

# Basic Communicative Competence and Sentential Utterance Production\*

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## *Abstract*

Although serious and continued efforts have recently been made to teach English learners communicative competence, most of the students in pre-tertiary schools in Korea have difficulties acquiring the ability to produce sentential utterances. This paper observes that this unexpected outcome is mainly attributable to insufficient input and interaction in their English learning settings. It explores a way to overcome this problem and teach Korean learners of English to produce sentential utterances, incorporating core ideas of Construction Grammar in the development of language instructional system.

*Key words: communicative competence, Construction Grammar, English learners, national English curriculum, foreign language learning and teaching, sentential utterances*

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## I . CLT-based National English Curricula and Sentential Utterance Production

Ever since the introduction of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT, hereafter) approach into the design of the national English curriculum in the early nineties, English teaching at elementary and secondary schools in Korea has placed special and continued focus on 'basic' communicative competence. For instance, as is quoted in the following, the current national English curriculum (2009) states that the primary goal of English teaching at pre-tertiary schools is to teach students to be able to perform daily basic communication in English.

### (1) Primary Goal of English Teaching at Elementary Schools

*The primary goal is to enhance students' interest in English and foster their basic ability to communicate in English.*

- a. Students build interest and confidence in basic use of English.*
- b. Students develop the ability to use English in basic communication.*

### (2) Primary Goal of English Teaching at Secondary Schools

*The primary goal is to improve students' ability to communicate in English on familiar and general topics.*

- a. Students build interest and confidence in daily use of English.*
- b. Students develop ability to communicate in English on familiar topics.*

More detailed specifications of these goals are provided in the form of Core Achievement Criteria (CAC, hereafter), and the following, quoted from the 2009 Curriculum, illustrates the CAC

in Speaking Component:

Table 1. CAC in Speaking Component

Elementary School Level	Secondary School Level
(a) Listen to simple conversations of daily life, and talk about the main idea.	(a) Listen to speeches or conversations of daily life, and talk about the main idea.
(b) Carry out simple conversations about everyday events.	(b) Listen to speeches or conversations about familiar objects and general topics, and ask and answer questions about them.
(c) Listen to simple conversations of daily life, and talk about the details.	(c) Describe simple pictures or charts about a general topic.
(d) Carry out simple telephone conversations.	(d) Talk about everyday events in the order of their occurrence.
(e) Make a request using basic expressions.	(e) Talk about experiences or plans in daily life.
	(f) Talk about feelings or thoughts about daily life.

For twenty or more years, these goals and criteria have exerted direct and profound influences on the main theoretical frameworks and detailed practices of English education in Korea, which include the design and development of textbooks, classroom instruction, and suggested teaching and learning activities. Especially noteworthy is the fervent and concerted effort not only in schools but also in local and national government institutions to implement the spirit and ideas of CLT approaches to develop students' basic communicative competence (Jeon, 2010; Ko, 2010; Lee & Hong, 2012; Min, 2008; Park & Min, 2014).

Notwithstanding the serious effort and valuable time devoted to addressing and improving English learning and teaching, it has frequently been reported that English learners in primary and secondary schools in Korea have considerable difficulties acquiring basic communicative competence in English (Kim, 2002; Lee, 2003, 2009; Lee, 2012; Lee et al., 1999). In particular, Lee (2003, 2009) showed that middle school students had difficulties

producing sentential utterances in communication, frequently relying on memorized words and phrases to express feelings and ideas. The following from Lee (2009) reveals some important characteristics of teacher-student interactions in 'meaning-focused' activities:

(3) Teacher-student interactions

*T: How many people is a broadcasting talking to?*

*S: Many people*

*T: Yeah. How many people? How many people?*

*Ss: Many people.*

*T: What?*

*Ss: Many.*

*T: Many people. How many people?*

*Ss: Many people.*

*T: Many people. Very good. Excellent.*

*Broadcasting is talking to many people. He's*

*talking to many people. So this is a*

*broadcasting. Very nice. How do we broadcast?*

*What do we use to broadcast?*

(Lee, 2009: 220-221)

Most salient in the above are one- or two-word non-sentential expressions of the student(s), which, according to Lee (2009), account for about 80 percent of the whole utterances in the observed discourse<sup>1</sup>). A similar observation is made in Kim (2002), which explored teacher-student interactions in middle school English class activities:

(4) Teacher-student(s) interactions

*T: What day is it today?*

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1) The following illustrates sentential utterances, observed in Lee (2009):

*S1: OK. I am genius.*

*S2: You're stupid.* (Lee, 2009: 221)

He suggested these utterances were 'learned expressions', and best characterized as 'memorized phrases'.

