Middle Construction processing of English by Korean learners

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This article explores how each Korean learners of English in different levels perceive and produce middle construction and what is the barrier to process English middle construction, in which the argument structure and the morpho-syntax are inconsistent to Korean. In this experiment, 70 low, intermediate, and advanced level learners of English participated as an experimental group, and 10 ESL teachers as a control group. The Grammatical Judgment Test for the perception test and the Sentence Completing Task for the production test were given for evaluating the English middle construction processing ability.

. Introduction

In a second language, where L1 and L2 verb meaning and argument structure match, we do not anticipate any learning problems, because of positive transfer. One might assume that an NP which is an agent always appears in subject position, and an NP which is a theme always appears in object position. Indeed, linking rules between semantics and syntax (e.g., Agent – Subject; Theme – Object) are thought to be part of UG and do not have to be learned on a case-by-case basis for each verb (Baker, 1988; Pinker, 1989). However, it is well known that semantics-syntax correspondences are not always so straightforward, as it is shown below.

(a) Mary <u>breaks</u> the bottle.
(b) This bottle <u>breaks</u> easily.

Break can appear with the Theme as Subject, as in (b). English is unusual in this respect, since cross-linguistically these alternations are typically associated with morphological changes on the verbs, as well as a change in the position of the NP.

French, Japanese and Korean frequently require extra morphology for such alternations; however, this morphology usually appears as a bound suffix on the verb or less frequently as ablaut(Jacobsen, 1992). Given the cross-linguistic differences

with morpho-syntax, one might expect differences in L2 representations. This article investigates how Korean learners of English process middle construction, in which argument structure and the morpho-syntax are inconsistent to Korean.

. Theoretical Background

Middle is meant to be a voice between active and passive. Middle verb constructions are exemplified in the following:

(1a) The bottle breaks easily.
(1b) The bread cuts easily.
(1c) The car drives nicely.
(1d) The knife cuts well.
(1e) She photographs well.
(1f) This book could sell.
(1g) This type of coal does not burn very easily.
(1h) This bread DOES cut.
(1i) This paper DOESN'T cut.

The middle take active form, not passive form, but their meaning is similar to that of passive. The middle sentences describe some property of the surface subject. Sentence (1a) describes the property of the bottle's being broken easily. Thus, middle sentences do not denote actions or events, but some states. The middle sentences usually take the present tense and they are adorned with some materials (manner adverbials: (1a-1e), modals: (1f) negation: (1g, 1i), focus: (1h, 1i)).

One interesting property of the middle verb is that they always have the corresponding transitive construction. Consider the following examples:

(2a) They break the bottle.
(2b) The bottle breaks easily.
(3a) They cut the bread.
(3b)The bread cuts easily.

The middle verbs in (b) sentences above have their corresponding transitive verbs in (a) sentences. This correlation or verb alternation indicates that middle verbs are derived form the corresponding transitive verbs, although they do not show any overt morphological change.

However the things are different when it comes to Korean.

(4a) Mary-nun Jongi-lul   Jaru-n-da (active voice)
    Mari-Nom   paper-Acc   cut-Prs-Decl.
(4b) Jongi-ga   Shipke   Jal-li-n-da. (passive voice)
    Paper-Nom easily   cut-Mor-Prx-Decl.

In Korean, morphology , the suffix and auxiliary should be attached to express the middle voice, like "li" in (4b). So Korean learners of English may have difficulty in processing middles, because of negative transfer, as claimed by Juff(1998).

. The purpose of this paper

The purposes of this study are as follows;

1. To see how Korean learners of English perceive and produce English middle construction.
2. To see whether there are differences between learners with different levels, in processing middle construction.
3. To see how much Koreans stick to passive sentences in dealing with middle voice.
4. To see whether there is a correlation between "knowing that" and "knowing how" in dealing with middle construction.

. Methodology of the experiment

1. Participants

Subjects were chosen on the basis of people who learned English as a second language in the Korean classroom setting. They consisted of 70 college students, most of who have enrolled in 2 English related classes and whose ages ranged from 20 to 25. They were divided into three groups according to their TOEFL and TOEIC scores. There were 20 advanced level learners, 33 intermediate learners, and 17 low level learners. Ten native speakers of English who were working as ESL instructors in Korea participated in this experiments as a control group.

2. Method

The test was conducted in October 2002. Fifteen minutes were given for the completion of the tests on the basis of pilot study.

The experiment was dividend into 2 sessions. One being perception test, and the other one production test. To see how learners perceive the middle voice, a

grammatical judgment test was given, in which subjects had to judge the acceptability of 27 sentences. Subjects were asked to choose one from three responses: 'correct', 'incorrect', or 'I do not know'. For this task, 11 middle formed sentences, 11 passive formed sentences and 5 control sentences were presented randomly. For the production test, sentence completion task was given, in which subjects were asked to complete the sentences by using the verbs that were provided. Nine middle voice verb classes and 5 control verb class were presented. The sentences that were given were taken from Chung(1996). To prevent the subjects from having difficulty in manipulating sentences, 4 ESL instructors had proof-read for the sentences beforehand.

