

A Short-term English Program for Korean Collegians and Their Grammatical Errors

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I. Introduction

Technically and/or functionally, language is a tool for communication. We employ two distinct media, letters and speech sounds, to communicate with others. English has long become the global language in many fields. Thus, many ESL learners try to learn English for international communication in both spoken and written language. However, unfortunately, English has been simply an academic subject in Korea for a long time. Though all Korean students spend an enormous amount of time and energy to improve their English – more accurately, their English scores, they find the results have

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been unsatisfactory in terms of the command of English. Thus, many Korean students go abroad for both long-term and short-term training to narrow the gap between their expectations and reality, since the need for English proficiency is rapidly expanding. However, not all the language programs abroad have proven to be successful and not all the students have succeeded in improving their English proficiency up to their potentials and expectations.

The central purpose of this paper is to report an assessment of a part of the curriculum of a short-term English/Culture camp held in the U. S. A. More specifically we focus on the Korean students' written samples and aim to find their repeated common errors. At the heart of this analysis is our hope that the understanding of the gap between the students' mother language and the target language would greatly help reduce the chance of their failures to meet their expectations to improve their English proficiency through a short-term language camp. A part of their effort to improve the command of a foreign language should be to narrow the gap, that is, to decrease the number and range of the systematic errors.

A language is a system of rules. Whereas it is true that there is some common core that all human languages share, each language has a unique set of rules that dictates the way communication ought to be carried in sounds and letters. The learners of a second language, therefore, are expected to make mistakes and errors in the target language they are learning. We aim to investigate and analyze the patterns in the syntactic errors that they make in their daily journals. In fact, a great portion of learning process involves making mistakes and errors. In other words, nobody can learn or acquire a language, whether it is a native, a foreign, or a second language without experiencing failures. One way to recognize errors is to study writings of the learners, since the sentences are readily accessible. That's why we have chosen the learners' writings for the present analysis.

The findings of the generalized and repeated errors of the ESL learners would be beneficial to both students and teachers of English to Korean

students. First, it would be extremely helpful for the students since the errors are indicative of what their weak areas are. By understanding and looking at the errors that they make themselves, the students can enhance the understanding of the system of English sentences. Often, students consider the rules of grammar as something to memorize, rather than something to use. It will be helpful for the teachers of English as well to recognize the syntactic errors of ESL students, since they might be able to understand the gap that the ESL learners have to overcome. Moreover, the native teachers can become aware of the syntactic rules that they are sometimes not aware of. Hopefully, error analysis let ESL teachers explain why their students make a particular set of errors.

2. The Camp

A short-term intensive language program(STILP) is usually defined as a program which: (i) is approximately one month or less in duration, (ii) takes place in the target language culture, and (iii) includes a minimum of three hours of classroom instruction in the target language per day. This particular camp is a clear example of STILP. The Winter English/Culture Camp is annually organized and run by the English Language Institute of Carson Newman College located in Eastern Tennessee in the U. S. A. for a period of four consecutive weeks. This paper of a case study of the recent camp held from January 11 until February 10, 2007. The camp participants are all young Korean college students (ages 19 to 24 years, the average age is 22.3), mostly sophomores and juniors. Eight students attending at a four-year college in Korea participated in this particular intensive program run by one of the sister institutions of their school. They all stayed in one of the dormitories on the campus.

As the name of the camp indicates, the curriculum consists a combination of language classes and a set of cultural activities. Each day students take two hours of spoken language for listening and speaking classes and another two hours of written language for reading and writing classes. One hour is reserved twice a week for grammar to reinforce their knowledge of the system of English sentences. Thus, the total of eighty eight hours of language classes are given to the students. In addition to those language classes, the camp organizes daily activities to encourage the students to experience American culture. We let students participate in various types of activities each day such as concerts, ball games, conversation clubs, seminars and home stays. It is not easy to calculate the amount of time for those cultural activities, since some of the activities are not required for every student. However, it might be safe to say that the students spent more time in cultural activities than class hours.

The classes were taught by two experienced ESL teachers. One was responsible for the spoken language class in the morning and the other for the written English class. Each class used a textbook and some supplementary materials. Homeworks and projects were given every day to enhance interaction with American collegians.

3. The Research Design

The project came about as a result of discussions among the ESL teachers that showed their keen interest in what the students' problem areas were and what should be done to help them overcome their difficulties.

