

Testing the Validity of Crosslinguistic Influence in EFL Learning

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This study questions the validity of Crosslinguistic Influence (CLI) in EFL Learning. A ten-minute grammaticality judgement test involving resumptive pronouns in English relative clauses was given to 15 female subjects. The research results, which were analysed in terms of language transfer and universalist arguments, support the existence of a universal process that guides L2 learning, and some common developmental patterns between the two processes of L1 and L2 learning. Hence, the universalist view should be given at least equal weight as the CLI approach.

1. Introduction

There are two major linguistic approaches to explaining second language acquisition (SLA): the universalist view and the language transfer/crosslinguistic influence (CLI) approach. The CLI approach claims that the interference of the L1 (mother tongue) on the L2 (second/foreign language) is the major explanation for the points of difficulties and errors by L2 learners and for learner varieties in L2. Universalists, on the other hand, argue that there is a universal process that guides learners' L2 acquisition process regardless of their L1 background. They suggest that

universal grammar available to L1 is also operative to L2 acquisition, since the same kind of cognitive process involved in children's learning L1 can be applied to L2 learning. This study compares Korean with English in terms of possible positions of relativization and possible locations of resumptive pronouns in relative clauses. A grammaticality judgement test was taken by 15 Korean female subjects to find out which of the two approaches has more explanatory strength.

II. Literature Review

Odlin (1989) provides a literature review slightly biased toward the CLI approach by quoting a number of studies supporting it (Flynn, 1984; Flynn & Espinal, 1985; Schachter & Hart, 1979). Gass (1983) also argues that the use of resumptive pronouns in English relative clauses is influenced by L1. She completed a study with native Persian speakers whose language employs such pronouns. These speakers accepted sentences such as, "*I know the woman that John gave the potato to her*", more frequently than speakers of languages that do not allow resumptive pronouns.

Singler (1988) found that speakers of Vai, a West African language prohibiting pronoun retention in subject position, seldom produced resumptive pronouns in the same position of English relative clauses, whereas speakers of Dan, another West African language allowing pronoun retention in subject position, produced them quite frequently. Hyltenstam (1984) also found evidence for transfer. In his study, speakers of Greek and Persian, languages that permit pronoun retention, used resumptive pronouns far more frequently than speakers of Finnish and Spanish, languages that, like English, ban such pronouns. This paper questions the theoretical validity of CLI approach. An experimental method modeled after Gass (1983) was employed, and the results were

analyzed in terms of the two approaches in SLA.

III. The Comparison of Korean with English in Relative Clauses and Positions of Resumptive Pronouns

While English allows relativization in six different positions, in Korean it is allowed in only five syntactic locations excluding OCOMP position as shown in the translation of six English sentences:

- (1) SU: The musician who played at the concert is from China.
 DO: The musician whom we met at the concert is from China.
 IO: The musician to whom we sent the message is from China.
 OPREP: The musician from whom we received a lesson is from China.
 GEN: The musician whose son played at the concert is from China.
 OCOMP: The musician who George is taller than is from China.
 (Odlin, 1989, p. 100): SU = subject; DO = direct object; IO = indirect object; OPREP = prepositional object; GEN = genitive; OCOMP = object of comparison
- (2) SU: khonssetheyse yencwuhān ku umakkanun cwungkwukeyse wassta.
 at the concert played the musician China from came
 DO: wulika khonssetheyse mannan ku umakkanun cwungkwukeyse wassta.
 we at the concert met the musician China from came
 IO: wulika sesinul ponayn ku umakkanun cwungkwukeyse wassta.
 we message sent the musician China from came
 OPREP: wulika leysunul patuncekiissnun ku umakkanun
 cwungkwukeyse wassta.
 we lesson got the musician
 China from came
 GEN: atuli khonssetheyse yencwuhān ku umakkanun
 cwungkwukeyse wassta.

son at the concert played the musician
 China from came
 OCOMP: * coocika te khun ku umakkanun cwungkwukeyse wassta.
 George taller the musician China from came

Korean is a SOV language and shows Left Branching Direction in forming relative clauses, unlike English (SVO) that relies on Right Branching Direction. Like English, Korean prohibits resumptive pronouns in all relativizable positions.

