

# What Causes Overpassivization?\*

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**Lee, Hyunsu & Choi, Incheol. 2011. What Causes Overpassivization?** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*. 19(3). 91-107. To identify the actual cause of the overpassivization errors made by L2 learners, we examined three main previous studies. The first approach is to lay the responsibility to the existence or absence of the information about the external cause (Ju 2000; Chung 2010). The second approach is to ascribe the reason to the transitive counterpart of the unaccusative verb (Yip 1995; Chung 2010). The final approach is to consider the adversity effect as a reason for the overpassivization error (Jung 1996a, 1996b). By conducting an experiment, we show that each factor should not be considered in isolation. Instead, we suggest that all these factors are significantly relevant in explaining the overpassivization errors made by Korean learners.

**Key Words:** overpassivization, external cause, transitivity, adversity, second language acquisition, unaccusative verbs

## 1. Introduction

One of the well-investigated *but* still controversial phenomena in second language (L2) acquisition is unaccusativity and its acquisition. Unaccusative verbs are a type of intransitive verbs that contrast with unergative verbs. These two types of intransitive verbs are represented by different lexical semantic structures. That is, an unaccusative verb takes a theme or patient argument as

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\* The experiment and its analysis reported in this paper are due to Lee (2011) and this paper is an extended version of it. The comments and suggestions from three anonymous reviewers were valuable in revising this paper. All errors are of course ours.

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its subject whereas an unergative verb takes an agent argument as its subject. The examples of these two types of verbs are given in (1).

- (1) a. Unaccusative verbs  
       increase, decrease, improve, change, grow, continue, break, die,  
       suffer, happen, appear, disappear, vanish
- b. Unergative Verbs  
       sing, dance, cry, laugh, sleep, talk, walk, smile, swim, run

It has been widely reported that L2 learners tend to make the errors exemplified in (2) (Burt and Kiparsky 1972; Zobl 1989; Hubbard 1994; Hirakawa 1994; 1995; 1997; Yip 1995; Hwang 1997; Balcom 1997; Oshita 1997; 1998; 2000; Montrul 1999; Ju 2000; Chay 2006; Choi 2010).

- (2) a. \*The most memorable experience of my life was happened 15 years ago.
- b. \*Most people are fallen in love and marry with somebody.
- c. \*My mother was died when I was just a baby.  
       (Zobl 1989)

This type of errors is known as overpassivization (Yip 1990). As Hubbard and Hix (1988) pointed out, the majority of the errors take place with unaccusative verbs.

The unaccusative hypothesis, as first formulated by Perlmutter (1978), claims that the surface subject of the unaccusative verbs originates from the underlying object position. From a transformational grammar perspective, the main cause of the overpassivization errors may come from the similarity of the underlying structures between the unaccusative verbs and the passive verbs as illustrated in (3) and (4).<sup>1)</sup>

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1) However, unaccusative verbs do not involve any volitional agent or causer that causes the event denoted by the verbs, in contrast with passive verbs. Therefore, the event structure denoted by an unaccusative verb involves only a theme argument that undergoes a change and ends up with its changed state. In contrast, passive verbs still imply an agent or causer regardless of its overt presence.

- (3) a. X died.  
 b. \_\_ [V NP] (i.e., \_\_ [died X])
- (4) a. X was killed.  
 b. \_\_ [V NP] (i.e., \_\_ [was killed X])

However, as indicated by Ju (2000), the cause of overpassivization errors is not defined by simple configurational similarity but involves semantic, syntactic and pragmatic reason. In this paper, we particularly review the following three major accounts found in literature (see Yip 1995 and Chung 2010 for (5a); Ju 2000 and Chung 2010 for (5b); Jung 1996a and 1996b for (5c)):

- (5) a. The existence of the causative counterpart plays a role.  
 b. The availability of the conceptualizable cause plays a role  
 c. The intervention of the adverse emotion plays a role.

To find out which of the factors is the actual cause of overpassivization errors, we conducted an experiment. The result shows that all the factors given in (5) are significantly relevant in explaining the overpassivization errors.

## 2. Previous Theories of Overpassivization

In this section, we will look over previous approaches to the cause of overpassivization focusing on the three factors in (5). The first factor (5a) involves the lexical property of the verb in that it is determined by the existence of the causative counterpart. The other two factors in (5) depend on the contextual information. That is, it becomes important whether an external cause is conceptualized in the context or whether a speaker's emotion like adversity or beneficiary is implied.

