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# A Corpus Study of Overpassivization in Korean EFL Learners' English Writings*

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L2 learners' tendency to incorrectly passivize intransitive verbs is called overpassivization. Overpassivization phenomenon is a language universal phenomenon which occurs in the interlanguage of learners from various L1 backgrounds (Ju, 2000). This study investigates the overpassivization errors in three types of intransitive verbs: unaccusatives with a transitive counterpart, unaccuatives without a transitive counterpart, and unergatives. Additionally, the study tries to find out whether the factors such as the animacy of each verb's subject and the proficiency level influence the pattern of overpassivization errors. Using Korean university students' English writings as a corpus, it is revealed that there is significance in error rates among different types of intransitive verbs. Moreover, the pattern of overpassivization errors differs according to the animacy of the subject. However, no difference is observed corresponding to four different proficiency groups (low, mid-low, mid, and mid-high according to their TOEIC scores). The study proves that the verb type and the animacy play a key role in the pattern of overpassivization errors, but the errors do not decrease as L2 learners' proficiency level increases.

***Keywords*** overpassivization, interlanguage errors, corpus linguistics, animacy, proficiency level

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Overpassivization phenomenon is a language universal phenomenon which occurs in the interlanguage of learners from various L1 backgrounds (Zobl, 1989). This overpassivization error comes from the learners' misunderstanding of the verb types: in English, transitive verbs with an active form can be paraphrased into their passive counterpart by switching the object to the subject, but intransitive verbs, which lack the object, never take the passive form. Moreover, previous studies on overpassivization focused on unaccusative verbs among intransitives since unergative verbs are less likely to be overpassivized (Oshita, 2000). The current study will include the analysis on unergatives along with unaccusatives to discuss the distinct patterns of overpassivization between the two verb types.

Many studies were conducted to find out the factors that influence overpassivization phenomenon. Overpassivization is affected by complex causes: cognitive factors (Ju, 2000), semantic factors (Pae, 2013), syntactic factors (Oshita, 2000), and non-linguistic factors such as the proficiency level (Lee, 2007; Shin, 2011). Among these factors, the current paper will focus on the semantic factor and the effect of the proficiency level on overpassivization. Since most of the studies on the semantic factor of overpassivization took experimental studies (e.g., grammaticality judgment test) in a controlled production, they have a limitation in that their data were far from naturally produced ones. Therefore, to deal with more reliable data, the current study makes use of the naturally occurring written data; corpus data.

The purpose of this study is to account for various factors of overpassivization phenomenon by using Korean EFL learners' English writing corpus. By analyzing this learners' corpus, the present study tries to clarify the validity of influences (verb types, the semantic feature of the subject, and learners' proficiency level) that cause overpassivization errors.

## II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The studies on the overpassivization errors in L2 learners have not yet reached

a consensus on the significant factors that attribute overpassivization. The differences among verb types that undergo overpassivization (Ju, 2000; Lee, 2007; Yip, 1990), the role of animacy in selecting passive or active constructions (Chen, 2013; Croft, 1995; Pae et al., 2014), and the effect of learnability on overpassivization (Kim, 2008; Lee, 2007; Shin, 2011; Yip, 1990; Zobl, 1989) are the issues with controversy.

Lee's (2007) analysis on the different types of verbs points out that overpassivization errors occur more often in unaccusatives, especially in unaccusatives with transitive counterparts. However, in Ju's (2000) study of the effect of conceptualizable agent in the discourse on overpassivization phenomenon, the grammaticality judgment test results showed that there was no significant difference in the error rates of overpassivization between two types of unaccusative verbs (one with transitive counterparts and one without). However, the test result revealed that there was a significant difference in error rates within the same type of verb. She suggests that the frequency of English unaccusatives in learners' data might correlate with the different rate of overpassivization within a type of verbs. However, the frequency of verbs may differ substantially between the speakers of L1 and L2 backgrounds, so more plausible explanation other than frequency is necessary.