*Ss: It's Wednesday.*

*T: All right. Anyway, did you enjoy the video?*

*Ss: Yes!*

*T: How was it?*

*Ss: Interesting!*

*T: Are you sure?*

*Ss: Yes.*

*T: All right. I think it's a beautiful, superb, fantastic story.*

(Kim, 2002: 326)

When ranked by ACTFL Guideline (Swender, Conrad, & Vicars, 2012), the proficiency of these learners, at best, is at the novice level:

(5) ACTFL Guideline 2012

NOVICE

*Novice-level speakers can communicate short messages on highly predictable, everyday topics that affect them directly. They do so primarily through the use of isolated words and phrases that have been encountered, memorized, and recalled*

INTERMEDIATE

*Speakers at the Intermediate level are distinguished primarily by their ability to create with the language when talking about familiar topics related to their daily life. They produce sentence-level language, ranging from discrete sentences to strings of sentences, typically in present time.*

(Underlines added by the authors)

Note that the learners' proficiency is far lower than the proficiency stated as basic communicative competence in the Curriculum.

All in all, many students at pre-tertiary schools in Korea find it more than difficult to use English sentential utterances in

meaningful interactions, one important aspect of basic communicative competence which is aimed at in the CLT-based national English curricula (Kim, 2007; Lee, 2012; Lee et al., 1999). The next section discusses possible reasons underlying this unexpected outcome, and shows that the unwelcome result is mainly attributable to deficient environmental settings, lacking sufficient input and meaningful interactions. Section 3 explores a way to resolve this dilemma, incorporating core ideas of Construction Grammar. The final section suggests possible directions for practical application of constructional schemes and inspirations to the development of instruction system of foreign language learning and teaching.

## II. Sentential Utterance Production and Communicative Functions in CLT-based Curricula

One of the most prominent and innovative features of the CLT-based National English Curricula is the introduction of *communicative functions* as one of the main language-related components<sup>2)</sup>. The Curricula assume that due and systematic consideration of communicative functions in the design and development of syllabus and instruction helps learners to acquire the ability to express feelings and ideas using sentential utterances, one important component of basic communicative competence (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The following illustrates communicative functions and their exemplary expressions listed in the current national English curriculum:

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2) In addition to *communicative functions*, there are two other main language-related components in the Curricula: *vocabulary* and *linguistic forms*. The former has been newly introduced in the Curricula, whereas the latter two have been in the national curricula since the First National English Curriculum (1955).

Table 2. Communicative Functions and Exemplary Expressions

Function & Sub-Function	Exemplary Expression
<b>1. Delivering &amp; requesting information</b> (1) Clarifying and describing identity	a. <i>That's/It's/They're ...</i> b. <i>Is this your ...?</i> <i>The man over there is Mr. Kim.</i> <i>The small one (with the blue buttons).</i> <i>Ms. Anderson is the owner of the restaurant.</i>
<b>2. Expressing attitudes toward fact</b> (1) Asking (dis)agreement	a. <i>What do you think?</i> <i>Don't you agree?</i> <i>Would/Do you agree with me?</i>
<b>3. Expressing knowledge, remember &amp; belief</b> (4) Expressing ignorance	a. <i>I don't know.</i> b. <i>I have no idea.</i> c. <i>I haven't got a clue.</i>
<b>4. Expressing modality</b> (10) Expressing ability	a. <i>I can ...</i> b. <i>I was able to ...</i> c. <i>I know how to ...</i> d. <i>I'm (pretty) good at ...</i>

As Table 2 shows, most of the communicative function expressions in the curriculum are fixed or formulaic, in nature. It is well-known that fixed or formulaic expressions (FEs, hereafter) are frequently employed in daily communication (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1999; Erman & Warren, 2000; Howarth, 1998), serve various communicative functions (Weinert, 1995; Wray, 2000, 2008), and contribute to the lexico-grammatical productivity in communication (Hall, 2010). FEs are also known to help language learners to acquire the ability to produce sentential utterances.

The importance of FEs has been noted in a number of L1 acquisition studies. For instance, Tomasello's (1992) diary study on his daughter's early multi-word utterances showed that her early L1 acquisition and production was guided by item-based structures with open but still semantically closed frames. Specifically, the child generated sentential utterances based upon specific verbal and predicative frames<sup>3</sup>). Tomasello (2000a: 77)

3) Tomasello (1992) hypothesized that children's first grammars could be characterized as a representation of verb-island

explains:

[W]hen young children have something they want to say, they sometimes have a set expression readily available and so they simply retrieve that expression from their stored linguistic experience.

