

Challenge to subject–object asymmetry: Acquisition of relative clauses in L2 Korean

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Teaching Korean as a second language has over-focused on the morphological aspects of Korean relative clauses (RCs) without much consideration for the syntactic and pragmatic features (Kim 2007). The main drawback of such a form-focused teaching approach is that teachers cannot actually observe how Korean language learners process or produce the different RC types in Korean, particularly when the learners are from typologically different first language backgrounds (Ju 2012).

In this study, we investigate the subject–object asymmetry in our European learners' L2 Korean processing and production and their preference for subject relative clauses (SRCs) and object relative clauses (ORCs) in L2 Korean. Accordingly, the two proposals of the filler-gap dependency — Structural Distance Hypothesis (SDH) and Linear Distance Hypothesis (LDH) — are examined to observe British and Dutch speakers' preference for SRCs and ORCs in L2 Korean. Our research questions are 'Does the processing and production of L2 Korean by European learners follow the subject–object asymmetry?' and, considering the results of our two studies on L2 Korean, 'Does the subject–object asymmetry fully explain European learners' acquisition of RCs in L2 Korean?'

In second language acquisition (SLA), the difficulty of processing and producing an RC increases with an increase in the length of the filler-gap dependency. The SDH predicts a universal SRC advantage, whereas the LDH prefers ORCs in the Korean context, as shown in Table 1 as follows:

	LDH	SDH
English	favors SRCs	favors SRCs
Dutch		
Korean	favors ORCs	

Table 1. Preferred RC types in LDH and SDH by English, Dutch and Korean.

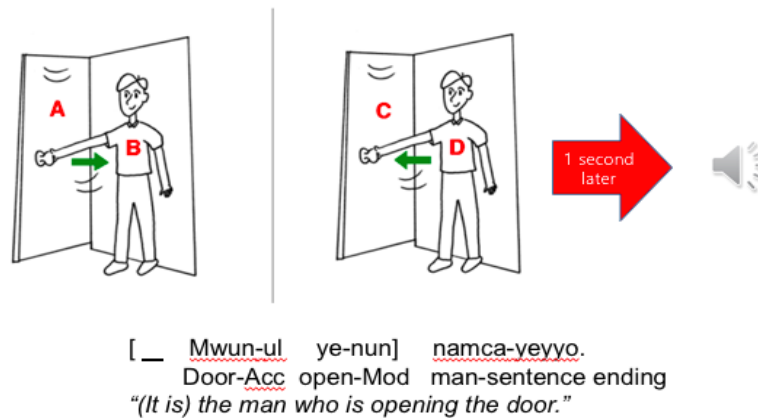
Regarding the developmental order in SLA, the LDH assumes perceiving systems as a linear array of words, whereas the SDH assumes computational operations as hierarchical syntactic representations. Thus, alternatively, it may be worthwhile to investigate the acquisition of relative clauses in Korean as a second language with learners from typologically different first language backgrounds, such as English and Dutch, in order to shed light on the factors that affect the processing and production of relative clauses.

Recent empirical findings on the acquisition of the head-final RCs of East Asian languages are far from conclusive (Tarallo & Myhill 1983; Ozeki & Shirai 2007; O'Grady et al. 2003; Jeon & Kim 2007), whereas the results of studies on English and other European languages have been mostly supportive of the SDH, such as Italian (Croteau 1995), French (Hawkins 1989), Swedish (Hyltenstam 1984) and Dutch (Frazier 1987).

Study 1 investigated the L2 Korean RC processing of English speakers by using a computer-assisted listening comprehension test (LCT) using SuperLab. The test consists of 20 listening comprehension tasks, 10 subject-headed RCs and 10 direct object-headed RCs and they are all programmed to appear randomly. The participants comprised 15 Korean

native speakers in the control group and 15 intermediate-level English learners of L2 Korean in the learner group.

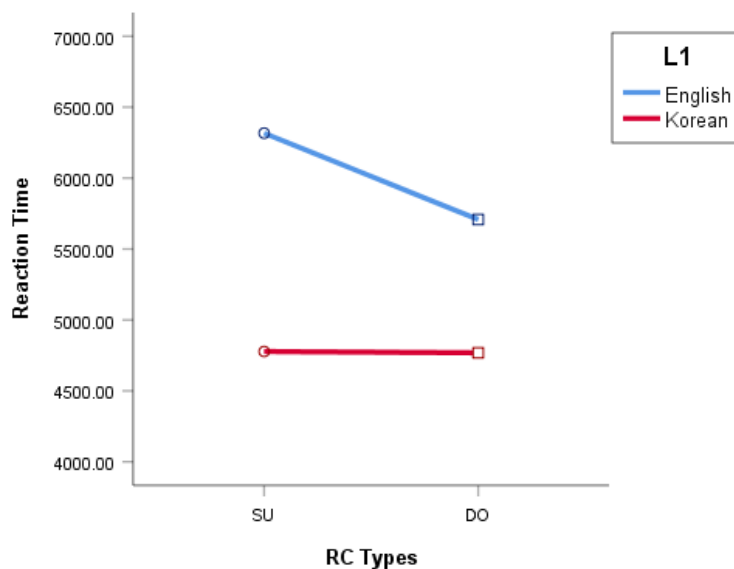
For example, the participants were expected to press the letter D on the answer pad after listening to the sentence ‘It is the man who is opening the door’ in Korean, as shown in Picture 1 below:



Picture 1. Example of LCT in Study 1.