Shin (2011), on the other hand, analyzed the corpus of Korean college students' English writings to see whether the proficiency level has an influence on the rate of overpassivization errors. The analysis revealed that learners of high-intermediate level had less overpassivization errors compared to mid- and low-intermediate students. In addition, she found out that high-intermediate learners did not overpassivize the verbs *appeared* and *died* at all. She assumes that the easier learnability of verbs with animate subjects might have affected the reduced rate in errors among students with a higher proficiency level of English. That is, verbs that are usually used with animate subjects are easier to learn and this fact leads to producing less errors.

The animacy of the subject may serve as a better account of the aforementioned discrepancy within a single verb type. In Korean, non-human or inanimate nouns rarely take the subject position in the active-voiced sentence. Therefore, Korean speakers' tendency to passivize the verb when the sentence has an inanimate subject could be the cause for Korean EFL learners' overpassivization errors (Hahn, 2009).

By analyzing the large amount of data, the current study tries to investigate three factors that affect overpassivization: the verb types, the animacy effect, and the proficiency level.

First, due to the semantically different argument structure (Levin & Rappaport, 1995), the study supposes that there will be a discrepancy in the rate of overpassivization among different verb types in intransitives: unaccusative verbs with a transitive counterpart (henceforth alternating unaccusatives), unaccusative verbs without a transitive counterpart (henceforth non-alternating unaccusatives), and unergatives. Unergatives are usually neglected from the study of overpassivization since learners produce relatively less errors than unaccusatives, but they are included in this study to see the clear-cut distinction among verb types and to figure out a possible reason for the rare errors (Note that unergatives tend to have animate nouns for their subjects.).

Second, the current study predicts that verbs with animate subjects are less likely to be overpassivized. The animacy hierarchy proposed by Croft (1995) states that the least marked form is a human noun and the most marked form would be an abstract noun. Ju (2000) claimed that "[a]s one moves away from the most unmarked format, conceptual difficulties may arise because linguistic structures have moved away from what is most expected" (p. 104). Therefore, it is predicted that verbs that go along with abstract nouns are conceptually more difficult than verbs with animate nouns so that these verbs tend to be overpassivized more often. The animacy effect is expected to explain the significant difference among verbs in the same category of unaccusatives.

Lastly, adopting Shin's (2011) analysis, the paper predicts that learners are less likely to make overpassivization errors as the proficiency level goes up. Her study was in direct contradiction with Lee's (2007) study, which presented that there is a learnability problem since overpassivization is not reduced as there is an increase in proficiency. If overpassivization phenomenon undergoes improvements, it is encouraged for learners to increase input exposure. If overpassivization is not remedial through implicit learning, an explicit instruction may be inevitable (Kim, 2008).

The current study aims to integrate these factors of overpassivization phenomenon by observing the corpus of Korean EFL learners' English essays. The verb types, the influence of semantic features of the subject (e.g., animacy), and the proficiency level of the learners will be taken into account to investigate the

co-existing factors of overpassivization errors. The paper expects the following to be observed in the corpus of Korean EFL learners:

**Hypothesis A.** There is a significant difference in the rate of overpassivization among different verb types (i.e., alternating unaccusatives, non-alternating unaccusatives, and unergatives) in intransitive verbs.

**Hypothesis B.** The animacy of the subject of each verb has a significant effect on overpassivization errors in Korean EFL learners.

**Hypothesis C.** The occurrence of overpassivization differs corresponding to the proficiency level of Korean EFL learners.

## III. METHOD

### 1. Data

This study used the corpus gathered from university students' writings, which contains 16,112 individual texts from 1,607 students' short English essays collected during the spring and fall semesters of 2012 and 2013 at a university in South Korea (Carlstrom & Price, 2012). Participants were asked to respond to 20 questions using between 100 and 150 words per text. Participants' information (e.g., gender, TOEIC scores, major, the degree of confidence in English, etc.) is clearly stated in the data. Among 16,112 individual texts, only 8,426 texts that had the records of TOEIC scores (ranging from 170 to 925) are selected.[2] In the chosen corpus, there are 787,401 tokens and total word types are 19,645.