The project was carried out as a part of the overall design of the camp. For the written language class reserved for two hours each day, all the camp participants were required to write eight short essay papers throughout the

camp, on average two essays per week. The topics of the essays are given below. Then, the instructor of the writing class assigned each student's journals to two native speakers of English and let them make corrections whenever necessary. We asked the judges to locate clear syntactic errors. Thus, many of the students' awkward expressions that sound odd but are somewhat acceptable are not included for the current analysis.

(1) My First Impression of U. S. A.

The Culture Shock

My Best Friend

My Life Dream

The Eternity Flower

My Experience in Dixie Stampede

My Homestay Story

My Experience in CN

The instructions given to the students are as follows. The students were given twenty four hours per topic and were allowed to consult dictionaries. There is no minimum requirement in terms of the length of the papers. At the same time, however, the students were told that each paper was expected to be about ten to fifteen lines. The collected papers show that the range of lines range eight to thirty five lines, depending on students and paper topics.

We collected those corrected papers at the end of the camp and investigated their errors with the hope that we could find some generalizations in those errors and mistakes. Then, we attempted to categorize those repeated errors. Errors are informative of the gap between a person's native language L1 and the target language L2, since they are supposed to make 'systematic' errors. The consistency of making the same errors would indicate that these errors also constitute a system that needs to be corrected.

4. The Results of Error Analysis

It is true that the ill-formed sentences by ESL learners can be subcategorized into mistakes and errors. Mistakes are occasional lapses that people make in speech or writing. Thus, even native speakers could make mistakes even though they are aware of all the rules of the language. The mistakes might refer to those deviations that the students are unable to correct by themselves. If they are able to, we might call them 'mistakes' to distinguish from errors. In that sense, some of the deviant utterances under analysis should be mistakes. But, for the same of convenience, we take all the collected ill-formed utterances into consideration.

The average number of lines per composition is a little more than fourteen, which is approximately what the teachers expected. It is very interesting to see that as the camp continues the length of the papers tend to increase. Thus, most of the long papers were written at the second half of the camp. Each separate paper includes sentences ranging from three words to a maximum of twenty eight words.

The total number of errors that we collected from the writings of eight students is 1,370. It means that, on average, a student is found to have made 172 errors: twenty two per paper. Most of the sixteen judges report that they are more or less surprised to find that they are able to express their ideas quite clearly, though they repeat some common errors.

4.1 Determiners

It is not surprising that the most prevalent of errors undoubtedly comes from the syntactic category of determiners in each of the papers by each student of the group. These errors account for 37 percent of the total number of errors. First, the omission of the definite article is the most frequent problem. Some examples of these errors follow and blanks indicate where the

definite article is needed.

- (2) a. ___ symbol of ___Korean national flower
b. I put ___ bag beside ___ big bed in my room.
c. my first impression of ___ U. S. A. is fine.
d. After ___ performance, we went to upstairs.
e. The performances were terrific because ___ music was exciting.

Note that they do not always fail to use the definite article, as shown in (2e). These errors are expected since the Korean language does not have the rule that a singular common noun can not be used alone; it must be preceded by one of the determiners in English. This is one of the most strict rules of the language without any exception. We might assume that these errors are due to the fact that even though Korean possesses a word corresponding to the definite article, the use of the word *ku* 'the' is not required in front of a noun if there is mutual understanding between the speaker and the hearer about what they are talking about. For example, the student omitted the definite article in (2b) with the assumption that the hearer already knows which bag and which bed the speaker is referring to.

The students also make frequent errors in the use of the indefinite article.

- (3) a. They say hello to me with ___ smile
b. I met him when I was ___ freshman.
c. Anna has ___ red face.

The Korean sentence corresponding to the English one *I am a student* would be *I student am*. Ignoring the direction of the head of a phrase, we can clearly notice the difference: presence and absence of the indefinite article.

Thus, again, we might say that the difference between the two languages in the required use of a determiner is responsible for these errors. Or, as an alternative, we could claim that the omission of the indefinite article is a different story. Strictly speaking, the information on the number of nouns is redundant, since in (3b), for example, the first person singular subject 'I' is a singular noun. Thus, the complement noun phrase 'freshman' does not have to be preceded by the indefinite article. In that sense, these errors might be understandable if we consider that in contrast to English where agreement plays a significant role in syntax, Korean does not exhibit rich agreement. Consider the following example.

- (4) a. We saw movie.
 b. I met new American friend yesterday.

The same line of analysis could hold for the ill-formedness of the above example. If both parties of communication assume that, as a default case, they saw one movie, not two, the indefinite article carries redundant information. Thus, a Korean ESL learner could produce utterances like (4).

Though not as omission, overuses of indefinite articles are also found.