### 2.1 The Existence of Transitive Counterparts

According to Yip (1995), unaccusative verbs have two subclasses: unpaired verbs, which only occur as unaccusatives, and paired verbs, which have a

transitive counterpart. It is not transparently predictable from syntactic or semantic properties whether a verb takes part in the causative alternation. Yip suggests that this unpredictability has to do with the prevalence of overpassivization errors in L2 learners. Passivization has broader application than unaccusativization. In addition, a passive verb has the configurational property similar to an unaccusative verb. Therefore, it is easily predicted that L2 learners are more likely to use passivization than unaccusativization. As a result, they would make more errors with unaccusatives which have transitive counterparts than those without. However, in contrast to the prediction, Ju (2000) reports that Chinese learners of English do not show any difference in difficulties between unaccusatives with transitive counterparts and those without.

In another story, Chung (2010) carried out an experiment with Korean EFL learners to investigate the role of the transitive counterpart regarding overpassivization errors. The two types of intransitive verbs that were examined in the experiment are given in (6) and (7) (from Chung 2010).

(6) bounce (alternating)

- a. A ball fell from a bag. It bounced down the street.
- b. The boy bounced the ball for a long time.
- c. The ball was bounced.

(7) die (non-alternating)

- a. The bird died.
- b. \*They died the bird.
- c. \*The bird was died.

In (6), the three sentences are grammatically correct since the unaccusative verb *bounce* has its transitive counterpart. In contrast, the unaccusative verb *die* does not have its transitive counterpart. For this reason, it cannot be used in a causative transitive sentence as in (7b) or in a passive sentence as in (7c). Chung's experiment, in contrast to Ju (2000), shows that Korean learners make more overpassivization errors with alternating unaccusatives than non-alternating ones.

## 2.2 The existence of external cause

Ju (2000) suggests that the availability of conceptualizable causer in the discourse has an important effect on the tendency for L2 learners to passivize English unaccusatives.

- (8) a. A fighter jet shot at the ship. The ship sank slowly.  
 b. The rusty old ship started breaking up. The ship sank slowly. (Ju 2000)

In (8a), the external cause of the ship's sinking event, i.e., a fighter jet, is explicitly informed. On the contrary, in (8b), no clear external cause is mentioned.<sup>2)</sup> According to Ju (2000), L2 learners are more likely to passivize unaccusatives when they are informed of the external cause in the context. In her experiment, the participants were asked to choose a grammatically appropriate option in the forced-choice test as in (9).

- (9) a. My car was very old. The engine (died/was died) suddenly.  
 b. A big truck crashed into my car. The engine (died/was died) suddenly. (Ju 2000)

In (9a) there exists no information of external cause whereas in (9b) there is an explicit information of the external cause. The result of the experiment clearly shows that L2 learners tend to choose the passive option when the external cause appears in the previous sentence. A similar observation was reported by Chung (2010).

## 2.3 Adversity

Jung (1996a, 1996b) notes that Korean passives in general convey adverse or beneficial emotion toward the event (cf. Davison 1980, Choi 2003).

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2) The external causer in Ju (2000) should be distinguished from the external causer in Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995). The external causer in Ju (2000) does not exert immediate control over the event differently from the definition in Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995). If it does, a passive rather than an unaccusative would be more appropriate. To avoid such confusion, I will use the term 'external cause' instead of the term 'external causer'.

- (10) a. Tom-un kyengchal-eykey son-ul cap-hi-ess-ta.  
 Tom-TOP police-by hand-ACC catch-PAS-PST-DC  
 'Tom is subject to his hand being caught by the police.'
- b. Na-nun palam-ey sso-i-le ka-ss-ta.  
 I-TOP breeze-by blow-PAS-to go-PST-DC  
 'I went out to enjoy by breeze.' (a-b from Jung 1996b)
- c. Kim-i mochin sang-ul tanghay-ss-ta  
 Kim-NOM mother death-ACC undergo-PST-DC  
 'Kim encountered her mother's death.' (from Choi 2003)

The examples in (10) express the subject's adverse emotion on the events. Particularly, the sentences in (10b) and (10c) do not involve any explicit external agent. The only reason for the passive use in the sentences comes from the speakers' decision whether or not the event brings about a pleasant or an adverse emotion.

In English, such emotional function is limited to *get*-passives, as illustrated in (11) (cf. Chappell 1980; Carter and McCarthy 1999).

- (11) a. Jane (was/got) fired.  
 b. Jane (was/got) promoted.

