The Learning and Teaching of Korean in Community Schools

Minsun Song, William O’Grady, Sookeun Cho & Miseon Lee
University of Hawai‘i at Manoa

1. Introduction

Every year, tens of thousands of Korean immigrants arrive in America, anxious not only to learn English and take their place in American society, but also to preserve their native language and culture and to see it transmitted to their children. One of the major vehicles for the preservation of Korean language and culture in America is the community school: more than 500 of these institutions exist in America, offering courses in the Korean language to over 30,000 students for a few hours every weekend (Choi 1991). The children in the community school language programs are drawn from the same population that later constitutes the majority of enrollees in college- and university-level courses in Korean. Their proficiency and progress is thus of interest to those involved in all levels of Korean language instruction.

Although most of the children enrolled in the community schools were born in America and virtually all attend regular English-language schools during the week, many nonetheless have attained an impressive level of oral proficiency in Korean.

Our research team became interested in these children in the fall of 1994. From the outset, our work has been motivated by two goals. On the one hand, we are interested in the nature of language acquisition and in comparing the acquisition process in bilingual and monolingual settings.
On the other hand, we also have practical concerns. Given the importance of language maintenance to the Korean immigrant community (Choi, 1989) as well as the advantages of having a linguistically diverse population in America, we wanted to identify possible deficits in the children's verbal skills to make recommendations about early remediation.

In the last two years we have been working on the design of experiments and procedures that will allow us to assess children's knowledge of various aspects of Korean sentence structure. We will report here on two of these studies, one involving the interaction between case markers (이가 and 줄/줄) and word order, and the other involving the interpretation of "reflexive pronouns" such as 자기 and 자기 자신.

2. Case markers and word order

Korean differs from English in that it has a special set of affixes (called "case markers") to indicate a noun's function in the sentence (e.g., subject vs. direct object).

(1) Yee-a ka namm-a-lul mil-ess-ta.
girl-Subj boy-Obj push-Pst-Decl
'The girl pushed the boy.'

Because of these case markers, it is possible to vary the order of nouns without undermining the intelligibility of Korean sentences.

(2) Nam-a-lul yee-a ka mil-ess-ta.
boy-Obj girl-Subj push-Pst-Decl
'The girl pushed the boy.'

The use of case markers and the resulting "free" word order are two fundamental typological features of Korean, and thus constitute a natural starting point for any study of learners' proficiency in the language.

We decided to test children's understanding of case and word order in Korean using a standard procedure from the study of first language acquisition—the picture selection task. Each child was tested individually by a native Korean experimenter. As they heard each test sentence (some with a context and some without), the children were shown a pair of pictures (see examples below). They then indicated their interpretation of the sentence by pointing to one picture or the other. A brief practice session involving intransitive sentences preceded the actual test.

(3) SOV (no context)
Yee-a ka namm-a-lul alae-wu-je.
girl-Subj boy-Obj hug
'The girl is hugging the boy.'

(4) OSV (no context)
Kom-ul sace-ka mil-e.
bear-Obj lion-Subj push
'The lion is pushing the bear.'
(5) SOV (with context)
Context:
Yeki say iss-e. Yeppu-ci?
here bird exist be pretty
*Here is a bird.*
He is pretty, isn’t he?

Test sentence:
say-ka cwi-lul mil-e.
this bird-Subj mouse-Obj push
*This bird is pushing the mouse.*

(6) OSV (with context)
Context:
Yeki wensungi iss-e. Kwiyep-ci.
here monkey exist be cute
*Here is a monkey.*
He is cute, isn’t he?

Test sentence:
I wensungi-lul kay-ka cha.
this monkey-Obj dog-Subj kick
*A dog is kicking the monkey.*

Results
We first carried out the comprehension task with 68 monolingual children (aged 2 to 8) living in Seoul. In this version of the test, there were four tokens of each type, so that children heard a total of sixteen sentences—eight SOV patterns and eight OSV patterns (half with a context and half in isolation). The test sentences were arranged in random order in two blocks. Block 1, consisting of the sentences with no context, was

presented before Block 2, consisting of the sentences with a context. Table 1 summarizes our results.

Table 1. Mean number correct (out of 4) for monolingual children in Seoul

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>SOV Without Context</th>
<th>OSV Without Context</th>
<th>SOV With Context</th>
<th>OSV With Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above-chance performance generally did not occur until age 4, but scores above 3.0 were common by age 5, especially on sentences presented with a context. All errors involved “reversals”—i.e., interpreting an OSV sentence as if it were an SOV pattern.

These results contrast sharply with those obtained when we administered the same test to a group of 28 immigrant children (aged 3 to 8) living in Honolulu and attending a local community school.