- (5) a. I think she is sharp and has a charisma.
 b. I brought the my book to America.

These errors clearly indicate that these Korean students do not have a complete knowledge of the class and subclasses of nouns and, more importantly, the use of determiners. While it is clear that these students were taught about determiners in the English language, they must still be thinking what they desire to communicate in Korean and then, using English words,

transcribing those ideas into the target language English. This category of errors is a huge portion of the deviant expressions. What it means might be that if the students are carefully trained in the use of determiners alone, it would not be difficult to decrease the number of their errors they make.

4.2 Verb Forms

The second most common errors in the students' writings is incorrect verb forms. They include the incorrect use of verb tense, the lack of tense agreement, and incorrect use of verb forms. Approximately one quarter of their errors have much to do with the syntactic category of verbs. The underlined words indicate the misuse of verb forms.

Simple careless errors are found below, where there is no tensed verb required for a predicate of sentence.

- (6) a. When someone say hello to me,
- b. She speak Korean well.
- c. He thinks it _ strange.

English is an unusual language in that the third person singular noun is treated differently from other nouns in terms of number agreement between the subject and the following verb. Thus, it might be natural that all the ESL learners, not just Koreans, would fail to inflect the verb with the affix *-s* in the present tense.

Tense agreement is one of the most common mistakes that most ESL learners make. This group of students are not an exception. Some examples are found below.

- (7) a. Before I arrive here, I didn't have experience of going U. S. A.

- so I thought that America is a powerful country.
- b. I wish that there are shows like this in Korea.
 - c. When I went to the building, there are a lot of tables and chairs.
 - d. I change my mind and I want to inform

The class of auxiliaries also poses a problem to some students. It is interesting to note that we could not find any misuse of auxiliary verbs in the other students' papers, though it is not certain whether they are completely knowledgeable of the system of auxiliaries.

- (8) a. I studied English for a long time.
- b. When I willgo back to Korea, I will mail them often.

The category of past participles and infinitives might not be easy to learn.

- (9) a. Everything is fine but something is not good comparing with Korea.
- b. I wanted stay more.
- c. I also gave Korean drum shape key ring.
- d. I have study English for ten years.

One thing that needs to be mentioned is that they do not show many instances of misplacement of verbs. Considering the crucial difference between the two language in the direction of headedness, it is a very surprising result. Korean is a typical head-final language, while English is a head-initial one. Thus, we might expect that the ESL learners whose native languages are head-final would have difficulty in placing a verb right next to the subject of a sentence. But, the writing samples show that they can place verbs in the correct places with much consistency.

4.3 Prepositions

In turn, it is somewhat surprising that these Korean students show many instances of the misuse or non-use of prepositions in various parts of their writings. Korean also has the class of particles that might correspond to English prepositions, though they follow nominals. Remember that Korean is a head-final language. These errors account for eleven percent of their total errors. The omission of prepositions can be exemplified by the following.

- (10) a. Mr. Hatkins drove us __ Cherokee Dam.
- b. His hobby is listening __ music.
- c. It has existed since long time ago __ all parts of Korea.
- d. Mr. Yanell travelled __ Malaysia to preach people.

Some instances of the overuse of prepositions are also found.

- (11) a. Since in 2002, I have took an active part.
- b. After that performance I went to upstairs.
- c. We explained about the plan.

The lexical differences between an English word and its Korean counterpart, especially the class of verbs, seems to be responsible for most of the omission and overuse of prepositions. For example, the Korean verb tut 'listen, hear' can be used as a transitive verb taking a noun phrase as a complement. Thus, this Korean verb is not followed by a postposition. Then, the ungrammaticality of (10b), for example, can be viewed as an example of lexical transfer.

- (12) a. We studied bible in the ground floor.
- b. Holly is an announcer in Carson Newman campus.

The misuse of prepositions illustrated above might result because the same postposition ‘-ese’ has a much wider range of uses to refer basically to any location in Korean. Thus, it can be used with a variety of nominals such as a country, a room, a floor or a desk to make up locative phrases. Again, we clearly see another example of interference of their mother language.

4.4 Other types of errors

Other less prevalent errors include those deviances in number agreement, omission and misuse of conjunctions, and incorrect use of vocabulary. Consider, for example, the following data.

- (13) a. I learned many things through class.
 b. These were interesting class to me.
 c. Last weekends, we went to Mr. and Mrs. Yarnell’s house.