. Results

	Group(I)	Group(J)	Mean Difference(I-J)	Sig.
Perception	Control	Advanced	16.36%	.189
		Intermediate	57.55%*	.000*
		Low	29.47%	.003*
Production	Control	Advanced	29.44%*	.002*
		Intermediate	75.66%*	.000*
		Low	49.95%*	.000*

<Table1> Result from one-way ANOVA test of perceiving & producing middles

According to Table 1, intermediate & low level learners have difficulties in processing middles in both perception and production. Specifically, intermediate level learners show the lowest ability to deal with middles. Advanced level learners had no significant difference to control group in perceiving middles, however, they showed difficulties in producing middles.

	Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Middle perception	Control	Advanced	16.36%	.189
		Intermediate	57.55%*	.000*
		Low	29.47%*	.003*
Passive Perception	Control	Advanced	-13.64%	.313
		Intermediate	-46.72%*	.000*
		Low	-22.14%*	.035*

<Table 2> Results from one-way ANOVA test in perceiving middles & passives

In comparison to perception of middles, intermediate level learners show strong tendency to stick to passives. Also, low level learners use passives instead of middles. But, native speakers and advanced level learners do not rely on passives too much as Table(2) shows.

	N	Correlation	Sig.
		Df	Sig.
Advanced	20	-.199	.401
		19	.000
Intermediate	33	-.368	.035*
		32	.000
Low	17	-.331	.195
		16	.405

<Table 3> T-test of middle perceiving & passive perceiving

<Table 3> shows how much passive construction processing affects learners when they need to process middle voices. For intermediate level learners, there is a correlation between middle perceiving and passive perceiving.   It tells that the rule of making passive construction is a barrier to processing middles for them. However, for advanced and low level learners, there is no significant correlation between perceiving middles and passives.

	N	Correlation	Sig.
		Df	Sig.
Advanced	20	.608*	.004*
		19	.719
Intermediate	33	.486*	.004*
		32	.268
Low	17	.514*	.035*
		16	.713

<Table 4> T-test of perception & production test

There is significant correlation between perception test and production test. It proves that the production ability of middles "knowing how" is not by coincidence, but the result of the "knowing that". However, production ability were lower than perception ability for all levels of learners.

. Interpretation

Korean learners of English are not accustomed to middle construction while native speakers of English prefer to use middles in the right situation. The reasons may be (a) they do not know that there is a middle structure in English, and that there is little instruction on that structure in English classroom, (b) they prefer to using passive structure, which they got from the form-focused instruction in a classroom setting, (c) they use "transfer" strategy from their native language.

The results indicate that advanced and even low level learners have better abilities in processing middles than intermediate level learners. It reflects that there is a U-shaped behavior. The U-shaped behavior is characterized by a stage of a target-like performance, a second stage marked by errors, and a third stage of returning to target like behavior. Intermediate level learners interpret and produce sentences syntactically and focus on the form of sentences, ignoring semantic and argument structure aspects of sentences. At advanced and low levels, greater lexical and semantic differentiation was noted, and these learners show less difficulties in processing middles, as claimed by Ard and Gass(1987). Consequently, even though low level learners showed some difficulty in processing middles, as should be given their catagorization, they did not show greater difficulty as the intermediate level learners. Thus intermediate level learners proved to be the weakest in processing middles. For keeping intermediate level learners from being in a fossilized state and making the middles perceived and produced in a right way, argument structure focused instruction should be emphasized rather than sticking to form focused instruction in a classroom setting too much, if there is no chance of exposure to that structure.

The finding also shows that advanced level learners do not show any big difference to native speakers in a perception test, however do show difference in a production test. This implies that after the explicit teaching of this structure, the long period of repeated opportunity to use that knowledge is needed so that it can be automatized.

There are 2 advantages of teaching middle construction. It helps students to use the right expression in the right situation, since passives and middles have

definitely different meaning. The middle voice is also learnable, because it affords English speakers another option for achieving theme-rheme requirements in discourse as Rutherford (1987) claimed. Second, students may feel much more comfortable from the burden of making the passive structure. In this study, more than 94% of students feel difficult in processing passive structures, but they still use passive forms in producing the middles. However, as far as they get to know the middle construction, which has much simpler form that passive structure, it will help students to get out of the stress of building passive structure, when expressing the middle voice.

. Conclusion

This article has presented to show that teachers should teach grammar not in a form-focused way, but rather in a meaning-based way so that learners do not rely solely on forms before the semantic process. Intermediate level learners should especially be instructed more on the basis of a meaning focused teaching method, which is well designed, since they tend to emphasize on the form too much. Second, it strongly supports the idea that middles need to be learned. In this research, 98% of native speakers of English preferred to use middles in the right situation, rather than passives. Therefore it is necessary to introduce middles as one of ways to express a passive meaning in the active form so that Korean learners of English can convey the right expression in communicating through English.

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