Korean EFL Learners’ Use of Tense and Tense Alternating Strategies in English Oral Discourse

Yusun (Jennifer) Kang
(Harvard Graduate School of Education)


The present study aims to examine Korean EFL learners’ ability to achieve discourse cohesion in English through appropriate use of tense and utilization of tense alternating strategies, and how the language-specific aspects of tense system in their L1 may be evident in their L2 performance. analyses examine oral narratives produced by Korean adult EFL learners (N=12) in L1 (Korean) and L2 (English) and adult American native English speakers (N=12), using “frog story” picturebook prompt. Quantitative analyses of the narratives highlighted the overall difficulties Korean EFL learners may have in establishing and maintaining an anchor tense in an extended oral discourse. Qualitative discourse analysis revealed that although the native English speakers’ and Korean EFL learners’ tense alternating strategies in their L1s were motivated by similar thematic and stylistic purposes, the Koreans were not able to transfer such discourse skills from their L1 to L2, thus failing to enact discourse functions through effective use of tense alternating strategies as they did in their L1 discourse. The findings from this study hold important implications for helping Korean EFL learners develop pragmatic skills in English oral extended discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

Narrative is an excellent genre to study L2 learners’ pragmatic skills, as well as grammatical and lexical knowledge, in the target language. It is more so, since narrative performance not only reflects L2 learners’ knowledge in a certain domain of language competence, but also reveals their ability to apply such knowledge in a longer discourse in conveying meanings. In other words, L2 learners’ pragmatic abilities to utilize their L2 knowledge become apparent in their narrative discourse. For instance, telling a story requires knowledge of how to use formal linguistic devices, including control of tense, to serve specific communicative functions. For this particular reason, many researchers have studied both oral and written narrative development of young children to understand language development (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Han, Leichtman, &
Wang, 1998; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Peterson & McCabe, 1992). And recently, such effort has been expanded to include studies of L2 learners.

Since producing narratives requires integrating skills from different domains of linguistic, social and cultural knowledge, studies on narratives have focused on the various narrative dimensions, including reference and temporal order, textual coherence and structure, and narrative functions. Reference and temporal order refers to the strategies of relating and sequencing events within a story. Research on this narrative dimension has focused on temporal relations, the use of tense/aspect and tense shifts within a narrative, and the use of referential expressions (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Clancy, 1980; Hickmann, 1993, 1996). The study presented in this article will focus on the temporal realm of narratives.

Tense, in narratives, serves multiple functions. First of all, use of unifying tense perspective constructs textual coherence. One measure of narrators’ accomplishment of textual cohesion is the establishment of an “anchor tense”, which is defined as 75% or more of the narrative’s finite verbs in either a past or present tense framework (Bamberg & Marchman, 1991; Berman & Slobin, 1994). Developmental studies have shown that younger children make frequent shifts between the past and present tense, reflecting inconsistent adherence to a narrative frame, and have identified a pattern of movement towards an anchor tense in children with age (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hemphill, Picardi, & Tager-Flusberg, 1991). In addition, in the temporal realm of narratives, many studies have shown language- and culture-specific variations in the use of tense and aspect in accomplishing textual coherence (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Jin-Nam Choi, 2003; Hi-Ja Chong, 1988; Shini-Ja Hwang, 1990). Berman and Slobin (1994), studying oral narratives produced in five languages by participants across different age groups, found that narrators are very sensitive to language-specific properties in expressing temporal relations and aspect, which in turn resulted in a language-specific narrative discourse style. Jin-Nam Choi (2003) compared oral narratives of Korean and French-speaking adults, and found that Korean adults’ principal verbal forms consist of the past which is explicitly marked by morphemes, and their texts were organized on the basis of an overall temporal structure.

On the other hand, French-speaking adults used, without exception, the present as the basic tense for their narratives and constructed their texts on a base of hierarchical organization. Hi-Ja Chong (1988) showed that, unlike in English (Berman & Slobin, 1994), Korean tense and aspect distinguish not between foreground and background, but between ordinary and significant information within foreground and background information in narratives. It was found that five levels of information are signaled by the choice of tense and aspect in Korean narrative: ordinary background information, significant background information, ordinary foreground events, significant foreground events, and peak.

