The Initial State of Korean EFL Learner Grammar: A Study of UG Accessibility in a Foreign Language Setting

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The present study investigates the earliest L2 grammar of Korean English learners. Within the minimalist approach, L1 children's early language acquisition process is understood as a gradual acquisition of functional categories such as IP and CP. Native English children's data show that their earliest sentences are bare projections of VP. Functional categories IP and CP emerge at later stages based on the interaction of UG and L1 input. The present study longitudinally observed the syntactic development of nine Korean learners belonging to three age groups: a preschooler group, a primary schooler group, and a middle schooler group. Irrespective of the learners' starting ages, the earliest multi-word utterances had *S-be-X* constructions. Later, VP (or *SVO*) was activated. This earliest *S-be-X* was analyzed as having a topic-comment framework, which was attributable to the topic-prominence of the learners' L1 Korean. These findings implicate that early language teaching cannot guarantee learning a foreign language in an L1-like way, purely based on the interaction of UG and the target language input.

1. Introduction

The recent zeal in early foreign language (FL) learning and teaching in Korea and other countries reflects the generally-held belief that the earlier one starts, the better he/she can access the innate ability of language acquisition that is exercised in learning his/her native language (L1) learning. The debate on the optimum age, or the critical period, has long been in the center of the second language acquisition studies. Studies on naturalistic language-acquiring environment generally hold that younger is better because the language faculty is subject to biological maturation

(Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982, Johnson & Newport 1989, Long 1990). However, findings in instructional, foreign language settings do not support the age advantage of the young learners.

According to generative linguistics, the innate, preprogrammed part of the language faculty corresponds to the universal grammar (UG). UG guides children's language acquisition by limiting possible structures so that anyone can learn any language in an error-free fashion. If UG guides the learners in instructional FL language settings in the same way as it does in L1 settings, foreign language learners' grammatical development will show the same or significantly identical patterns to that of L1 children. The present study examined Korean English (EFL) learners' earliest grammatical development in order to see whether (i) they have the same initial state as L1 child learners, and (ii) the learners' starting age influences the grammar of the earliest developmental stages. Speech samples of three different age groups were regularly collected to see if younger EFL learners' developmental pattern is closer to that of native English-speaking (NES) children. In the following sections, the minimalist account of NES children's earliest grammar will be surveyed in terms of the lexical and functional projections prescribed by UG. Then the method and findings of the present study will be presented. Finally, the implications of the present study will be considered.

2. NES Children's Early Developing Grammar

The minimalist approach distinguishes between lexical and functional categories (Abney 1987). Lexical categories include categories such as noun (N), verb (V), preposition (P), and adjective (A), which head the maximal projections of NP, VP, PP, and AP, respectively. Functional categories include I(nflection), C(omplement), and D(eterminer), which, like the lexical categories, are believed to head the independent maximal projections of IP, CP, and DP.

A close examination of L1 children's initial utterances shows that they lack functors and grammatical morphemes. Later functional features develop, and grammatical structures related to the functional features emerge together with them in several stages. [1]

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[1] There are two major positions on the availability of functional categories in the earliest grammar. While the Minimal-Tree approach states that the functional categories are absent in the beginning, the Full-House approach states that the full

2.1. Overall Shape of the Development

Radford (1990) proposes that child grammar begins with lexical categories only. According to this analysis, sentences in their earliest forms are bare VP, which lack functional category. The subject is situated in the Spec of VP. This is in line with the Predicate Internal Subject Hypothesis (Sportiche 1988, Koopman & Sportiche 1991), which states that the sentential subject is generated within VP as in (1).

(1)   VP
          ⟋   ⟍
      NP   V'
      | ⟋   ⟍
      | V   NP
      | | |
    girl   want   tiger
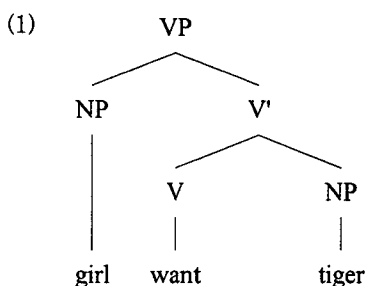
Since there is no INFL projection in the beginning, verbs are not marked for agreement or tense. There are no modals or auxiliaries. Questions don't exhibit Subject-Aux inversion. Negators occur before the subject.