The *get*-passive options in (11) convey the interpretation such that the event brings about subject's adverse or pleasant emotion as in Korean passives. However, such emotional implication does not apply to *be*-passive options. Jung (1996a) reports that Korean learners of English also tend to align the emotional function with the *be*-passives. This results from the interference of Korean passive properties. That is, Korean learners wrongly consider that English passives in general carry the emotional implication as Korean passives do. More interestingly, Jung (1996a) found that some Korean learners used passive forms of *happen* and *occur* to express some adverse emotion toward the events. Given the transfer tendency, it seems to be natural to predict that Korean learners are more likely to overpassivize unaccusatives when the event is not favorable to the subject or a participant in the context.

### 3. Hypotheses and Method

#### 3.1 Hypotheses

In this study we examine three hypotheses that are set on the basis of the previous studies. The first hypothesis is that L2 learners tend to overpassivize unaccusatives ungrammatically if an external cause is provided in the context. The second hypothesis is that L2 learners are likely to overpassivize unaccusatives incorrectly if unaccusatives have transitive counterparts. The third hypothesis examines the relationship between the effect of adversity and overpassivization. The three hypotheses are summarized in (12), (13) and (14), respectively.

(12) **Hypothesis 1**

Korean learners of English tend to overpassivize unaccusatives ungrammatically with an explicit external cause in the context than without the external cause.

(13) **Hypothesis 2**

Korean learners of English are more likely to make overpassivization errors with unaccusatives that have transitive counterparts than those without.

(14) **Hypothesis 3**

Korean learners of English are inclined to overpassivize unaccusatives when a participant in the context suffers adversity.

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants of the experiment consisted of 72 Korean high school students. All of them were third year students. They had learned English in public education system for about 10 years and were chosen from the students who scored 70 points or more in their mid-term and final English exams. Among these participants, one participant was excluded from the analysis because the participant did not pass the passivization test items that were inserted in our experiment as distracters.

### 3.3 Materials and Procedures

The test consisted of 25 forced choice questions. In the test, participants were asked to choose the grammatically correct option between the unaccusative and passive options as given in (15) and (16).

(15) He had high blood pressure, but he didn't take his medicine. His blood pressure (increased / was increased) suddenly.

(16) He enjoyed the nice view of the mountain. However, his blood pressure (increased/was increased) suddenly.

Among the questions, 20 question items were supposed to be correct when a participant chose the unaccusative option.<sup>3)</sup> The other 5 question items were distracter and hence would be correct when the participant chose the passive option.

In the 20 testing items, we included 10 unaccusative verbs: *increase, fall, melt, dry, grow, die, appear, vanish, disappear, and emerge*. Each item is categorized into the three features: [+/- Transitive], [+/- External Cause], [+/- Adversity]. The feature [+/- Transitive] checks whether the unaccusative verb has a transitive counterpart (cf. Chung 2010). The feature [+/- External Cause] checks whether the question item provides the information of the external cause (cf. Ju 2000). Finally, the feature [+/- Adversity] shows whether the question provides the context where a participant of the input sentences suffers adversity (cf. Jung 1996a, 1996b). The Table 1 illustrates the 8 possible feature combinations that we wanted to reveal from this test. Following the feature classification, the question in (15) will be classified as +E, +T and +A and that in (16) as -E, +T and +A.

To concentrate on the three features, we tried to control other possible variables in the test. The variables we were particularly concerned about were animacy effects and adverbial intervention. Croft (1995) notes that the animacy feature of the subject has a significant influence on L2 learners' decision whether to use the active voice or the passive voice. Specifically, learners tend to use the

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3) We included the input question only when 4 out of the 5 English native speakers chose the unaccusative option. Except two marginal cases, the native speakers unanimously chose the unaccusative options for the input questions. Even in the two cases, they agreed that the unaccusative options are more appropriate.



passive voice when the subject refers to an inanimate entity.

Table 1 Structures of the test<sup>4)</sup>

Features	+ External Cause		- External Cause	
	+Adversity	-Adversity	+Adversity	-Adversity
+Transitive	+T,+E,+A	+T,+E,-A	+T,-E,+A	+T,-E,-A
-Transitive	-T,+E,+A	-T,+E,-A	-T,-E,+A	-T,-E,-A

Accordingly, it is possible that animate subject induces overpassivization errors. We also did not include any adverbial that can signal the existence or absence of the external agent. Instead, we included in the question items only 6 manner adverbs that are neutral to the agenthood: *suddenly, quickly, fast, instantly, immediately, and slowly*.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The overall result of the test according to the 8 feature combinations is given in the Table 2.