In addition to ordering events and constructing coherence within the story, tense also serves several other functions in oral narrative discourse. Research on tense shifts in
narratives has found that competent (adult) narrators use tense shifts strategically to mark narrative structural units and evaluation (Fludernik, 1991; Schiffrin, 1981) and to indicate narrative contrasts and mark disjunction (Bazzanella & Calleri, 1991). For example, in American adult narratives, shifts between the past and present tense were motivated by changes in narrative stance corresponding to major elements of narrative structure, such as orientation and complicating action (Fludernik, 1991; Schiffrin, 1981). They were also used to mark changes in agency (Johnstone, 1987) and to signal the importance of particular events (Fludernik, 1991). Developmental studies have documented children’s gradual achievement of an anchor tense as a result of maturing discourse skills and linguistic abilities (Bamberg, 1987, 1991; Berman & Slobin, 1994). Berman and Slobin (1994), for example, showed that 3- and 4-year-old English speakers make frequent and poorly motivated tense shifts, whereas they begin to impose consistent tense perspectives and use tense shifts for limited scene-setting purposes in their narratives beginning at age 5.

There has been relatively less research on second/foreign language narratives than on first language narrative development or cross-cultural narrative analysis. Moreover, investigations of tense use in second language acquisition have mostly focused on syntactic and semantic tense/aspect morphology development, rather than the overall use of tense system in enacting discourse effects. For example, Eun-Joo Lee (2001) investigated two Korean ESL learners’ acquisition of temporality in English by focusing on the expression of past-time events, semantic aspect and verb morphology, and suggested that the learners employed discourse devices before they gained control of lexical and inflectional means to express past-time events. On the other hand, Bardovi-Harlig (1992) showed that Korean- speaking and Chinese-speaking intermediate learners of ESL showed much more appropriate use of past tense in the written narratives than in the oral narratives, which is also in agreement with Ellis’s (1987) findings.

Few studies have examined the use of tense and tense shifts as means of textual coherence and accomplishment of discourse purposes in second language learners’ narratives. In general, most the few studies have detected deviations from native discourse production. In addition, most have found transfer of first language discourse and linguistic skills to the second/foreign language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Shin-Hye Kim, 1999). Flashner (1989), for example, showed that Russian ESL learners distinguished foreground from background information in oral narratives by marking foreground information in simple past, whereas they used base forms predominantly to mark background information. Likewise, Krumpf (1984) found that Japanese ESL learner also differentiated tenses in distinguishing foreground from background information in oral narratives. Relatively few such studies have been conducted on Korean ESL/EFL learners. Shin-Hye Kim (1999) compared Chinese and Korean EFL learners’ English oral frog story (“Frog Goes to Dinner”) narratives to study the L1 transfer of tense and aspect. She found that the overall
use of the simple past and progressive with activity and achievement verbs is lower in the Chinese learners of English than in the Korean learners. The differences, she concluded, were due to a possible L1 transfer effect, as Chinese is a tenseless language in which the use of the progressive is very restricted. However, since she did not test the participants’ narrative competence in L1, as many other researchers did not, direct detection of L1-L2 transfer was not possible.

Although English tense system might be one of the grammatical aspects that Korean EFL learners have most difficulty with, not much attention has been paid to their actual use of tense and tense shifts in extended discourse to learn what specific difficulties they may have and what may explain such troubles. In fact, there has not been any study that looked at Korean EFL learners’ tense use in extended discourse as a measure of discourse competence, let alone any studies that investigated transfer of such skills across two languages. Thus, this study was designed to investigate: 1) How Korean EFL learners’ use of tense in English narratives is different from American-native-English speakers’; 2) how Korean adults’ use of tense may be different in their Korean and English narratives; and 3) whether any specifically Korean linguistic or cultural strategies are evident in Korean EFL learners’ use of tense in their English narratives.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Participants

The participants of this study were 12 native English speakers and 12 Korean EFL learners. All 24 participants were university students in their respective countries. Twelve frog stories produced by twenty-year-old English native speakers were collected by Virginia Marchman and Dan Slobin and are available for public use through the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES). The Korean participants ranged from 20 to 28 years of age and were majoring in English at an average-ranking university in the suburbs of Seoul. Five of the Korean adults were males and seven were females. College students were chosen as participants under the assumption that they have acquired most of their native language skills and also had completed at least 6 years of formal, compulsory EFL education in Korea.

