Acquisition Process
of English Relative Clauses as L2

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Jaemin Kim, 2013, Acquisition Process of English Relative Clauses as L2. Studies in Modern Grammar 71. 115-133. This paper investigates Korean learners’ comprehension pattern of English relative clauses. Also Korean learners’ general principle for interpretation of English complex sentences as L2 is discussed. Though, for the native speakers’ general principle, Conjoined-clause strategy, Left-to-Right strategy and Functional Principle are argued in linguistic literatures, none of them is fully supported by Korean learners’ data. Thirty High School students and sixty college students were tested in the experimental tests. As the results of de Villiers et al.(1979), Korean adult learners have shown the order of comprehension, as SS > OO > OS > SO type, and the number of possible candidates of the gap in relative clauses, not just the distance, has made them difficult to comprehend. To see the distribution of the relative clauses in Korean textbooks, I have investigated two High School textbooks. Both the amount and the diversity of relative clause types seem not to reflect Korean learners’ developmental process properly.

[Key Words: Language acquisition, Relative Clauses, Conjoined-clause Strategy, Left-to-Right Strategy, Functional Strategy, Experimental test, L2]

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1. Introduction

Relative clauses in English have been studied extensively because of their different structures from the ordinary English sentences. English has a number of different relative clauses structures, as follows;

(1) a. John bought the book [which Mary recommended ____].
    b. John bought the book [that Mary recommended ____].
    c. John bought the book [Mary recommended ____].

As these examples show, they can begin with a relative pronoun, a complementizer such as *that,* or neither. They share at least two features. First, they modify a nominal element (often called the Head). For example, in (1), the relative clause restrict the possible referent of *book* from any member of the set of books to the particular book that Mary recommended. Second, the relative clause contains a gap that is matched with the head. Thus, in (1), it is assumed that there is an understood element, *book* not toy, that is recommended by Mary.

There is a special kind of relative clause (2), often called *Free Relative Clause*, that does not share the first feature of the relative clause;

(2) I don’t know [what Mary recommended __].

Though the free relative is regarded as relative clause generally, it is not dealt with in this paper.

In this paper, first of all, the developmental process and/or the competence of the English relative clauses for the Korean students will be investigated. Though most acquisition studies of English relative clauses have focused on the native speaker’s developmental process, the developmental process and the competence of the constructions for non-native speakers are discussed in this paper. Also, the acquisition process of the native speakers will be compared with that of Korean