English-speaking children's reliance on FEs in language acquisition and production is also reported in Lieven, Pine, and Barnes (1992), Lieven, Pine, and Baldwin (1997), Lieven and Tomasello (2008), Tomasello and Brooks (1999), and Vihman (1982). Lieven and Tomasello (2008), in particular, reported that highly frequent and prototypical formulaic chunks enable L1 learners to abstract the generalized patterns, which become 'less item-based and more schematic' as the acquisition process proceeds. Similar findings were reported in L1 acquisition studies of other languages: Italian (Pizutto & Caselli, 1994), Brazilian Portuguese (Rubino & Pine, 1998), and Hebrew (Berman & Armon-Lotem, 1997).

The facilitative roles of FEs in acquisition and production of sentential utterances have also been reported in ESL studies (Ellis, 2002a; Ellis & Schmidt, 1998; Fillmore, 1976; Hakuta, 1974, 1976). These studies show that meaningful use of FEs in communication settings helps learners of English as a second language to acquire the ability to use sentential utterances. Intriguingly, these studies share the understanding that natural and frequent input is a prerequisite for this to happen (Ellis, 1996, 2002b, 2008, 2009; Ellis & Ferreira-Junior, 2009a; Year & Gordon, 2009). Ellis and Ferreira-Junior (2009a), in particular,

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patterns which is highly formulaic (e.g., *lemme-do-it*, *I-wanna-see*, and *gimme-it*). As expected, the verbs and their co-occurring constructions that were highly frequently used by children were those that were most frequently heard. He later reported, "of the 162 verbs and predicate terms used, almost half were used in one and only one construction type, and over two-thirds were used in either one or two construction types" (Tomasello, 2000b: 213).



observed that frequent use of FEs in natural and meaningful communication settings assists ESL learners to produce sentential utterances. They analyzed seven successful ESL learners' conversation with native speakers of English, and found that its patterns of input and interaction reflect the patterns in natural settings<sup>4</sup>). Ellis and Ferreira-Junior (2009b) also reported that ESL learners achieved putative default natural sequence of naturalistic acquisition from high utility generic functional FEs (e.g., *went to the shop, you put it in, and I'll give you money*) to analyzed schematic constructions (e.g., intransitive motion, caused motion, and double object constructions).

FEs, on the other hand, have been considered to have limited roles in EFL contexts, and rarely help foreign language learners to develop the ability to use sentences and utterances in communication (Holme, 2009; Pawley & Snyder, 1983). Since Pawley and Snyder (1983), many studies have shared the view that foreign language learners are not provided with sufficient opportunities to use communicative function expressions in meaningful contexts, and consequently fail to acquire the ability to use sentential utterances in actual communication (Ellis, 1991; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Holme, 2009). One conceivable way to cope with this problem is to provide foreign language learners with sufficient, natural and meaningful chances to use FEs. This, however, is hardly possible in 'foreign language' learning and teaching contexts, where learners have very limited access and exposure to target language input and interaction<sup>5</sup>).

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4) Ellis and Ferreira-Junior (2009a) found that (the successful) ESL context is full of 'natural input' which is organized in a way of a *Zipfian distribution* (Zipf, 1935), with the highest frequency words accounting for the most frequent linguistic tokens.

5) One of the reviewers noted that intriguing suggestions have been made to provide foreign language learners with more input and meaningful interaction, one of the influential ones being the computer-assisted language learning (CALL). See Doughty (1987), Jung (2007), Salaberry (2000), and Warschauer (2002), for improvements and limitations of introduction of the CALL to EFL learning and teaching.

In sum, communicative functions and FEs are introduced to the Curriculum with a view to teaching English learners to produce sentential utterances, one of the important components of basic communicative competence. Unfortunately, this effort has not yielded the expected outcome. This has been mainly due to the contextual and environmental limitations and restrictions, which do not provide sufficient and meaningful input and interactions to language learners. The following section explores a way to teach foreign language learners to produce sentential utterances, incorporating core ideas of Construction Grammar in the design of foreign language instruction.