Their answers and reaction times were automatically recorded in the computer software.

English speakers processed ORCs (the mean of the reaction times: 5707.79) more quickly than SRCs (the mean of the reaction times: 6316.85), showing the learners’ processing preference for ORCs over SRCs, as presented in Graph 1:

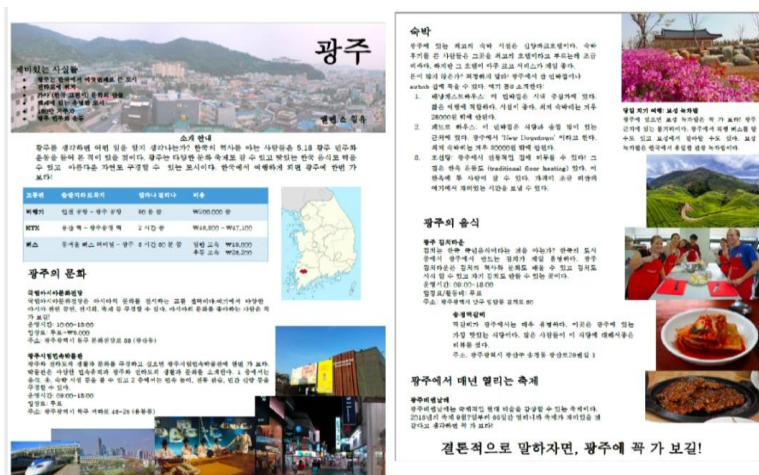


Graph 1. Reaction time of Korean and English speakers to Korean RCs.

According to the One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA, there was a significant effect of the RC types on English speakers’ processing of L2 Korean RCs ($F(1, 28) = 4.80, p < .05$).

Study 2 examined Dutch speakers’ production of L2 Korean RCs by using a free composition task. The participants comprised 16 Dutch students of L2 Korean, who completed lessons on Korean relative clauses. They volunteered to join the “Travel

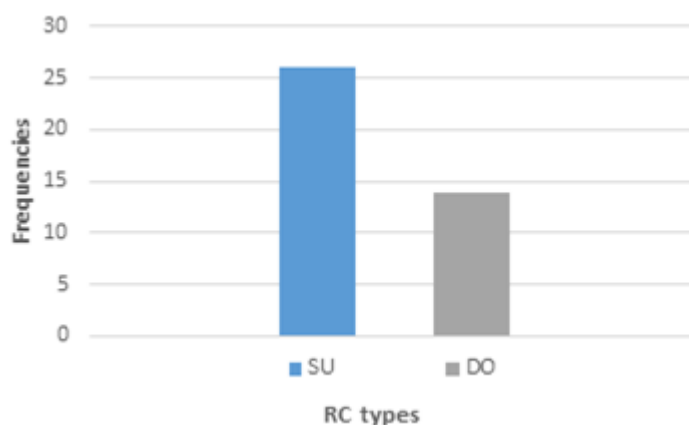
magazine project”, which is a free composition task, individually or as a pair. The task was to write a travel guide on places in Korea without a grammar requirement or length limit. Their composition was published in a digital magazine format at the end of the semester, as shown in Picture 2 below:



Picture 2. Travel magazine project.

Amongst all relative clause constructions found in the data, only subject and object RCs were coded, counted and totalled.

All 12 student groups' (four pairs and eight individuals) writings in their travel magazine project exhibited either or both SRCs and ORCs; a total of 26 subject RCs and a total of 14 examples of object RC were observed in the compositions, as shown in Graph 2:



Graph 2. Frequencies of Korean RCs.

In terms of individual production, the two-paired t-test revealed a significant difference in the occurrence of SRCs ($M=2.07$, $SD=1.69$) and ORCs ($M=1.07$, $SD=1.14$); $t(13)=2.25$, $p<.05$.

We found that English speakers processed ORCs more quickly than SRCs, implying that their processing of L2 Korean RCs was compatible with the LDH. In contrast to the results of Study 1, Dutch speakers produced more SRCs than ORCs in Study 2, implying that their production of Korean RCs was consistent with the SDH. Finally, the above-mentioned contrasting results were inconsistent with the prediction of the subject-object asymmetry. The empirical findings of our two studies revealed that neither the SDH nor the LDH could

fully explain European learners' acquisition of RCs in L2 Korean. Instead, they explained the learners' RC acquisition according to the types of tasks.

In conclusion, the memory-based LDH suggested that SRCs were more difficult to process than ORCs in L2 Korean because of the larger working memory decay. In contrast, the production asymmetry between SRCs and ORCs was associated with their structures. Therefore, both analytic and synthetic approaches are required to explain the implications of the SDH and LDH for the European learners' acquisition of RCs in L2 Korean.

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