As there emerges the INFL system, verbs will be inflected. auxiliaries and modals are placed in INFL, and subjects are raised to [Spec, IP]. The COMP projection emerges at a still later stage. Accordingly, I-to-C movement (i.e., Subject-Aux Inversion) is triggered in interrogatives and WH-element is raised to [Spec, CP]. In sum, as the result of the successive emergence of functional categories, child grammar will acquire adult-like declaratives, negatives, and interrogatives.

lexical stage ⟶ IP stage ⟶ CP stage

In the early period, newly emerging projection (IP, for example) coexist

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functional categories are available from the very beginning. According to the latter approach, grammatical functors are initially absent not because the functional catego- ries are absent but because they are not overtly activated. Whichever position one takes, the bottom line is that children's initial utterances lack overt evidence for inflection, auxiliary, or inversion in the very beginning, and that later the evidence for functional projections emerge. For convenience' sake, the present study will use the vocabulary of the Minimal-Tree approach.

with structures in the previous stages (VP, for example).

before age 2;0	: VP-stage	VP
ages 2;0~ 2;6	: IP-stage	VP, IP
from age 2;6	: CP-stage	VP, IP, CP

Along this developmental schedule, NES children show major changes of their basic sentence structures in affirmative declaratives, negative declaratives, Yes/No questions and WH-questions.

2.2. NES Children's Structural Development

Native English Children are also found to pass through VP, IP, and CP stages. With the onset of each stage, related structures emerge together, showing a clustering effect. In what follows, the characteristics of each stages will be described together with concrete child data.

2.2.1. Bare-VP Stage: Bare Thematic Representations

The earliest multi-word stage in child English can be defined as a period during which the sentential subject is situated in the Spec of VP. This initial period typically extends from 1;6 to 2;0, but children's individual difference in the rate of grammatical development is substantial especially in L1 children's initial phase (Radford 1990, 1996).
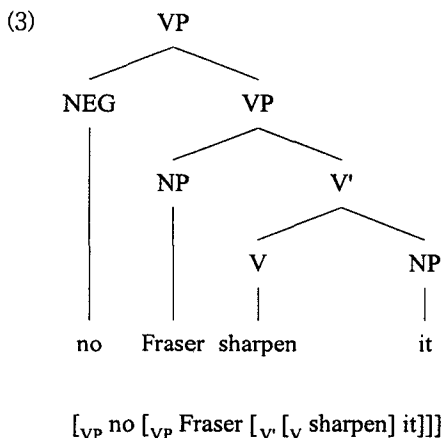
The verb in this stage lacks inflection, especially agreement feature for the third person singular subject. Although Déprez and Pierce (1994) claim that children are sensitive to the distinction between finite and nonfinite verbs in morphologically rich languages, the earliest English grammar does not exhibit tense or agreement marking (Hyams 1986, Radford 1996).

(2) a. Daddy gone   Paula (1;6)
    b. Paula play with ball   Paula (1;6)
    c. baby talking   Harley (1;8)
    d. Mummy doing dinner   Bethan (1;9)
    e. Harley draw boat   Harley (1;8)
                                (from   Radford 1996)

Negatives of this stage are predominantly NEG-initial *NEG-SVO* sequences. Sentences do not include auxiliary *do,* which can be interpreted as an indication that INFL has not been activated yet. Déprez & Pierce

(1994 : 61) report that 96% (71/74) of the earliest negative sentences produced by NES children Eve (at age 18~21 months), Peter (at 23~25 months) and (Nina at 23~25 months) had sentence-initial negatives. Radford (1996) analyzes them as NEG-adjoined VP as in (3).