Table 2. Mean number correct (out of 4) for immigrant children in Honolulu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>SOV No Context</th>
<th>OSV No Context</th>
<th>SOV With Context</th>
<th>OSV With Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.375</td>
<td>1.875</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.143</td>
<td>0.857</td>
<td>3.714</td>
<td>0.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>3.036</td>
<td>1.393</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can easily be observed here, the performance of these children was rather poor, with the overall mean score for OSV sentences well below the level of chance, even when there was an accompanying context. These results set the stage for the research project on which we wish to report here, which involved an attempt to study the effects of remedial instruction on children's sensitivity to case and word order in Korean.

The Remediation Study

We began by giving a version of the picture selection comprehension test to thirteen children (aged 7 to 12) in a Korean community school in Honolulu. We concentrated on SOV and OSV sentences presented out of context, which is the more demanding condition even for monolingual children. The children were presented with eight tokens of each sentence type (arranged in random order).

Table 3. Mean number correct (out of 8) for immigrant children in Honolulu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SOV patterns</th>
<th>OSV patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>94.23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Predictably, the scores on the OSV patterns were extremely low (25% on average), suggesting an insensitivity to the function of case markers in Korean. This opened the way for the next step in our study—remedial instruction.

The fact that the immigrant children grew up in a bilingual environment in which they are exposed to much less Korean than they would receive in a monolingual setting undoubtedly has a great deal to do with their inability to use case markers in the expected way. However, we were somewhat puzzled over why the language classes had not already remedied this problem. By examining the instructional materials used in the community schools, we were able to identify a likely explanation for this: the children's textbook contained no OSV sentences, and case markers were used primarily in sentences where they had no functional importance—i.e., where they were not needed to distinguish between the subject and the direct object, as in (7).

(7) John-i kong-ul tene-i n-ta.
    John-Subj ball-Obj throw-Pros-Decel
    'John throws the ball.'

In such sentences, it is possible to identify the subject and direct object solely on the basis of word meaning (i.e., people throw balls, but balls don't throw people) without paying any attention to the case markers.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, we created new instructional materials and activities that focused on patterns (such as (1) and (2)) in which case is crucial for interpreting the sentence correctly. The remedial program included the following components:

- An informal explanation of why case is needed in Korean.
- Examples of sentences (including OSV patterns) with case markers on the subject and the direct object.
- Explanation of the difference between -ka and -i on the one hand and -tal and -tal on the other.
- The teacher demonstrated actions with the help of stuffed animals and then uttered a sentence. The children had to indicate whether the sentence correctly described the action. Immediate feedback was given.
- The children were given two cards—one containing -ka and -i and the other containing -tal and -tal. The teacher then wrote sentences without case markers such as the following on the blackboard.

(8) kom _cwi_ italyeyo.
    bear mouse hits
    'The bear is hitting the mouse.' or 'The mouse is hitting the bear.'

She then performed an action with the help of toys and asks the students to hold up the appropriate case cards for each noun. Feedback was given.

- The students were grouped into pairs and given toy animals. The teacher then uttered various sentences, which the children acted out with the help of the animals.
Each student was asked to wear an animal mask. The students were then grouped into pairs and the teacher uttered sentences which the children acted out on each other. The students were grouped into pairs and one student in each pair was given a sentence to act out. The other student then had to describe the action.

Children received remedial training along these lines for approximately 50 minutes during each of their weekly language classes for two weeks following administration of the initial comprehension test.

The children were then once again given the comprehension test (henceforth called the 'post-test').

Table 4. Mean number correct (out of 8) for immigrant children on the post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>SOV patterns</th>
<th>OSV patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>11.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results in Table 4 demonstrate, there was a very noticeable improvement in children’s performance. Average scores on the OSV patterns rose from 2 out of 8 (25%) to 5.31 out of 8 (66.37%).

A follow-up study conducted nine weeks later showed that the instruction had long-term positive effects. Scores were again more than double as on the test that had preceded the remedial instruction.

Table 5. Mean number correct (out of 8) for immigrant children on the follow-up test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>SOV patterns</th>
<th>OSV patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>11.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of student C, the children in the study generally maintained the progress that they had made during the remedial program—a remarkable result, given that no new instruction or practice exercises had been given during the interval period. This suggests that early identification of deficits in children’s linguistic knowledge and implementation of an appropriate remedial program can have long-lasting, beneficial consequences.

These findings raise the question of whether other deficits exist and precisely how much remedial instruction is needed to overcome them. A study that we are currently conducting on reflexive pronouns sheds some light on these issues.