Table 2 Overpassivization errors due to feature combinations

Condition	Number of Sentences	Mean Number of Errors per Learner	Percentage Incorrect
+T, +E, +A	3	1.34	45%
+T, +E, -A	2	1.15	58%
+T, -E, +A	3	0.92	31%
+T, -E, -A	2	0.56	28%
-T, +E, +A	3	1.38	46%
-T, +E, -A	2	0.90	45%
-T, -E, +A	3	0.51	17%
-T, -E, -A	2	0.31	16%

4) +T stands for unaccusatives with transitive counterparts; -T unaccusatives without transitive counterparts; +E external causation; - E no external causation; +A adversity in the context; -A no adversity in the context.

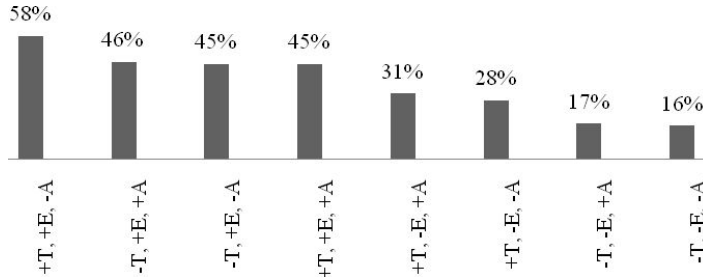


Figure 1 Error percentage in descending order

Table 3 Overpassivization errors in [+Transitive]

Verb	External Causation		Internal Causation	
	+Adversity	-Adversity	+Adversity	-Adversity
increase	19		19	
fall	36		16	
melt	40		30	
dry		53		39
grow		29		1
Total	95	82	65	40

Table 4 Overpassivization errors in [-Transitive]

Verb	External Causation		Internal Causation	
	+Adversity	-Adversity	+Adversity	-Adversity
die	29		4	
appear	24		6	
vanish	45		26	
disappear		40		20
emerge		24		2
Total	98	64	36	22

As shown in Table 2, each feature combination is distributed in 2 or 3 input question items. Figure 1 shows the overpassivization errors according to the 8 feature combinations in descending order. Tables 3 and 4 show how participants responded to input verbs on the basis of the conditions we investigated.

### 4.1 The existence of external cause

Figure 1 shows that the most conspicuous feature is apparently the existence of the external cause, which is ranked in the first to the fourth place regarding error rate. Figure 2 shows this tendency more clearly. The graph is divided into the unaccusatives with transitive counterparts and those without. However, regardless of the existence of transitive counterparts, the overpassivization errors were made more in the context with the external cause than in the context without the external cause. The mean difference in Table 5 further supports the observation. The mean difference is affirmed to be significant by a paired-samples T-test ( $t=6.825, p=.000$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 in (12) is statistically verified by our test results.

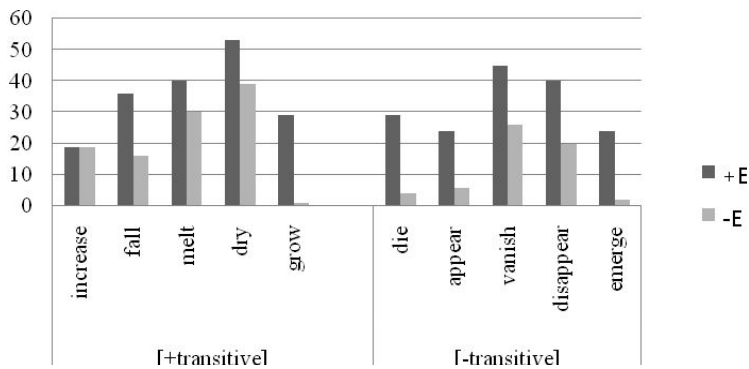


Figure 2 Overpassivization Errors due to existence of external cause

Table 5 Paired Samples Statistics for [+External] and [-External]

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
External	4.77	71	2.732	.324
Internal	2.30	71	1.760	.209

### 4.2 The existence of transitive counterparts

Regarding the overpassivization errors made by Korean learners, Figure 1 shows that the existence of transitive counterparts is not as conspicuous as the effect of the external cause. However, a paired-samples T-test we conducted in this study shows that the feature is also significant. As shown in the descriptive

statistics in Table 6, the difference in the mean values is .87, which is affirmed to be significant ( $t=3.616$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 in (13) is also supported by our test results.