(3)

```
                    VP
              ╱           ╲
          NEG              VP
           │          ╱        ╲
           │         NP         V'
           │         │       ╱     ╲
           │         │      V        NP
           │         │      │        │
          no     Fraser  sharpen     it
```

$[_{VP}$ no $[_{VP}$ Fraser $[_{V'} [_V$ sharpen$]$ it$]]]$

(4) a. no my play my puppet   Nina (2;0)
    b. no lamb have it   Nina (2;0)   (from CHILDES)

Children do not produce interrogatives containing inverted auxiliaries.

(5) a. chair go?
    b. Kitty go?
    c. car go?   Claire (2;0-2;1) (from Hill 1983)

Children's initial clauses typically contain a very limited range of WH-questions. As was mentioned earlier on early WH-questions, children at this stage do not make use of the presubject auxiliary found in adult questions, i. e., Subject-AUX inversion does not occur.

(6) a. where girl go?
    b. where pencil go?
    c. where cow go?   Claire (2;0)   (from CHILDES)

2.2.2. IP-1 Stage: V-to-I Raising and Subject Raising

When INFL is projected, modals such as *can* and *will* are base-generated.
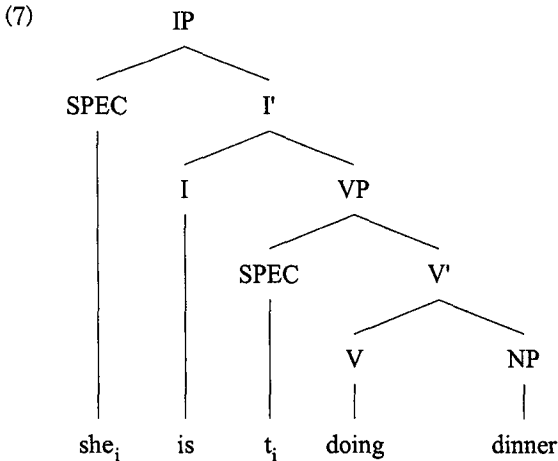
Be and auxiliary *have* are raised to INFL, but lexical verbs still remain in VP.

While verbal inflection seems to be acquired with the onset of IP in languages such as German and French, English main verbs remain uninflected during the corresponding stage. There are two ways by which inflectional affixes are attached: (i) via movement of the verb, and (ii) via the affixation (Pollock 1989). In languages with relatively rich agreement paradigm such as French and German, INFL has strong features. Strong features are visible at PF, and if they remain unchecked at PF, the derivation will crash, i. e., it will not be generated. While all French verbs are raised to INFL in tensed clauses, the relevant features in English are weak and needn't be checked before SPELL-OUT. The raising of the verb is thus delayed until at LF.

Be and the auxiliary *have* are exceptions in that they behave just like French verbs (Pollock 1989, Chomsky 1993). Other English lexical verbs are not raised to INFL, and thus English does not exhibit the surface word order movements which characterize other languages such as German and French. In English, inflectional affixes lower onto the verb. Since affix-lowering does not occur until the IP stage proceeds considerably, the initial IP stage does not display finite verb forms.
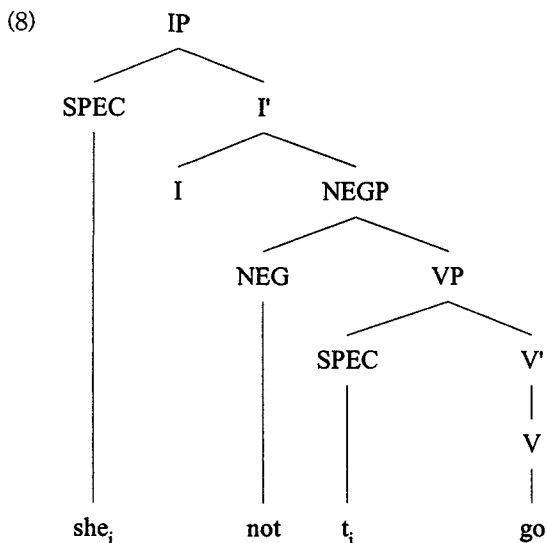
Some propose that V-to-I raising precedes Subject raising in time (Déprez & Pierce 1993, Radford 1996). The present study will not posit separate stages for V-raising and subject-raising.

