found these students to be avoiding use of the relative clause.

Among the student papers that attempted the relative clause once or zero times, multiple sentences did seem to be preferred, however they were not always “shorter,” as was observed by Cho (2004). The following are situations in which the relative clause may have been avoided, all of which were taken from papers with the least frequent use of relative clauses:

Today I'm going to tell you about famous street food about beaver tails. It comes from Ottawa Canada. – Untitled paper.

The dogs can bark and have furs in the house. So the children can get allergic. – Keeping Pets.

And there was a real situation the students did too many killing games and he confused and he killed family and friend. – “Violent Video Game.”

Because of the low frequency of relative clause constructions among the pieces, and the uneven distribution of attempts across the sample compositions, it is assumed here that the students who wrote the pieces analyzed here “consciously avoided” using the relative clause to varying degrees. This conclusion is based on the information provided by Li (1996).

6.0 Pedagogical Implications

Due to a lack of the relative pronoun in the Korean language, a great place to start teaching the RC to Korean learners of English would be with the relative pronoun. Korean does use a suffix marker to show a relative clause, but this marker remains the same for all types of head nouns. English, on the other hand, uses different relative pronouns depending on the quality of the head noun. For instance, a head noun possessing the quality *animacy* will use the relative pronouns *who* or *that*, but not *which*.

A second consideration for Korean learners of English is the placement of the relative clause in English as it is opposite to the relative clause placement in Korean. In Korean, the relative clause is found to the left of the head noun that it is restricting, whereas it is to the right of the head noun in English. Therefore, it is possible that proofreaders of papers written by Korean learners of English may look for L1 interference in writing by looking for clauses restricting head nouns written before the head noun. As was the case in the excerpt taken from one of the student papers analyzed in this study, this excerpt is taken from an essay on beauty contests in Korea written by a Korean intermediate level ELL in middle school.

Named MS. KOREA. It is the beauty contest the test the beauty. In this contest only one winner gets the 2000 million won and the other six people each get 600 million won.

This excerpt is unique in that it does not necessarily show avoidance of the RC. Instead, it appears as though the writer included a Korean style head-final RC at the beginning of the sentence. “Named MS. KOREAN,” appears to restrict the head noun, “the beauty contest.” The excerpt does show an avoidance of the English complementizer, ‘which’ as the sentence could be rewritten as, “It is the beauty contest [which is named MS. KOREA.]” (The brackets are added to show the RC.)

5. 0 Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to highlight the fact that, although most language learners struggle with acquiring new relative clause constructions, it is those students whose L1 differs significantly from their L2 that struggle the most. The striking differences found in RC constructions between English and Korean highlight one of the many difficulties languages learners face. It is important to understand the reason and manifestations of this problem, both for teachers and for the Korean students themselves. The more that is understood about the nature of transfer issues, the more material can be developed to anticipate and circumvent problems.

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