2. Procedure

The wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You?* by Mercer Mayer (1969) was used to elicit oral narratives in this study. The picture book was chosen because it standardizes the
content of expressions and allows reliable comparison of the ways in which the participants perform the same task. In fact, *Frog, Where Are You?* has been widely used for research in narratives (Bamberg, 1987; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hemphill et al., 1991).

A sample of 36 oral frog-story narratives is analyzed (12 English narratives produced by the American English-native speakers and 12 English and 12 Korean narratives produced by the Korean EFL learners). Each American participant in Marchman and Slobin’s data was interviewed individually. They were asked to look through the wordless picture book and tell a story afterwards.

Korean participants were given the same prompt. Their Korean narratives were collected first and their English narratives were collected a week later, in order to minimize direct language transfer and influence across tasks. The Koreans’ Korean narratives were collected first because the researcher was interested in their best performance in English. That is, by having them narrate in their native language first, the researcher intended to lower affective filters and increase confidence in their EFL performance.

3. Transcription and Data Analysis

The audiotaped narratives were transcribed into the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) (MacWhinney, 2000). Each narrative was divided into clauses, following Berman and Slobin (1994), because the clause is “more linguistically structured than the behavioral unit of an ‘utterance’ but less determined by syntactic criteria than a ‘sentence’” (p. 26). A clause is defined as a unit containing a single verbal element and its corresponding unified predicate.

After each narrative was coded at the clause level, all inflected verbs were identified and coded as either present or past. CLAN programs were used to count instances of each coded tense. In addition, the anchor tense for each narrative was determined and each tense shift was identified and counted.

To better understand the distribution of past and present tensed finite verbs across the two groups, the frequencies of each participant’s use of every tensed verb were counted and converted to a proportion of that participant’s total number of tensed verbs in the narrative to account for the narrative length differences. Then, between-subject MANOVA was conducted to test whether there were group differences between the native English speakers and Korean EFL learners in the mean frequency of the two tenses, the mean frequency of tense shifts and the tense shifts as a proportion of total narrative clauses. In addition, within-subject MANOVA was used to compare Korean EFL learners’ narratives in Korean and English for the same constructs.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis was conducted to investigate the sources that may have motived the native English speakers and Korean EFL learners to shift tenses in their
oral narratives. More specifically, each clause in every narrative was coded for the narrative function it accomplished, using an adaptation of Peterson and McCabe’s system (1983). Each clause was classified as accomplishing one of the following main narrative functions:

- **Orientation**: Clauses that described the setting (place, time and character introduction/description) of the story.
- **Appendages**: Clauses that served to mark the beginning or conclusion to the narrative (i.e., “once upon a time”, “the end”, etc.) or that occurred in an abstract that summarized the story (i.e., “so this was a story about the boy searching for his frog friend”).
- **Events**: Events and character actions that advanced the plot of the story.
- **Duratives**: Clauses which provided descriptive information related to who and what was involved in the events.
- **Evaluations**: Clauses which describe the point of view of the narrator, including references to mental state of characters, and narrators’ individual stylistic ways of presenting information that serve to create an effect (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

Then, COMBO program of CHILDES was used to track co-occurrences of every tense shift and one of the above narrative functions it accompanied for further qualitative analysis in order to detect any thematic and strategic motivation behind each tense shift.

4. Reliability of the Coding

Approximately 20% of the data from each language group was randomly selected to be coded by two research assistants other than the researcher, including one native Korean speaker, to test the reliability of the designed coding system. Cohen’s kappa (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986), a measure of inter-coder agreement that corrects for chance, was .85 for Korean narratives and .92 for English narratives.