TABLE 1
Relativizable Positions and Possible Locations of Resumptive Pronouns

	Korean		English	
	Relativization	Resumptive Pronoun	Relativization	Resumptive Pronoun
SU	O	X	O	X
DO	O	X	O	X
IO	O	X	O	X
OPREP	O	X	O	X
GEN	O	X	O	X
OCOMP	X	X	O	X

O = possible; X = impossible

IV. Method

A ten-minute grammaticality judgement test containing 9 sentences was performed to determine whether the subjects were able to correctly reject resumptive pronouns in English relative clauses. In view of the

standard prescriptive grammar of English that does not allow pronoun retention in relative clauses, all of the 9 sentences in Table 2, with resumptive pronouns used, should be regarded as ungrammatical, even though sentences 3, 4, and 5 are viewed significantly better by a number of native speakers consulted.

TABLE 2
Grammaticality Judgement Test

Use letters O and X to indicate whether the following sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical.

1. The boy who he loved Mary is an Italian. ()
 2. The boy whom Mary saw him is an Italian. ()
 3. This is the man whom they think that if Mary marries him, then everyone will be happy. ()
 4. This is the man whom Tom told me when he will invite him. ()
 5. This is the man whom Jason made the claim that he will invite him to the party. ()
 6. Mary is the girl whom Tom gave a book to her. ()
 7. The boy who we bought a newspaper from him came to visit me today. ()
 8. The woman who her husband is a lawyer came to visit me today. ()
 9. John, who Bill is taller than him, plays basketball much better. ()
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To enhance the quality of the data and the research results, an attempt was made to control subject variability by following SLA research guidelines given in Larson-Freeman and Long (1991) and Seliger and Shohamy (1989). The subjects were selected so that they could be as homogeneous as possible in terms of sex, age, L2 communicative competence, length of formal instructional exposure to an L2, and

postnatal extraneous L2 input. The subjects, selected from 167 students, were 15 Korean females whose age ranged from 20 to 21. All of them graduated from high school in Korea and learned English mainly through the grammar-translation method. At the time of this study, they were third-year students in the College of International Studies at Korea Maritime University and had taken three proficiency-oriented English conversation courses at the university. None of them were English majors, and none had overseas language learning experience. Their L2 communicative competence was in the intermediate level as indicated by their recent KMU Institutional TOEIC scores, which ranged between 600 and 700. They all reported a similar degree of communication difficulties in the classroom, and none of them had clear metalinguistic knowledge about resumptive pronouns in English.

V. Results

TABLE 3
The Number of Subjects Who Provided Correct Answers for Each Sentence

The number of subjects who indicated		
Sentences	O (grammatical): incorrect response	X (ungrammatical): correct response
1 (SU)	0/15 = 0 %	15/15 = 100 %
2 (DO)	1/15 = 6.6 %	14/15 = 93.4 %
3 (DO)	11/15 = 73.3 %	4/15 = 26.7 %
4 (DO)	7/15 = 46.6 %	8/15 = 53.4 %
5 (DO)	9/15 = 60 %	6/15 = 40 %
6 (IO)	2/15 = 13.3 %	13/15 = 86.7 %
7 (OPREP)	3/15 = 20 %	12/15 = 80 %
8 (GEN)	5/15 = 33.3 %	10/15 = 66.7 %
9 (OCOMP)	7/15 = 46.6 %	8/15 = 53.4 %

The relativized positions in 9 sentences given in Table 2 are as follows: 1, SU; 2, 3, 4, and 5, DO; 6, IO; 7, OPREP; 8, GEN; 9, OCOMP.

In Table 3, the number of subjects who incorrectly answered 'grammatical' is listed in the left column along with the percentage ratios for each sentence, and in the right column, the number of subjects who correctly responded 'ungrammatical' and its percentage are listed.

VI. Discussion

As for 1 and 2, almost all subjects, correctly rejected the two sentences as ungrammatical. CLI can well account for these results except for the incorrect response of one subject for 2. It can be argued that since Korean and English are similar in that both allow relativization and ban resumptive pronouns in SU and DO positions, their correct responses are due to the positive influence of L1. The subjects' responses for 3, 4, and 5, however, are quite anomalous in view of CLI. DO is relativized in all of the three sentences, therefore, what is normally expected is that the subjects, provided with positive transfer (structural similarities between L1 and L2) from L1, would uniformly treat them as ill-formed contrary to what the results show. Equally puzzling is the fact that whereas only one subject accepted pronoun retention for 2, in which the same DO position is relativized, more than half of them accepted it for the three sentences.