When the subject is raised to [Spec, IP], it is assigned Nominative Case. The resulting sentence structure might be

(7)

```
                     IP
                   /    \
              SPEC        I'
               |        /    \
               |       I      VP
               |       |     /   \
               |       |  SPEC     V'
               |       |   |      /  \
               |       |   |     V     NP
               |       |   |     |     |
             she_i    is   t_i  doing  dinner
```

Null subjects are evidenced for a while, even after the lexical subject is raised to [Spec, IP]. The omission of the subject in English child language appears to endure beyond the initial IP stage, where overt inflection is not observed, up until about 2 1/2 years of age (Hyams 1986).

Since the subject is raised to [Spec, IP] during this period, negators occur in sentence medial position as in (8).

(8)

```
(8)            IP
            /      \
        SPEC        I'
         |        /    \
         |       I      NEGP
         |            /     \
         |          NEG      VP
         |           |     /    \
         |           |   SPEC    V'
         |           |    |      |
         |           |    |      V
         |           |    |      |
        she_i       not   t_i    go
```

Children continue to produce uninverted *SVO?* and *WH-SVO?*.

(9) a. where the other Joe will drive?
   b. what he can ride in?
   c. which way they should go?   (from Bellugi & Klima 1966)

2.2.3. IP-2 Stage: Affix Lowering

IP-2 Stage is characterized by the onset of affix lowering. Because of this change, much of the adult-like structures are acquired. In affirmatives, 3rd-person -s ending is supplied and sentential subject becomes obligatory. It is a general agreement that affix lowering is a PF merger, which is distinct from syntactic rules of raising (Halle & Marantz 1993, Lasnik 1994). With the increase of the inflection, overt subjects become obligatory and null subjects disappear.

On the other hand, affix lowering is impossible in negatives because the

negator intervenes between INFL and the main verb (e. g., *he not goes*). In order to support the features in INFL, a semantically null auxiliary, such as *do* is supported. and adult-like forms of negation are generated.

It is not clear whether I-to-C movement already takes place at this stage. It is quite possible that I-to-C movement begin while the INFL projection system is still being stabilized. We will assume that the operations directly involving CP take place in the next stage.

2.4. CP-Stage: I-to-C Raising

Adult-like interrogatives emerge with the onset of I-to-C raising, i. e., true Subject-AUX inversion. In WH-Questions, WH-expressions are raised to [Spec, CP].

(10) a. what's he doing?   Eve (2;0)
     b. how did he get out?   Nina (2;9)
     c. why can't we open this piano?   Nina (2;9)   (from CHILDES)

In summary, the data shows that there are at least four major restructuring involved in the development of functional categories. Each stage and structures that cluster around the onset of the stage are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Developmental Stages and Related Structures.

stage	affirmatives	negatives	Yes/No Q	WH-Q
VP	(S)VO	NEG-(S)VO	(S)VO?	WH-SVX?
IP-1	(S)VO	(S)-NEG-VO	(S)VO?	WH-SVX?
IP-2	$SV_{[+fin]}O$	$S-do_{[+fin]}-NEG-VO$	$SV_{[+fin]}O?$	$WH-SV_{[+fin]}O?$
CP	$SV_{[+fin]}O$	$S-do_{[+fin]}-NEG-VO$	$do_{[+fin]}-SVO?$	$WH-do_{[+fin]}-VX?$

3. The Present Study

3.1. The Learners

Three age groups were observed. Each group consisted of three learners who had not learned English before the present study. The preschooler group started learning when they were 5 years old. They learned English at their preschool twice a week, 30 minutes each, in addition to a twice-a-week

instruction from the researcher. One lesson period was about 60 to 90 minutes long. The primary schooler were 8 years old when they started English. They received 40 minute long instructions twice a week from their classroom teachers, plus 60 to 90 minute long instruction twice a week from the researcher. The third group was a middle schooler group. They received four 45-minute long instructions at school and additional two 80~90 minute long instructions from the researcher.