### 2. Method

Two types of unaccusatives (alternating and non-alternating) and unergatives

[2] Texts will be divided into four different proficiency groups; scoring 170-445 (1,590 texts) for low, 450-545 (2,753 texts) for mid-low, 550-645 (2,438 texts) for mid, and 650-925 (1,645 texts) for mid-high proficiency level. The difference in the range among each group was inevitable in order to balance the size of each sub-corpus.

were chosen for the study to see the difference in the rate of overpassivization between verb types. Eleven verbs were selected for each unaccusative verb and for unergatives. The equal number of verbs for each type was selected in order to justify the comparison among different verb types. All verbs in analysis are chosen based on the studies of overpassivization phenomenon by Yip (1990), Ju (2000), and Oshita (2000). In addition, Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British National Corpus (BNC), large-scale of native speakers' corpora (approximately over 400 million words and 100 million words in size, respectively), were referred to select only the verbs with high frequency.[3] The frequency was controlled since rarely used verbs might cause difficulty among learners.

(1) Alternating unaccusatives
*turn, move, continue, change, grow, open, break, close, increase, drop,* and *improve*

(2) Non-Alternating unaccusatives
*happen, appear, die, fall, rise, occur, arrive, exist, suffer, emerge,* and *disappear*

(3) Unergatives
*come, talk, run, speak, walk, laugh, sing, smile, sleep, cry,* and *jump*

Sentences with the target verbs above were extracted from the research corpus by using the concordance program in WordSmith Tools 6.0. The sentences preceding the sentence with the target verb were taken into consideration when the target sentence itself did not fully provide the intended use of the verb by the learner. Among the sentences obtained from the corpus, some types of verb usage and forms were excluded from the analysis based on Oshita's (2000) study.

(4) Verb forms and usages excluded from the analysis

[3] The selected verbs were over frequency 20,000 for COCA and over frequency 5,000 for BNC. The frequency ranks for the selected verbs were below 2,000 in both of the reference corpora.

a. raising verb; e.g. *happen to be, appear to be,* etc.
b. idioms and metaphorical usage of verbs; e.g. *fall asleep, break up,* etc.
c. nonfinite verbs; e.g. infinitives (with or without *to*), gerunds, etc.
d. verbs without the subject; e.g., imperatives, subject-omitted sentences, etc.

Raising verbs were excluded from the analysis because "they take a clausal, not nominal, complement" (Oshita, 2000, p. 308). Idioms and metaphorical uses were also left out since they "tend to appear repeatedly within a single essay and may thus skew the overall result" (Oshita, 2000, p. 307). Nonfinite verbs and verbs without the subject were screened out because it is impossible to look into the property of the subject. In addition, verbs with two arguments (i.e., $NP_1$+*be*+V-*en*+$NP_2$) are ignored since it is hard to determine which argument is the learner's intended subject (one [$NP_1$] is a syntactic subject and the other [$NP_2$] is a semantic subject).

Unlike former studies, the current paper regarded not only *be*+V-*en* but also *be*+V-*ed* and *be*+V as overpassivization errors, treating them as a case of "weak overpassivization."

(5) Weak overpassivization: Overpassivization errors with mistakes in main verb forms.