III. RESULTS

1. Quantitative Analysis

The establishment of a single anchor tense\(^1\) for a narrative can show the narrator’s ability to achieve narrative cohesion. Table 1 shows that both the native English speakers (hence after, NES) and Koreans showed a predominant tense in narratives told in their

---

\(^1\) Here, the “anchor tense” is defined as 75% or more of the narrative’s finite verbs are in either a past or present tense framework (Berman & Slobin, 1994, p. 62)
Korean EFL Learners’ Use of Tense and Tense Alternating Strategies in English Oral Discourse

251

native languages. However, 5 out of 12 Korean participants (42%) failed to establish an anchor tense framework in their English narratives.

### TABLE 1

Distribution of Anchor Tense and Tense Shifts across Groups/Languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>NES (n=12)</th>
<th>Korean EFL learners (n=12)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No anchor tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The NES and the Korean EFL learners showed a different pattern of preference for the anchor tense; a majority of the NES used a present tense framework, while all of the Koreans displayed a past tense framework. Among the Koreans who established an anchor tense in their English narratives, more preferred a present tense framework like the NES, although they preferred a past tense framework in their native language narrative performance.

### TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Tense and Tense Shifts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NES (n=12)</th>
<th>Korean EFL learners (n=12)</th>
<th>NES (n=12)</th>
<th>Korean EFL learners (n=12)</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present/Total Tensed verbs</td>
<td>0.76 (0.36)</td>
<td>0.63 (0.21)</td>
<td>0.76 (0.36)</td>
<td>0.07 (0.21)</td>
<td>43.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past/Total Tensed verbs</td>
<td>0.24 (0.36)</td>
<td>0.37 (0.21)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.36)</td>
<td>0.92 (0.21)</td>
<td>41.98***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense shifts (9.17) Shifts/Total Tensed verbs</td>
<td>6.50 (9.17)</td>
<td>14.58 (9.18)</td>
<td>4.66* (9.17)</td>
<td>6.50 (9.18)</td>
<td>2.50 (2.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clauses MANOVA</td>
<td>0.07 (0.07)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.14)</td>
<td>20.50*** (0.07)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.04)</td>
<td>2.04 (2.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilk's Lambda MANOVA</td>
<td>11.10***</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.94***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~p<.10    *p<.05     **p<.01     ***p<.001

Table 2 presents the group mean, standard deviations and the ANOVA/MANOVA results for the use of tenses and tense shifts. MANOVA revealed that there were significant group differences, for both English and Korean narratives the Koreans produced in comparison to...
NES’s English narratives. However, the ANOVA showed different patterns of group differences. There were significant differences in only the frequency of tense shifts and tense shifts as a proportion of total narrative clauses between the NES’s and the Koreans’ English narratives. In contrast, the significant differences were in the mean frequencies of each tense as a proportion of the total tensed verbs when comparing the Koreans’ Korean narratives and the NES’s English narratives. On average, the Koreans were much more likely to make tense shifts in their English narratives and much more likely to use the past tense in their Korean narratives, compared to the NES’s English narratives. This conforms with our earlier observation that many of the Koreans failed to achieve an anchor tense framework in their English narratives and that the Koreans preferred a past tense framework while the NES preferred a present tense framework.

**TABLE 3**

**Within-Subject Comparisons of Tense and Tense Shifts for Korean Participants’ English and Korean Oral Narratives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Korean EFL learners (n=12)</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present/Total tensed verbs</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present/Total tensed verbs</td>
<td>0.07 (0.07)</td>
<td>0.63 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past/Total tensed verbs</td>
<td>0.92 (0.07)</td>
<td>0.37 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense shifts</td>
<td>2.50 (2.71)</td>
<td>14.58 (9.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifts/Total clauses</td>
<td>0.04 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANOVA Wilks’ Lambda</td>
<td>78.33***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to see if there were language-related differences in the Koreans’ use of tenses and tense shifts, MANOVA and ANOVA were used again. As shown in Table 3, there were statistically significant effects of language, with significant univariate effects for all of the variables. On average, the Koreans included a greater proportion of present tense verbs in their English narratives, while they produced a significantly greater proportion of past tense verbs in their Korean narratives. In addition, tense shifts occurred more than five times as often in their English narratives, compared to their Korean narratives. A correlation analysis (see Table 4) showed that there was no significant correlation between the Koreans’ tense choices in their two languages. That is, the Korean EFL learners appeared not to transfer their tense-related strategies in Korean narratives to their English narratives.
TABLE 4
Correlation Matrix Comparing Tense and Tense Shifts between Korean EFL Learners’ Narratives in Two Languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English/Korean</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>%Present</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>%Past</th>
<th>Shift</th>
<th>%Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present (%)</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past (%)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift (%)</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*None of the above correlations is statistically significant.*