### III. Sentential Utterance Production and Argument Structure Constructions

According to Construction Grammar as developed in Fillmore (1985, 1988) and Goldberg (1995, 2006, 2013), a sentence is a propositional linguistic unit which encodes the form and content of a particular verbal message about an event or situation. In particular, it specifies the number and semantic roles of participants as well as their syntactic categories (Berman & Slobin, 1994). It also involves pairing of propositional meaning with surface structure so that the intended meaning is syntactically realized (Goldberg, 1995). The following table illustrates the pairing process in the so-called double object sentence:

Table 3. Pairing Forms and Meanings in Double Object Sentence

	<i>Jane</i>	<i>faxed</i>	<i>Mary</i>	<i>a document</i>
Form	Subject	Verb	Indirect Object	Direct Object
	⇕	⇕	⇕	⇕
Meaning	Agent	Predicate	Recipient	Theme

The schematic pairing of form and meaning, as illustrated in Table 3, is called argument structure construction (ASC, hereafter), and has its own constructional meaning which is used

to express a propositional message about event and situation. For example, the pairing of form and meaning in Table 3 is called the ditransitive construction, and has a constructional meaning SUBJECT causes INDIRECT OBJECT to receive DIRECT OBJECT, and the example sentence describes a scene in which *Jane* (SUBJECT) causes *Mary* (INDIRECT OBJECT) to receive *a document* (DIRECT OBJECT).

The following from Goldberg (2006: 73) shows some further basic ASCs in English:

Table 4. Basic Argument Structure Constructions in English<sup>6)</sup>

Form	Meaning	Construction Label
1. Subj V Obl <sub>path/loc</sub> e.g. <i>The fly buzzed into the room.</i>	X moves Y <sub>path/loc</sub>	Intransitive Motion
2. Subj V Obj Obl <sub>path/loc</sub> e.g. <i>Pat sneezed the foam off the cappuccino.</i>	X causes Y to move Z <sub>path/loc</sub>	Caused-Motion
3. Subj V Obj Obj <sub>2</sub> e.g. <i>She faxed him a letter.</i>	X causes Y to receive Z	Ditransitive
4. Subj V Obj RP e.g. <i>She kissed him unconscious.</i>	X causes Y to become Z <sub>state</sub>	Transitive Resultative

ASCs, illustrated in the above, represent specific types of proposition in the form of ‘form-meaning’ pairing, and express event types that are basic to human experience<sup>7)</sup> (Goldberg, 1995:

6) The following, from the current national English curriculum in Korea, shows the so-called basic sentence types in English:

- [10] The baby cried. [SV]  
 She stayed in bed. [SVA]  
 He is a math teacher. [SVC]  
 I like gimbap. [SVO]  
 You can put the dish on the table. [SVOA]  
 He gave me a present. [SVOO]  
 Why did they elect him chairman? [SVOC]

While argument structure constructions in the construction grammar specify grammatical information on both form and meaning, sentence types in [10] specify grammatical information on form only.

39). For example, the caused-motion construction, *Pat sneezed the foam off the cappuccino*, represents the proposition of *something causing a change of location*, pairing the form *Subject-Verb-Object-Oblique* and the meaning *X causes Y to move Z* of the sentence.

According to Goldberg (1995, 2006), ASCs are the basic means to express propositions, serve as primary units for everyday communication, and convey feelings and ideas in the form of sentential utterances. The following is from Tomasello (1998: 433-434), which emphasizes the role of ASCs in human communication:

Goldberg's major premise is that these abstract and complex constructions themselves carry meaning, independently of the particular words in the sentence. Indeed, much of the creativity of language comes from fitting specific words into linguistic constructions that are non-prototypical for them. Abstract linguistic constructions are thus an important part of the inventory of symbolic resources that language users control, and they create an important 'top-down' component to the process of linguistic communication in keeping with the role of abstract schemas in many other domains of human cognition.

ASCs being basic and systematic means to express feelings and ideas in the form of sentential utterances, serious attention needs to be paid to the constructive roles of constructions in foreign language teaching. The following section suggests possible ways to incorporate core ideas of Construction Grammar in the design and development of foreign language teaching frames and mechanisms.

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7) For further details of basic event types in English, see Goldberg (1995: 39).

#### **IV. Finishing Touch**

As has been observed above, one of the most prominent characterizing features of constructional grammar is systematic considerations of constructional meaning in the understanding of sentences. Thus, when we want to implement constructional ideas in foreign language learning and teaching, with a particular view to improving sentence producing abilities of foreign language learners, we need to pay special attention to constructional meaning of sentences. To be more specific, due emphases need to be given to 'form-meaning pairing' properties of sentences in developing foreign language curricula and instructional systems which include teaching materials and methods. Recently serious attempts have been made, and shown that language instruction armed with constructional ideas helps foreign language learners produce sentential utterances, one of the most significant components of basic communicative competence aimed at in the current CLT-based curricula: Hwang (2013), Jang (2014), Kim (2012), Kim (2013), Rah (2014), Sung (2012), and Yang (2010).

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