The passive construction normally has the auxiliary *be* before the main verb and the verb form changes into past participle. However, the learners in the corpus also make other grammatical mistakes besides overpassivization error such as inflection errors. Therefore, learners may mistakenly use past or present verb with *be*-verb to indicate the passive form. Regarding the existence of *be*-verb as a cue for the passive construction, the examples of weak overpassivization will also be counted as the cases of overpassivization.[4] The grammatical use of the

[4] It may be erroneous to consider the inserted *be* in *be*+V or *be*+V-*ed* as a part of passivization since there have been controversial arguments about the grammatical properties of the *be*-insertion—whether it is a topic-subject marker (Ahn, 2006), a projection of underdeveloped functional category (Yang, 2001), or else—in Korean EFL learners' interlanguages. In Hahn's (2009) study, however, *be*+V structure such as in "you will be die" was categorized as a case of an "insertion of *be* in unaccusative constructions" (p. 150). This was supported by her analysis on the subsequent interview with the participants. In addition, the current data contain a negligible amount of occasions where

verb (i.e., NP+V) will be compared with the ungrammatical examples. Moreover, spelling errors are ignored and verbs which intended the meaning of other parts of speech (e.g., nouns or adjectives) are excluded from the analysis.

The semantic features of the subject in each target sentence in the corpus were manually observed. Borrowing Croft's (1995) animacy hierarchy (i.e., human > animate > inanimate > abstract), the current analysis divided the subjects into two groups: animate nouns (mostly human and a few animals) and inanimate nouns (nonhuman concrete nouns and abstract nouns). One exception in this study is that inanimate nouns with mobility (i.e., cars and roller coasters) were counted as animate nouns. Chen (2012) noted that "different mobilities meant very different things, and that the differences often had something to do with the animacy of the mobile or immobile object (p. 233). It is indicated that speakers' views about subjects' animacy depend on the entities' degree of mobility. Since the mobile subjects (mostly vehicles) in the sentences of our corpus inevitably possess human subjects within, it is plausible to regard that the participants counted the mobile subjects as animate ones.

## III. RESULTS

A total of 980 token sentences were obtained on the non-alternating unaccusatives and 164 overpassivization errors were observed. As for alternating unaccusative, the corpus showed 1067 token sentences with 311 errors. 1564 token sentences were produced on the search for unergatives and only 72 cases of overpassivization errors were found. The frequencies of overpassivization were analyzed by dividing the overall tokens into two sub-categories: an active form and an overpassived form. The values in percentage were rounded off to the nearest hundredth. Table 1 shows the overall frequency and proportion of overpassivization errors in different verb types. The target verbs are listed according to the frequency rate of overpassivization from the highest to the lowest.

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*be*-insertion is used as a topic marker; rather, in most of the cases, *be*-insertion is observed when the sentence is interpreted as possessing passive meanings.

**TABLE 1**

**Overall Frequencies of Overpassivization in Three Verb Types**

| Non-Alternating Unaccusatives | | | Alternating Unaccusatives | | | Unergatives | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Active | over-passivized | | active | over-passivized | | active | over-passivized |
| *disappear* | 28 (60.9) | 18 (39.1) | *close* | 0 (0) | 3 (100) | *smile* | 52 (85.2) | 9 (14.8) |
| *exist* | 52 (72.2) | 20 (27.8) | *improve* | 22 (40.7) | 32 (59.3) | *cry* | 50 (86.2) | 8 (13.8) |
| *suffer* | 61 (79.2) | 16 (20.8) | *break* | 39 (41.5) | 55 (58.5) | *laugh* | 21 (91.3) | 2 (8.7) |
| *die* | 120 (81.1) | 28 (18.9) | *open* | 19 (54.3) | 16 (45.7) | *jump* | 26 (92.9) | 2 (7.1) |
| *happen* | 229 (84.2) | 43 (15.8) | *change* | 166 (61) | 106 (39) | *run* | 126 (93.3) | 9 (6.7) |
| *rise* | 16 (84.2) | 3 (15.8) | *continue* | 17 (63) | 10 (37) | *walk* | 86 (94.5) | 5 (5.5) |
| *fall* | 47 (85.5) | 8 (14.5) | *increase* | 48 (64.9) | 26 (35.1) | *sing* | 36 (94.7) | 2 (5.3) |
| *occur* | 112 (86.8) | 17 (13.2) | *drop* | 11 (73.3) | 4 (26.7) | *sleep* | 114 (95) | 6 (5) |
| *emerge* | 9 (90) | 1 (10) | *turn* | 87 (77) | 26 (23) | *speak* | 97 (95.1) | 5 (4.9) |
| *appear* | 89 (90.8) | 9 (9.2) | *grow* | 286 (90) | 32 (10) | *come* | 440 (96.1) | 18 (3.9) |
| *arrive* | 53 (98.1) | 1 (1.9) | *move* | 61 (98.4) | 1 (1.6) | *talk* | 444 (98.7) | 6 (1.3) |
| Total | 816 | 164 | | 756 | 311 | | 1492 | 72 |