The instructions that the two younger groups received at their kinder-garten or at their school centered on notions and functions. The school syllabus of the middle schoolers was also organized around notions and functions. But grammatical items were carefully introduced. The copula was introduced before verbs in their. The research provided inputs which include both main verbs and the copula from the very beginning. TPR (Total Physical Response) activities, games, chants were actively used. Sentence-building activities with picture cards were also used in order to help the learners to consolidate their structural knowledge. Middle schoolers were offered additional grammatical instruction where necessary.

The learners of each age group and their starting ages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Learners and their Starting Ages

age group	learner	starting age
preschooler	Bo	5;2
	Young	5;7
	Suh	5;10
primary schooler	Jo	8;6
	Min	8;6
	Woo	8;6
middle schooler	Kook	12;5
	Han	12;5
	Kim	12;6

3.2. Method

The learners were taught English by the researcher and their oral productions were regularly audiotaped for about twenty months. Task-based

tests were administered, using pictures designed to elicit the learners' affirmative, negative, and interrogative constructions. For the description of the tasks used in the present study and samples of related structures, see Appendix.

design: longitudinal
period of the research: twenty months
data collection: audiotaping of oral productions.
elicitation sessions: 15 sessions
elicitation method: task-based interaction using pictures
elicited structures: affirmatives, negatives, Yes/No questions, WH-questions

4. Results

Although there existed individual variation, the learners generally showed similar developmental patterns. All learners reached the *SVO* stage. All passed through the following two earliest stages.

4.1. Stage 1: S-be-X

After three to four months of the primitive stage with word-level utterances, the learners began to produce multi-word utterances with *S-be-X* sequences, where *X* is either N, A, or V. The verbs were rare. There were neither *VO* nor *SVO* initially. In negatives, NEG-medial negation occurred whenever the subject appeared. Only one preschooler Suh generated NEG-final negation. Also characteristic of this stage was the frequent insertion of *be* immediately after the subject. Samples from individual learners are presented in (II). Months in the parentheses indicate the months passed since the starting point.

(11) a. he is head / he is no hair (Bo, Month 4)
     b. he is egg / she is not sandwich (Young, Month 4)
     c. he truck / Sally cookie no (Suh, Month 6)
     d. he is glasses (Jo, Month 4) /
        this monster is not hair? (Jo, Month 8)
     e. I am comb / she is not cake (Min, Month 4)
     f. she breakfast (Woo, Month 4) / 2 cat no hungry (Woo, Month 9)
     g. Fred is three eyes / 10 cat no happy cat (Kook, Month 2)

h. this boy is headphone / Dan is not big nose (Han, Month 2)

i. he is big nose / this cat not happy (Kim, Month 2)

Yes/No interrogatives were identical except for the rising intonation. No WH-interrogatives were found.

To summarize, the newly emerging structures of affirmatives, negatives, and interrogatives were

S – (be) – N/A/V

S – (be) – NEG – N/A/V

S – (be) – N/A/V ?

4.2. Stage 2: Full VP

As the verb emerged, the canonical *SVO* occurred. *Be*, which occurred after the subject in the previous stage, tended to be inserted between the subject and the verb. As the verb becomes a consistent part of the sentence, *be* gradually disappeared. Also, some learners transferred the Korean *OV* sequence before they advanced to *SVO* stage. Thus the VP stage can be divided into two substages.

a. VP–1: Some learners initially carried over Korean head-final *OV* order. The extent to which the learners resorted to the Korean *OV* sequence showed individual variation. The transfer of the Korean word order was the most pertinent in the preschooler Suh, lasting for almost 8 months until the onset of *VO* sequences.

b. VP–2: Other learners directly set the head direction of VP at head-initial *VO*. As the learners entered into the VP-2 stage, they showed the following affirmative, negative, and interrogative constructions.

S-(be)-VO   (e.g., she is eat sandwich, cookie, water, juice)

S-(be)-NEG-VO   (e.g., John no eat hamburger)

S-(be)-VO?   (e.g., she is like egg?)

