Correlation between Comprehension and Production in Learning Epistemic Modals by Korean EFL Learners

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This research aims to examine to what extent the knowledge and processes used by Korean learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) for comprehension of epistemic modal (EM) verbs are related to those of production and why the learners’ ability to use EM in comprehension is often delayed or not realized in their production. EM is a linguistic means to present one’s evaluation and degree of confidence in the knowledge described in one's utterance. The production test adopted a timed free writing test type, while the comprehension test used a fill-in-the-blank type with two EM answer choices given. Also, an untimed guided rewriting test was used for measuring production and comprehension. Correlation results in this study suggest the production and comprehension are strongly interrelated in such a way that syntactic competence in EM first induces a connection between form and meaning, facilitating the constructions of sentences using EM. However, without recourse to a firm grasp of semantic knowledge of EM, it is difficult to lead EM to emerge in real communication. Thus, syntactic competence combined with semantic competence of EM is essential in the actual uses of EM. (189)

I. INTRODUCTION

As a researcher and teacher of English in an EFL setting, it is not unusual to witness students having a good grasp of the rules of linguistic features and vocabulary, but not being proficient at expressing what they already know or understand whether in speaking or writing (Kwan-Young Oh, 2000). It is generally assumed that comprehension tends to
precede production in the process of learning, so the resulting differential ability between comprehension and production at a certain point of learning may well be accepted.

However, if the gap between the two is significant and continuous as is often the case in a Korean EFL setting, students would feel that their knowledge of grammar or vocabulary does not contribute to real communication. It may also lead to frustration, subsequently lowering their interest in learning English. Learning modal verbs, particularly epistemic modals (EM), appears to be a typical example of a form that EFL students understand far better than they can produce (Flowerdew, 1998; McEnery & Kifle, 2002). EM is a linguistic means to present one’s evaluation and degree of confidence in the knowledge being described in one’s utterance (Coates, 1983). Despite this important value of EM in communication, Korean learners of English prefer not to use EM in their utterances or tend to substitute other linguistic means for EM (Hera Chu, 2007; Sun-Young Oh, 2007).

This phenomenon and its potential problems focused my attention on the relationship between comprehension and production of EM, and ways to help transfer learners’ ability in comprehension to production. Therefore, this research aims to examine to what extent the knowledge and processes used for EM comprehension are related to those of production and if related, why learners’ ability to use EM in comprehension is often delayed or not realized in their production.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Explicit and Implicit Knowledge

The types of knowledge important in describing the process of learning are explicit and implicit knowledge (R. Ellis, 2004, 2005). The distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge is often compared to ‘knowing about’ (explicit) and ‘knowing how to’ (implicit) (Anderson, 1981). Explicit knowledge is held consciously and intentionally, and is learnable and verbalizable, whereas implicit knowledge is acquired unconsciously and unintentionally, and is not verbalizable and normally used for spontaneous communication (R. Ellis, 2004). For example, children learning a first language can use a number of words and rules without conscious effort, but may not verbalize the rules they used for their utterances. In this case, the knowledge that the children have can be referred to as implicit knowledge. In contrast, English learners only with explicit knowledge may have the ability to explain the rules of English, but may not be able to apply their knowledge in real communication correctly. However, the distinction between explicit and implicit does not mean that the two types of knowledge are mutually exclusive. Learners may have both