As for the results in 6 and 7, CLI may serve again as a plausible explanation since L1 and L2 are alike in IO and OPREP positions. Most of the subjects provided correct answers which were reflected in the notion of positive transfer from their L1, even though the acceptance of resumptive pronouns by two subjects for 6 and three subjects for 7 remains to be explained. GEN and OCOMP positions in 8 and 9 are another area of positive transfer in that both L1 and L2 prohibits pronoun

retention. As for the latter position, the question does not even arise because relativization itself is not possible in L1. Here again, CLI predicts that all subjects would transfer their L1 knowledge to the data and correctly mark them ungrammatical. Surprisingly, many students provided incorrect responses by accepting the two sentences (five students for 8 and seven students for 9), which CLI account cannot explain in a straightforward manner. In summary, the explanatory power of CLI is limited to subjects' correct responses, and their high degree of preference for using resumptive pronouns, especially in 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9, cannot be captured by the theory.

The frequency of right answers ('ungrammatical') for each of six sentences excluding 3, 4, and 5 are as follows:

(3) 1(SU):	100 %
2(DO):	93.4 %
6(IO):	86.7 %
7(OPREP):	80 %
8(GEN):	66.7 %
9(OCOMP):	53.4 %

As shown in (3), the frequency gradually decreases from SU to OCOMP. This frequency hierarchy reflects Keenan and Comrie's (1977) universal implicational sequence that they claimed holds constant across languages and is related to varying degrees of comprehensibility of the six positions: Clauses relativizing SU, DO, and IO are more easily comprehended than ones relativizing OPREP, GEN, and OCOMP positions (4):

- (4) Degree of Comprehensibility: SU > DO > IO > OPREP > GEN > OCOMP (Fox, 1987)

Two generalizations can be drawn from the results of this study: first, subjects are more likely to view pronoun retention as acceptable when structures are cognitively taxing and second, the different degree of preference for the use of resumptive pronouns shown in the results correlates with the comprehensibility hierarchy given in (4). Further support for these generalizations comes from subjects' answers for 3, 4, and 5, compared with their responses for 2. Unlike 2, relative clauses in the three sentences are long and complex with an embedded clause, thus, far more subjects tend to accept pronoun retention in the same DO position, because it aids in comprehension by making the cognitively taxing structure of relative clauses more transparent.

The foregoing discussion leads to the conclusion that the universalist view offers an account better than or at least as good as that provided by the CLI approach. The study results provided in (3) clearly support Keenan and Comrie's universal hierarchy as a good predictor of in which relativized position subjects are more likely to employ resumptive pronouns. While SU is the least likely position to have such pronouns, OCOMP is the most likely position for pronoun retention, GEN the next most likely, and so forth. A fair number of English native speakers I consulted also agreed that they would prefer resumptive pronouns in GEN and OCOMP including DO position in sentences like 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9.

Gass (1983) found evidence for the above hierarchy, too. In her study, the frequency of relative clause types used in English native speaker compositions correlated with this hierarchy, showing SU relative clauses being the most frequent and OCOMP sentences the least frequent. In Lee (1999), it was found that the hierarchy is reflected in the frequency of accurate production of different relative clause types by Korean EFL students, therefore, moving along the hierarchy in (4): students' accuracy decreased as their errors increased. If the order of frequency/accuracy can be equated with the order of acquisition and students' errors reflect their

developmental sequence, then the developmental stages language learners undergo in learning different relative clause types would be the same for both L1 and L2 learning: (4).

With the existence of quite a few other studies where the implicational hierarchy is attested for other foreign languages (Hyltenstam 1984; Gass and Ard 1984; Fox 1987), the acquisition order for different relative clause types provided in (4) may remain the same irrespective of the learners' L1 background. Since the results of the present study argue for the existence of a universal process that guides L2 learning, and some common developmental patterns between the two processes of L1 and L2 acquisition, the universalist view should be given at least equal weight as the CLI approach.

VII. Limitations and Implications for Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Considering the small number of subjects and the short ten-minute grammaticality judgement test in this study, future research could provide a more thorough investigation to illuminate conclusions about the relative weight of universalist arguments over the CLI approach. Those structural areas where CLI and other approaches have more explanatory power should also be more clearly identified.

The results of this study imply that adults may learn English, in some aspects, in a way similar to how children learn it as a native language. This suggests that the traditional grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods in the classroom may be less effective compared with the direct method where only the target language is used. If this is the case, a variety of immersion programs where natural learning environments are simulated should be implemented in EFL learning.

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