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses are the percentage of the total number of the verb use.

The average percent of overpassivization errors for non-alternating unaccusatives is 17%. For alternating unaccusatives and unergatives, the values are 39.6% and 7% respectively. Therefore, the rough calculation from Table 1 leads to the conclusion that overpassivization errors tend to occur frequently in the following order: alternating unaccusatives > non-alternating unaccusatives > unergatives.

To compare overpassivization error rates among different verb types with statistically significant values, three Mann-Whitney U tests were carried out on the data. The purpose of this test is to see if the error rates are significantly different among the verb types. The results are given in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**

**Results of Mann-Whitney U Test in Three Verb Types**

| Verb types (A/B) | Mean Difference (A-B) | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|
| Non-Alternating Unaccusatives/Alternating Unaccusatives | -22.6 | 0.025* |
| Non-Alteranting Unaccusatives/Unergatives | 10 | 0.004* |
| Alternating Unaccusatives/Unergatives | 32.6 | 0.001* |

*Note.* The results are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

The results in Table 2 show that there is a significant difference in the rate of overpassivization for the target verbs among different types of verbs. According to the mean differences, alternating unaccusatives are most likely to be overpassivized, followed by non-alternating unaccusatives and unergatives in order of mention. The results are consistent with Hypothesis A: There is a significant difference in the rate of overpassivization among different verb types. The reason for comparing error rates instead of raw frequencies is because the total tokens observed for each verb were highly unequal.

The next hypothesis is about the animacy effect on overpassivization. It is assumed that verbs that are frequently used with animate subjects are less likely to be overpassivized. However, some verbs (e.g., *die* and *suffer*) do not correspond to this assumption (to be discussed below). Due to these outliers, a tendency rather than a statistic evaluation will be discussed for the influence of the animacy. In the current study, a verb that mostly has an animate subject (approximately over 70% of the cases) will be called an animate verb and a verb that is often used with an inanimate subject will be referred to as an inanimate verb. The first type to be dealt with is non-alternating unaccusatives.

**TABLE 3**

**The Frequency of Animate Subjects for Non-Alternating Unaccusatives**

| | *occur* | *happen* | *emerge* | *disappear* | *rise* | *exist* | *appear* | *fall* | *arrive* | *die* | *suffer* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Animate | 0 | 1 | 2 | 10 | 5 | 19 | 51 | 39 | 51 | 145 | 77 |
| subject | (0) | (0.4) | (20) | (21.7) | (26.3) | (26.4) | (52) | (70.9) | (94.4) | (98) | (100) |
| Inanimate | 129 | 271 | 8 | 36 | 14 | 53 | 47 | 16 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| subject | (100) | (99.6) | (80) | (78.3) | (73.7) | (73.6) | (48) | (29.1) | (5.6) | (2) | (0) |

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses are the percentage of the total number of subjects.

Verbs such as *occur, happen, emerge, disappear, rise,* and *exist* are mostly used

with inanimate subjects, so they will be referred to as inanimate verbs. On the other hand, *fall, arrive, die,* and *suffer* will be categorized as animate verbs. According to Tables 1 and 3 on non-alternating unaccusatives, the most frequently overpassivized verbs *disappear* (39.1% of errors) and *exist* (27.8%) are both inanimate verbs, and the least frequently overpassivized verb *arrive* (1.9%, only one case of error among 54 cases) is an animate verb. This tendency supports the assumption that learners will perform less errors of overpassivization when using animate verbs.