2. Reflexive pronouns

In contrast to English, Korean contains at least four types of elements that can function as reflexive pronouns—caki, casin, caki casin, and ku casin. Our study focuses on two of these elements—the very common caki and the much less common caki casin. These two elements can overlap in their function and distribution, as the following sentences help show.
caki prefers a more distant antecedent, where one is available; thus, in the
dominant interpretation of (11), caki refers to the monkey, which is not in
the same clause.

Our initial goal in investigating reflexive pronouns was to determine
whether the children in our study understand the key properties of caki and
caki casin—that both require a more prominent antecedent and that they
differ in terms of how close this antecedent has to be. To our surprise,
however, preliminary work revealed that many children seemed not to
even know the words caki and caki casin. For example, when we asked
three preschool children to describe six simple pictures depicting reflexive
actions, not a single response (out of 18) involved a reflexive pronoun.
The most common response strategies are exemplified in (13).

(13a) Use of honcase ‘alone’: 10/18
Kay-ka honcase tayliyeo.
dog-Subj alone hits
‘The dog hits alone.’

(13b) Use of body part term (with or without honcase): 3/18
Wensungi meli-lul maneyeyo.
monkey head-Obj touches
‘The monkey touches his head.’

(13c) Repetition: 6/18, all from one child
Saca-ka saca-lul maneyeyo.
lion-Subj lion-Obj touches
‘The lion touches the lion.’

We were able to determine the children’s level of knowledge of
reflexive forms in a preliminary way by asking them to translate items
such as the following.

(14) 1. koyangi ‘cat’
2. thokki ‘rabbit’
3. masita ‘drink’
4. i catongeha ‘this car’
5. caki ‘self’
6. hakkyo ‘school’
7. ee sip ‘that house’
8. kata ‘go’
9. caki casin ‘self’
10. yeki ‘here’
   dog-Subj self-Obj hit-Pst-Decl
   ‘The dog hit himself.’

B. Holangi-ka cali casin-ul mancy-ess-ta.
   tiger-Subj self-Obj touch-Pst-Decl
   ‘The tiger touched himself.’

About half the children were unable to translate the reflexive pronouns either in sentences or in isolation. (However, they had no such problem with other items, such as i and ce which have relatively abstract meanings.)

This led us to consider a rather daring remediation strategy. It is sometimes suggested that children learning a first language have access to a set of inborn grammatical principles that allow them to ‘know in advance’ how certain aspects of sentence structure should work. In the case of reflexive pronouns, it is often suggested that inborn principles have determined that these elements require a more prominent antecedent and that ‘long’ reflexives demand a near-by antecedent while ‘short’ reflexives can look to a more distant element for their reference (e.g., Cole, Hermon & Sung 1990).

(15) Possible Inborn Grammatical Principles
   • Reflexive pronouns require a more prominent antecedent.
   • ‘Long’ reflexives (i.e., caki casin) prefer an antecedent in the same clause.
   • ‘Short’ reflexives (i.e., caki) prefer an antecedent in a higher clause.

Notice that Korean does indeed seem to comply with these principles. As explained above (see sentences (10)-(12)), Korean reflexives require a more prominent antecedent and the ‘long form’ caki casin differs from the ‘short’ form caki in preferring an antecedent in the same clause.

Given that the ability to learn a second language—and especially the syntax of a second language—remains strong at least until adolescence (e.g., Long 1990), we reasoned that the children in our study might be able to access putative inborn principles such as those in (15) with minimal training. The strongest version of this hypothesis is that simple exposure to caki and caki casin in sentences such as (9a) and (9b) would suffice to establish that these elements are reflexive pronouns, which in turn would trigger the relevant principles. We set out to test this hypothesis with the help of the following three-part experimental procedure.

Subjects
The subjects were taken from a class of eight students, aged 8 to 14, and another class of eight students, aged 6 to 9.

Method
I. Pretest: In order to help determine children’s previous knowledge of reflexive pronouns, the translation test described above was administered. Based on the results of this task, we divided the first class of children into two smaller groups—an ‘A’ group whose members successfully translated at least 3 of the 4 instances of reflexive pronouns, and a ‘B’ group whose members correctly translated none of these items. The ‘A’ group contained three children and the ‘B’ group contained four. (One child, who correctly translated one item, was not assigned to either group.) None of the children in the second class of 8 students were able to pass the translation test; we henceforth refer to them as the ‘C’ group.

II. Modeling: Following the translation test, the entire class was given a ‘modeling’ session, in which they were shown pictures such as the one below and asked to describe what was depicted.