Number agreement clearly presents another example of transfer of L1 into the target language, since the Korean language is not really sensitive to the number of noun phrases. Thus the agreement in number between the elements of a sentence is often optional in Korean. Both examples in (14) are acceptable in the Korean language. We can perhaps predict that the same student who makes the errors in (13) would not violate the rule of number agreement in other occasions and produce perfect sentences like ‘These were interesting classes to me’.

- (14) a. three student
 b. three students

Some students have hard time in using conjunctions. Though these are minor local errors, if a student repeats the same kind of errors, they should be

pointed out and corrected.

- (15) a. Jefferson City is very quiet and buildings are low, ___ beautiful.
b. There were many kinds of animals like horses, doves, ___ roosters.

One of the things that we can safely generalize with respect to any L2 learners would be that they make semantic errors. In other words, they often show incorrect and/or awkward use of vocabulary in both written and spoken language. Consider the following examples.

- (16) a. When I make mistakes, they lead me very kindly.
b. In Korea, doors are separated from floor and protect people's personality.
c. He likes music so he always keeps MP3 player.
d. He was finding someone who stood in front of green screen.

Though these examples might be considered syntactically acceptable, they contain semantic mistakes or errors. The underlined content words should be replaced by other appropriate words: *correct*, *privacy*, *carries* and *looking for*, respectively in (16). Again, we might conclude that the students think in Korean and try to match each Korean word needed to convey the ideas with an English word that he or she is familiar with. For example, the Korean verb *caj* can mean both 'to find' and 'to look for'. Thus, the role of transfer lets the student use the simpler verb *find* in his attempt to write in English in (16).

5. Concluding Remarks

Error analysis is an essential tool for diagnosis and evaluation of the

learners' problems, which, in turn, would help ESL teachers better understand their job of teaching English. While it is true that the analysis of the sixty four essays written by a small group of eight college students during the period of four weeks would not suffice to come to any conclusion on the issue under discussion, we still believe that we have found some general pattern from their repeated errors.

First, the current analysis shows that the interference of their mother language plays a significant role in the process of learning their target language. As Brown (2000) states, the role of interference is the greatest obstacle to overcome. A great portion of their syntactic errors result from the "unconscious" transfer of their mother language structures to those of the target language. We might be safe in saying that a Korean students, for example, uses English in writing in Korean. Thus, most of their errors result from the gap between the two languages in terms of syntactic rules. We also find that most of their deviant utterances in their writings are local errors, not global ones that violate the overall structure of a sentence. Thus, a majority of their errors have to do with the use of such features as tense and agreement. As far as the parts of speech of words are concerned, we can also see that they continue to commit some serious syntactic errors with the structure words such as determiners, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions and prepositions.

It is clearly evident that many ESL learners spend a great deal of time learning about the rules of the English language, but they are not trained to "use" those rules. The best way to improve the command of a foreign language, whether written or spoken, is undoubtedly to keep practicing in order to "use" the rules of the target language. Krashen (1983) proposes that extensive reading would improve learners' grammar skills. In addition to reading, we might let the students read their own writings and make corrections by themselves, since much of any learning process involves a certain aspect of self-learning. The sixteen judges agree that if the above

categories of errors could be recognized and corrected, a great deal of improvement in their writing will follow.

Another task worth to explore would be to do a diachronic analysis of the camp participants. The students consistently repeat some particular syntactic errors, while their later samples show a marked improvement in other categories as well as their confidence in the use of English vocabulary. A four week period of camp is not a long time to expect a rapid growth of students. But, considering the intensity of the camp and the amount of work on the part of students, one month could amount to perhaps a whole year in terms of the amount of work and energy that the students pour. Thus, we might assume that four weeks could be long enough to expect students to show improvement on some aspect of grammar, particularly, in a certain area such as omission of determiners, making questions and so on.

If we better understand the weak areas of the ESL learners, we should be in a better position to offer better training to them. Thus, we hope that the findings of this research can provide a possible answer to the question of how we should design a short-term intensive English camp to make it as beneficial as possible to the ESL learners.

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Abstract

A Short-term English Program for Korean Collegians and
Their Grammatical Errors

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This study focuses on a particular short-term English immersion camp held in the U. S. A. and designed for Korean college students. We attempt to describe and analyze the syntactic errors found in the ESL learners' journals to explore the issue of what needs to be done to improve their English proficiency. The findings of their systematic syntactic errors are expected to be beneficial to both ESL teachers and students in their attempt to improve the command of the English language.

Key words: Intensive Language Program, ESL, Syntactic Errors, Mistakes, Determiners, Tense, Verb Forms, Short-term.

집중영어프로그램, ESL, 구문에러, 실수, 한정사, 시제, 동사형태, 단기

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