However, in the case of *die* and *suffer,* the occurrence of overpassivization is fairly high even though they have animate subjects nearly in all cases. One possible explanation is that the subject of these two verbs undoubtedly has no will for dying or suffering. The subjects of *arrive* might have their will for the action, but the subjects of *die* or *suffer* are obviously patients of dying or suffering from something since no one willingly dies or suffers. These strong patient-like subjects might have caused Korean EFL learners to mark the verb as passive incorrectly even though it has an animate subject (Pae et al., 2013). The rest of the verbs in this type show somewhat similar error rates (around 10-20%), so they were left out of the discussion.

The following table presents the animacy rate for alternating unaccusatives.

**TABLE 4**

**The Frequency of Animate Subjects for Alternating Unaccusatives**

| | *open* | *close* | *improve* | *increase* | *continue* | *break* | *change* | *turn* | *move* | *drop* | *grow* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Animate subject | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 5 (9.3) | 10 (13.5) | 4 (14.8) | 15 (16) | 56 (20.6) | 30 (26.5) | 49 (79) | 12 (80) | 273 (85.8) |
| Inanimate subject | 35 (100) | 3 (100) | 49 (90.7) | 64 (86.5) | 23 (85.2) | 79 (84) | 216 (79.4) | 83 (73.5) | 13 (21) | 3 (20) | 45 (14.2) |

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses are the percentage of the total number of subjects.

The results of alternating unaccusatives in Tables 1 and 4 show that all of the inanimate verbs (i.e., verbs having inanimate subjects over 70% of all cases, such as *open, close, improve, increase, continue, break, change,* and *turn*) except for *turn* have over 35% of overpassivization errors. Among animate verbs (i.e., *move, drop,* and *grow*), *move* (1.9%, only one case of error among 62 cases) and *grow* (10.1%) showed less errors compared to inanimate verbs. Another animate verb *drop* is

overpassivized less than other inanimate verbs except for *turn,* but the error rate is still high (26.7%). The relatively low error rate of *turn* and high error rate of *drop* need further explanation.

The following table for animacy gives the data for unergatives.

**TABLE 5**

**The Frequency of Animate Subjects for Unergatives**

| | *come* | *run* | *sing* | *talk* | *speak* | *cry* | *smile* | *sleep* | *walk* | *jump* | *laugh* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Animate subject | 285 (62.2) | 124 (91.9) | 36 (94.7) | 436 (96.9) | 100 (98) | 57 (98.3) | 60 (98.4) | 119 (99.2) | 91 (100) | 28 (100) | 23 (100) |
| Inanimate subject | 173 (37.8) | 11 (8.1) | 2 (5.3) | 14 (3.1) | 2 (2) | 1 (1.7) | 1 (1.6) | 1 (0.8) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses are the percentage of the total number of subjects.

According to Table 5, 10 out of 11 unergative verbs (except for *come*) are strictly animate verbs, having over 90% of animate subjects. Moreover, all of the verbs in this type have the overpassivization error rates below 15%. The reason for low frequency of overpassivization in unergatives can be explained by saying that these verbs are dominantly used with animate subjects; thus they have easier learnability (Croft, 1995; Shin, 2011).

In all three verb types, the results showed that verbs that are often used with animate subjects (i.e., human) tend to undergo overpassivization less frequently. Since the results do not present a significant difference but only a tendency, Hypothesis B needs to be modified as follows: Korean EFL learners tend to make less overpassivization errors when a verb usually has an animate subject.

Lastly, the corpus data were analyzed to see if learners produce less overpassivization as the proficiency level increases. One-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare differences among the four proficiency levels: low, mid-low, mid, and mid-high. However, no significance was found among different proficiency levels, $F(3, 128) = 1.056$, $p = .371$.