If someone responded by saying Holangi-ka caki-lul kalikii-ta, the experimenter replied ‘Yes, that’s right. And we can also say Holangi-ka
caki casin-ul kalikhi-n-ta.' And if someone initially responded by Holangi-ka caki casin-ul kalikhi-n-ta, the experimenter replied 'Yes, that's right. And we can also say Holangi-ka caki-lul kalikhi-n-ta.' If no one responded appropriately, the experimenter would say: 'We can say either Holangi-ka caki-lul kalikhi-n-ta or Holangi-ka caki casin-ul kalikhi-n-ta.'

This procedure was repeated with five different pictures. The hope was that this experience would be sufficient to make the children realize that caki and caki casin were reflexive pronouns in Korean. This in turn might be expected to trigger the putative inborn principles in (15), leading to the realization that both elements require a more prominent antecedent but differ from each other in terms of how close that element has to be. A post-test was designed to determine whether this had occurred.

III. Post-test: Immediately after the modeling portion of the experiment, children were shown a series of 32 pictures and asked a question about each picture. Some of the pictures were designed to test the prominence requirement and others to test how far the antecedent could be from the reflexive pronoun.

(16) Sample pictures and question to determine whether children know that a reflexive pronoun requires a more prominent antecedent. [eight tokens each for caki and caki casin]

Koyangi-uy emma-ka caki(casin)-ul kalikhi-ni?
cat-Gen mother-Subj self-Obj point to-Ques
'Does the cat's mother point to herself?'

[correct answer: 'yes']

(17) Sample pictures and question designed to determine whether children know that caki casin requires a local antecedent. [eight tokens]

'Does the mouse think that the monkey touched himself?'

[preferred answer: 'yes']

(18) Sample pictures and question designed to determine whether children know that caki does not require a local antecedent. [eight tokens]

Say-nun [twayci-ka caki-lul kalikhi-ess-ta-ko] sayngakha-ni?
bird-Top pig-Subj self-Obj point to-Pst-Decl-Comp think-Ques
'Does the bird think that the pig pointed to himself?'

[preferred answer: 'no']

[preferred answer: 'no']

[preferred answer: 'yes']
Results

Table 7 presents the scores on the post-test for each of the sentence types that we investigated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does \textit{cai} \textit{ci} \textit{sin} require a more prominent antecedent? (Yes)</th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95.8%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does \textit{cai} \textit{ci} \textit{sin} permit a local antecedent? (Yes)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does \textit{cai} \textit{ci} \textit{sin} permit a distant antecedent? (No)</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does \textit{cai} require a more prominent antecedent? (Yes)</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does \textit{cai} permit a local antecedent? (Yes)</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does \textit{cai} permit a distant antecedent? (Yes)</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Group A are quite clear. The children overwhelmingly realize that \textit{cai} \textit{ci} \textit{sin} has the properties of a local reflexive pronoun, recognizing that it requires a more prominent antecedent and that the antecedent must be near-as shown by the high scores (above 95%) on the sentences designed to test knowledge of these properties.

The key results, of course, involve the children in Groups B and C, who were not able to translate \textit{cai} \textit{ci} \textit{sin} correctly on the pre-test. Would the very limited exposure to this form in the modeling session be enough for them to discover its crucial properties? The answer seems to be yes. The children did very well on the sentences designed to determine whether they realize that this form requires a more prominent antecedent (78.1% and 70.3% for Groups B and C, respectively). They also performed well above the level of chance on the sentences designed to test the preference for a near-by antecedent (a distant antecedent is rejected 68.8% of the time by Group B and 75% of the time by Group C). Although these scores are far from perfect, they suggest that even very limited exposure to correct

uses of previously unfamiliar forms can have a major impact on children's linguistic knowledge.

For reasons that we do not understand at this time, the children did noticeably less well with \textit{cai}. Although there was some indication (especially in Group C) that they realized that it required a more prominent antecedent, there was no indication of a strong preference for the more distant antecedent.

Overall, though, we are optimistic about the results of this experiment. There is reason to believe that even limited exposure to previously unfamiliar forms can trigger quite intricate knowledge in children who are partly proficient in Korean. The prospects are good for even more impressive results under conditions that would provide exposure to a larger number of relevant sentences and situations over a more prolonged period of time. We intend to pursue this possibility in the near future.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the principals, teachers and students of the Korean Catholic Community School and the Hanin Sahoyhalkyo, both in Honolulu, for their assistance with the studies reported here.

References


1 However, in Group A, all of the incorrect responses on the sentences relevant to prominence came from a single child; the other two children invariably chose the more prominent nominal as antecedent. In Group B, one of the four children is largely responsible for the errors on these sentences.