5. Discussion

The findings in Section 4 indicate that the initial state of the Korean EFL learners' grammar is distinct from that of NES children in some important aspects.

5.1. The Status of Korean EFL Learners' Earliest Grammar

As we have seen in Section 4, the earliest multi-word utterances had an *S-be-X* sequence. There are at least three potential interpretation for it.

Hypothesis 1. *S-be-X* is the projection of a bare VP, and *be* is the verb. Learners project VP from the beginning, just like NES children. It is only that the verb is realized as *be*, a suppletive which is inserted in place of the lexical verb.

[$_{VP}$ she [$_{V'}$ is [$_{NP}$ salad]]]
[$_{VP}$ she [$_{V'}$ is [$_{NP}$ no [$_{NP}$ salad]]]]

Hypothesis 2. *S-be-X* is the projection of IP, and *be* is positioned in INFL as a place-holder. Considering that *be* is absent in NES children's VP stage and only appears with the onset of IP, the presence of *be* in EFL learners' earliest utterances can be taken as an indication of IP.

[$_{IP}$ she$_i$ [$_{I'}$ is [$_{VP}$ t$_i$ [$_{V'}$ ø salad]]]
[$_{IP}$ she$_i$ [$_{I'}$ is [$_{NEGP}$ no [$_{VP}$ t$_i$ [$_{V'}$ ø salad]]]]]

Hypothesis 3. *S-be-X* has a discourse-oriented topic-comment framework. There is no VP yet. *Be* is (i) a topic marker, or (ii) a linker that connects the topic and the comment, or (iii) an unanalyzed material which automatically follows the topic, possibly due to initial emphasis of *S-be-complement* constructions.

[(topic (be)) [comment]]
she   is   salad

[(topic (be)) [NEG [comment]]
 she   is   no   salad

Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported because there are some counterexamples. First, the *S-be-X* constructions of Stage 1 included *S-be-V* sequences, although far scarcer than *S-be-N* and *S-be-A* sequences.

(12) a. she is make
     b. he is write

Second, the verb which occurred at Stage 2 was not developed out of *be* in

S-be-X of the previous stage. *Be* was frequently observed before the main verb.

(13) a. she is eat sandwich, cookie, water, juice
     b. he is like cookie

Third, not a single *NEG-SVO* was found during this stage. When the subject occurred, the negative marker *no / not* was placed after the subject.

(14) a. he is not eat cookie
     b. JJ is no like banana

Therefore, the initial template of the Korean EFL learners is not a bare VP. This means that the starting point of the Korean learners are distinct from that of NES children.

The second hypothesis can account for the occurrance of *be* from the earliest stage. It can also explain why the learners don't show NEG-initial constructions. However, when we adopt this IP analysis, we are led to a further claim that functional categories are projected first even before the basic argument structure (i.e., VP) is projected. If we are to analyze *S-be-X* as IP, then we should posit a very unnatural developmental process (i.e., IP->VP->CP).

On the other hand, the topic-comment analysis states that *S-be-X* is a presyntactic structure. Givón (1979) views language acquisition process as grammaticization from loose parataxis to tight syntax or from early pragmatic mode to later syntactic mode. Rutherford (1987) also proposes that children's process of grammaticization is a gradual shift from discourse-oriented topic-comment to syntax-oriented subject-predicate. In terms of language typology, Li and Thompson (1976) distinguish subject-prominent languages from topic-prominent languages. For topic-prominent languages such as Korean, Japanese and Chinese (Mandarin), the syntax-definable category 'subject' is less significant than the discourse-definable category 'topic' (Rutherford 1987).