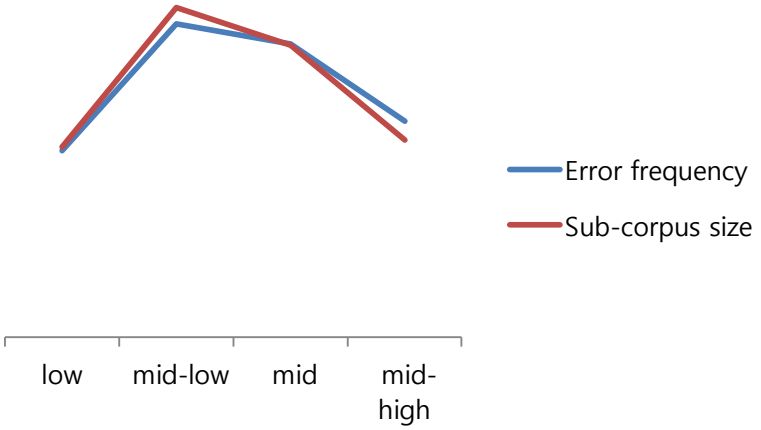


**FIGURE 1**

**The Error Frequency and the Sub-corpus Size among the Proficiency Levels**

Figure 1 compares the proportion of the error frequency and the sample size according to the proficiency level. The mean errors are 3.06 for low, 5.15 for mid-low, 4.82 for mid, and 3.55 for mid-high level and the respective size of the sub-corpus is 1,590 texts, 2,753 texts, 2,438 texts, and 1,645 texts. Figure 1 shows that the proportions of these two values for each level are considerably similar. Therefore, it is not the case that learners with higher proficiency level produced less overpassivization errors than learners with lower proficiency level; the small differences are only due to the different sample sizes. This leads to a rejection to Hypothesis C: The occurrence of overpassivization differs corresponding to the proficiency level of Korean EFL learners. Instead, overpassivization errors are not remedial as the proficiency level increases but produced constantly regardless of the proficiency.[5]

[5] Overpassivization in unergatives acted differently from those in unaccusatives. Errors in the alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives were equivalent to the number of sample texts in each proficiency group; however, errors actually increased as the learners' proficiency improves in unergatives (low: 8, mid-low: 20, mid: 19, and mid-high: 25 errors). This exception can be attributed to the avoidance phenomenon because the low-level learners' avoidance of using confusing structures yielded less errors (Kleinmann, 1977).

## IV. DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis about the influence of verb types on overpassivization was developed from Ju's (2000) hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the rate of overpassivization between unaccusatives with transitive counterparts and those without (p. 94). Even though her study argued that there was no significant difference between alternating unaccusatives and non-alternating unaccusatives, the current study's finding revealed the opposite. Alternating unaccusatives, non-alternating unaccusatives, and unergatives each have different degree of influence on overpassivization errors: alternating unaccusative is the most influential and unergatives the least. The result is in congruous with previous research (Lee, 2007; Yip, 1990; Zobl, 1989). It is assumed that selecting only the verbs with high frequency makes the results more reliable in that low frequency words may work as a potential difficulty among learners. It follows that the word frequency can be another factor contributing to the patterns of overpassivization and other forms of interlanguage errors; thus, further research on the issue is encouraged.

The second finding of this study is that verbs that usually have animate subjects are less likely to be overpassivized than those having inanimate subjects. This finding is different from Croft's (1995) point of view on the animacy effect, which suggests that animacy is an important factor in choosing voice forms. That is, when a verb has an animate subject, the overpassivization errors are reduced whereas learners make more overpassivization errors when the same verb has an inanimate subject. However, the current study argues that each verb has a tendency to have an animate or inanimate subject, and a verb rarely gets overpassivized if it tends to have an animate subject. In other words, the pattern of overpassivization differs depending on each verb's natural feature for animacy, not on the condition of the subject's animacy whatever the verb is. Ju (2000) controlled the subject to be inanimate; therefore, the study failed to consider that there is a tendency for the subject's animacy of each verb. An unexplained discrepancy among verbs within the same type in Ju's (2000) study is now solved: frequently overpassivized verbs *close* and *break* both tend to have inanimate subjects whereas *grow*, which usually takes animate subjects, showed less overpassivization errors accordingly.

