An experimental study on the Accessibility Hierarchy and its implications for teaching of Korean noun-modifying clauses

The primary aim of the current study is to reinvestigate the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) hypothesis (Keenan & Comrie, 1977) as a typological universal of relative clauses (RCs) with reference to Korean as a foreign language (KFL). We also consider its implications for teaching Korean noun-modifying clauses.

Although the NPAH was initially proposed as a typological universal of RC formation, it was later extended to the order of difficulty in acquisition and processing of RCs in second language research (Eckman, 1977, 1985a; Eckman, Bell, & Nelson, 1988). Comrie (2007, p. 304) called such extension “the NPAH effect”, distinguishing it from the original typological generalization of the NPAH. The NPAH effect has long been regarded as typologically universal and widely accepted as an account for the acquisition difficulty of RC types. However, it has been disputed whether or not the formation and acquisition of RCs adheres the hierarchy in East Asian languages, such as Korean, Japanese and Chinese.

In this study, a computer-assisted Listening Comprehension Test (LCT) on Korean RCs was conducted to test the NPAH effect in L1 and L2 Korean with typologically different L1 backgrounds (English, Japanese and Chinese). All of the subjects from the four different L1 groups were tested with the different RC types (subject, direct object, indirect object and oblique headed RCs) and their reaction time was measured at each of them. The statistical analysis of the reaction time shows that the NPAH effect was not found in L1 and L2 performance on processing RCs in Korean, implying that the acceptability and interpretation of noun-modifying constructions in Korean do not primarily rely on syntactic constraints on grammatical functions of the NPAH such as an advantage of subject RCs over object RCs.

Based on the findings in the experiment, we argue that interpretation of Korean RCs depends on context and pragmatic factors and that therefore those factors should be taken into account when teaching Korean noun-modifying clauses as a foreign language. The current methods of teaching RCs in Korean are exclusively centred on acquiring correct modifier forms and accurate uses of them. However, the main drawback of such a form-focused teaching approach is that the teachers cannot actually observe how the learners understand and process the structure of RCs (Ju, 2012). Moreover, the fact that the majority of KFL textbook exercises on relativization rely upon the flawed “linear” method of noun-modifying clause teaching is particularly disappointing as nobody in the real world is likely to produce two separate sentences first, and then connect them with a modifying clause.

In conclusion, we suggest that semantic and pragmatic aspects of Korean RCs should be incorporated in context-based approaches that more closely represent real-world language usage (Yeon, 2012). Further research should be directed at examining the linguistic and pragmatic use of such clauses in real-world Korean using corpus analysis, and developing how the semantic and pragmatic features apply to teaching Korean noun-modifying clauses as a foreign language to improve teaching efficiency.
References