Table 6 Paired Samples Statistics for [+Transitive] and [-Transitive]

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
With T	3.97	71	2.042	.242
Without T	3.10	71	1.943	.231

### 4.3 Adversity

Table 7 Paired Samples Statistics for [+Adversity] and [-Adversity]

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
With A	4.14	71	2.537	.301
Without A	2.93	71	1.457	.173

The adversity effect does not seem to be as conspicuous as the external causation effect, as we have observed in Figure 2. However, the paired samples T-test we conducted also verifies that the difference of mean values between [+Adversity] and [-Adversity] in Table 7 is significant ( $t=4.405$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 in (14) is supported by our test results.

## 5. Conclusion

During 1980s and 1990s, the similarity of thematic and configurational structures between unaccusative and passive verbs attracted many scholars who wanted to reveal the reason for the overpassivization errors that are prevalent in the L2 acquisition process (Zobl 1989; Yip 1995; Balcom 1997). With the beginning of the new millenium, scholars began to turn their eyes toward the more specific lexical, semantic and pragmatic aspects to identify the main factors that induce the overpassivization errors. After examining those approaches, we identified three main approaches. The first approach is to lay the responsibility to the existence or absence of the information about the external cause (Ju 2000;

Chung 2010). The second approach is to ascribe the reason to the transitive counterpart of the unaccusative verb (Chung 2010). The final approach is to consider the adversity effect as a reason for the overpassivization error (Jung 1996a, 1996b). Our study shows that each factor should not be considered in isolation. Instead, it suggests that all three factors conspire to induce the overpassivization error.

Our approach has merits in that it investigates possible factors at the same time with equal importance. In addition, it reveals the relative scale of the factors. Specifically, our study shows that the existence or absence of the external cause is more conspicuously responsible for the overpassivization error than others (cf. Ju 2000). However, it also has its own limitations. For example, surely there must be more possible factors that we did not include in our study. Further, we confined the range of investigation to only 10 unaccusative verbs. The learner corpus study in Choi (2010) reveals that not only unaccusatives but also unergatives induce Korean learners to make the overpassivization error. To identify more factors and cases for the overpassivization error, a big scale learner corpus study would be ideal. We leave this task to future study.

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## Appendix

### Forced-choice Test

1. This house is very old. It (built/was built) in 1890.
2. He enjoyed the nice view of the mountain. However, his blood pressure (increased/was increased) suddenly.
3. He cut the power supply. The machine (died/was died) suddenly.  
\*power supply: 전원공급
4. His money slipped into the sewer. The money (vanished/was vanished) quickly. \* slip: 미끄러져 떨어지다 sewer: 하수구
5. She brought the heater closer to the snowman. The snowman (melted/was melted) quickly.
6. Jane held a party. I (invited/was invited) to the party.
7. We were climbing up the mountain. The fire (appeared/was appeared) instantly.
8. Night came. The stars (emerged/were emerged) slowly.
9. It was going to rain. The sky (covered/was covered) with dark clouds.
10. Tom shook the big tree. The leaves of the tree (fell/were fallen) suddenly.
11. She came closer to the heater. Her clothes (dried/were dried) quickly.
12. The weather became warm and sunny. The snowman (melted/was melted) quickly.
13. He threw down the cigarette. The fire (appeared/was appeared) instantly.
14. The washing machine was very old. The machine (died/was died) suddenly.
15. The weather was warm. The plants (grew/were grown) tall fast.
16. I put the trash bags in front of my house. A few minutes later, the trash bags (disappeared/were disappeared) immediately. \*trash bag: 쓰레기봉지
17. He had high blood pressure, but he didn't take his medicine. His blood pressure (increased/was increased) suddenly. \*high blood pressure: 고혈압
18. He put luminous star-shaped stickers on the wall and turned off the light. The stars (emerged/were emerged) slowly.
19. It is a very big company. Two thousand people (employ/are employed) there.
20. He spent his money so fast. The money (vanished/was vanished) quickly.



21. Tom received a present box. The box (opened/was opened) immediately.
22. He took care of the plants and added nutritional supplements to them. The plants (grew/were grown) tall fast.
23. Street cleaners were asked to clear up the street. The trash bags (disappeared/were disappeared) immediately.
24. There was a big tree in the yard. The leaves of the tree (fell/were fallen) suddenly.
25. My mom hung out the laundry in the backyard. The clothes (dried/were dried) quickly.

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