This approach is also linked to the gap of the overpassivization error rates among different verb types because the verbs in one type are dissimilar to those

in other types in the degree of animacy of their concomitant subjects. It is no doubt that unaccusatives undergo overpassivization more frequently than other intransitives such as unergatives (Lee, 2007; Oshita, 2000; Shin, 2011; Yip, 1990). As for the reason for the distinct patterns among intransitives, the animacy effect plays a pivotal role. Unaccusative verbs investigated in the current study are inanimate verbs in general, and most unergative verbs are strictly animate verbs. Accordingly, unaccusatives are more susceptible to overpassivization errors than unergatives since the frequently appearing inanimate subjects in unaccusatives easily mislead learners into choosing passive forms. Likewise, higher overpassivization error rates were observed in alternating unaccusatives than in non-alternating unaccusatives since most alternating unaccusative verbs are more rigorous inanimate verbs than the non-alternating ones (cf. Table 3 and 4). Therefore, a significant difference in overpassivization rates among different verb types is correlated with the animacy effect.

The results also suggest that learners' overpassivization errors did not differ according to the proficiency level, which is inconsistent with Shin (2011). The reason for the discrepancy in the results may be due to the unequal size of the sub-corpora in Shin's (2011) study. Her finding showed that learners of high-intermediate level made less errors of overpassivization; however, the sub-corpus for high-intermediate learners was about four times smaller than other two sub-corpora. The fact that even advanced learners suffer from choosing grammatically correct verb forms is supported by Lee (2007), and this finding implies that implementing the explicit grammar instruction on L2 learners (such as lexical decomposition and negative feedback treatment) rather than relying on the implicit learning (i.e., input exposure) is required to reduce Korean EFL learners' overpassivization errors (Kim, 2008).

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated three co-existing factors of overpassivization in Korean EFL learners' English essays: the verb types, the animacy effect, and the proficiency level. As for the verb types, the observation revealed that there is a significance among three different types of verbs. The order of the frequently overpassivized verb types is as follows: alternating unaccusatives, non-

alternating unaccusatives, and unergatives. Moreover, it is assumed that verbs that are often used with animate subjects are easier for learners to acquire and use because of the unmarked feature of the animate beings, so learners make less overpassivization errors with these verbs.

The current corpus data revealed that the proficiency level did not affect the frequency of overpassivization. Therefore, this interlanguage error is not remedied as learners improve their English. It is also suggested that it is important to provide instruction on choosing accurate voice forms according to the different types of verbs even for the high proficiency level students. In addition, instructing animate verbs prior to inanimate verbs will be an effective order in the curriculum. The explicit grammar instruction is more helpful for EFL students than a mere input enhancement.

There are some limitations in the current study. First, the categorization of the *be*-insertion structure into overpassivation cannot be considered perfectly accurate since the learners in the data produced many other grammatical mistakes which inhibit an exacting distinction of the intended use. Also, each proficiency group had a different range of TOEIC scores, and the highest score of low group and the lowest score of the next higher group practically had no difference. This might have blurred the clear-cut boundaries for each group, causing the difference among groups to have no significance. Next, the analysis of the animacy effect did not fully explain a few exceptional verbs. It is proposed that some verbs are highly affected by the agentivity of the subject or the directness of the causation. Therefore, the agentivity and the degree of causation seem to be other key factors in conducting overpassivization. A further investigation is needed to clarify the major causes of overpassivization phenomenon and to examine the relations and the interplaying influences among those factors.

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