Some attempts to understand the typological distinction between topic-prominence and subject-prominence as a parametric difference. This typological parameter is claimed to be useful in explaining the topic-comment structure which occurs in L2 learners with a topic-prominent L1. Zobl (1986), for example, reported that the ESL learners with a topic-prominent L1 showed a strong tendency of misparsing the English sentence-initial

N(P) as a topic. Then it is quite possible that the Korean EFL learners of the present study misparsed English subject as a topic. And *be,* which automatically follows the subject/topic in their earliest constructions might have been analyzed as a topic marker or a linker between the topic and the comment. Sasaki (1987) proposed that *be* in her Japanese E2 learners' interlanguage corresponds to Japanese topic marker *wa.* Heubner (1983), in a study of the acquisition process of a Hmong learner, also found that the learner tended to use *is* as a topic marker.

If we accept this third option, we can explain the EFL learners' grammatical development in terms of a successive acquisition of topic-comment, VP, IP, and CP. Also, since the topic is outside the scope of negation, NEG-medial constructions are automatically derived when the topic is present.

The discussions so far shows that the earliest multi-word sentences does not have a bare-VP structure. One of the most plausible interpretation is that it has a topic-comment framework.

5.2. Transfer of the Korean Word Order

The transfer of the Korean *OV* sequence was not a universal phenomenon across all EFL learners. As was mentioned already, two preschoolers and two middle schoolers initially set the head direction of VP at a head-final value. The other four learners did not transfer *OV.* Suh, the preschooler, was most heavily influenced by the Korean word order.

5.3. Relevance of Age

All learners were found to pass through the *S-be-X* stage, irrespective of the learners' starting age. The present study proposed that this earliest construction has a topic-comment framework, which reflects the Korean typological parameter value. This shows that even a child learner at the age of five does not start with a V-projection, and further indicates that foreign language learning is not a pure interaction of the target language input and UG, at least for learners over the age of five. In terms of the L1 transfer of head direction, too, younger learners were not less influenced by their L1. The basic skeleton of the Korean language seemed to be firmly established before age 5. The transfer of the L1 head direction appeared in younger learners as well as older learners. Therefore the learner's starting age did not affect the degree of L1 influence.

6. Conclusion

The study of Korean EFL learners' initial state showed that EFL grammar does not exhibit the same developmental process as that of NES children. This held regardless of learners' starting ages. Therefore, as far as the initial grammar is concerned, there were no qualitative differences among preschoolers, primary schoolers, and middle schoolers. The qualitative advantage of early learning of a foreign language learning was not supported. The present study indicates that a learner — old or young — who already has a mature L1 system cannot acquire another language in a native-like way in an input-poor, instructional foreign language setting.

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Appendix

The Tasks

The learners were asked to perform a series of task-based tests. Learners were presented test sheets that had a series of similar but subtly different pictures. All the tasks were designed to elicit positive, negative, or interrogative constructions.

1. Description Task

The learner chooses one picture from a number of similar but different pictures presented in a single sheet of paper. In this type of task, the researcher indentifies the picture that the learner has chosen, solely based on the information given by the learner. The learner describes the picture in order to help the researcher identify it. When the researcher successfully identifies the picture, the learner is given a candy. In order for the learner to make the researcher exclude irrelevant pictures and get closer to the right picture, the learner has to mention the presence or absence of certain aspects in the picture.

(e.g.) This boy has a flower, he is running, and he is not hungry.

2. Contrast Task

The learner is asked to pinpoint differences between two similar pictures. This task also elicits positive and negative constructions. If s/he succeeds in the the task, s/he is given a candy.

(e.g.) This boy$_i$ has a flower, but this boy$_j$ does not have a flower.

3. Identification Task

The learner is asked to identify a picture among many, by asking questions to the researcher. The researcher only provides "yes" or "no" type of answers. When the learner figures out the right picture, s/he is given a candy. This task elicits Yes/No questions.

(e.g.) Does he have a flower?
       Is he running?

4. Multiple Choice Task

The learner is asked to identify relevant pictures among many be asking WH-questions. The researcher answers the questions and the learner circles the right picture or matches pictures by drawing a line between them.

(e.g.) What is he drinking?
       Who does Mimi love?

5. Completion Task

The learner is asked to fill out the blank by asking WH-questions. The learner either draws pictures or writes in the blank.

(e.g.) What does she eat?
       What color is her bag?
       What time does she wake up?

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