2. Qualitative Analysis of Tense Shifts

We have already observed in the quantitative analysis that many Korean EFL learners failed to accomplish textual coherence in their English narratives. We also observed that the NES and the Koreans differed greatly in which tense they narrate in their native languages; The NES mostly told the story in the present tense while all Koreans chose the past tense frame as the anchor tense. In order to further understand whether the Korean EFL learners have acquired the linguistic and discourse skills in English to use tense shifts thematically and stylistically as they do, and the NES do, in their native language performance, a qualitative study was conducted. In this section, we will first examine what motivated the NES and Koreans to use contrasting tense in their native languages. Then, because the Koreans’ English narratives contained a significantly greater number of tense shifts, presumably due to their failure to adhere consistently to the narrative frame they established, the patterns of tense shifts in their English narratives will be examined separately.

Overall, the qualitative analysis indicated that the NES’s and Koreans’ shifts out of the anchor tense showed similar patterns and purposes: 1) setting off evaluation and durative information from narrative events, 2) setting off foreground events from background information, 3) setting off narrative orientations and appendages from the main body of the story, and 4) marking episode boundaries and imposing an internal structure on episodes. Each of the patterns identified will be discussed in the following section.

1) Tense Shifts in the NES’s and the Koreans’ Narratives in Their Native Languages

(1) Setting Off Evaluation and Durative Information from Narrative Events

Tense shifts in a NES ES8’s narrative separated non-event durative information from event-reporting.

---

*These tense-alternating patterns are discussed in Hemphill et al. (2001).*
Example 1

ES8: and he’s leaning against the branches.
ES8: and the um the little dog is hiding.
ES8: um those branches were, were really a deer.
ES8: and the deer raises his head and the little boy is stuck on his head.
(Middle passage omitted)
ES8: and the little boy and the dog fall off the ledge.
ES8: they fall into the water as the deer watches them.
ES8: the water was shallow.
ES8: the little boy’s just sitting it in with the dog on his head grinning.

ES8 reported narrative events in the present or present progressive, but switched to the past tense, which set off durative/descriptive information, “those branches were really a deer” and “the water was shallow.”

Likewise, ES2’s shift from the dominant present tense to the past set off evaluative and durative information from event reporting.

Example 2

ES2: and they crawl over the log.
ES2: and they find on the other side of the log two happy frogs one of
ES2: which was the frog in the jar.
ES2: and then they see that there was not only two happy frogs.
ES2: but there is an entire family of little frogs there.

Contrasting tenses were used for the durative information “one of which was the frog in the jar” and for evaluative/durative information “there was not only two happy frogs.” Both examples contradict what Schiffrin (1981) proposed in emphasizing the importance of the direction of the tense switch: she argues that only switches from historical present to past have the function of separating events (p. 56) and switches from the past to historical present function to mark evaluatives (p. 59). The contradiction may be partly due to the nature of narratives studied: Schiffrin studied personal narratives whereas picture-elicited narratives were analyzed in this study. But still, there is a need to investigate the direction of a tense switch further across different types of narrative tasks.

KS10, on the other hand, seemed to highlight her evaluative comments by switching from the anchored past tense to the present.
Example 3

frog-NOM one QUAN-only be-REL-thing not-PAST-IND
There was not only one frog.

KS10: nameci anay kaykuli-i-ess-napwa-yo.
remainder wife frog-be-PAST-maybe-IND
The rest, maybe it was the wife frog.

KS10: eme, ike-n tto mwe-ya.
Oh this-TOP again what
Oh, what about this?

KS10: yep-eyse ayki kaykuli-tuyl-i cakku cakku cakku nawa-yo.
side-from baby frog-PL-SM constantly come out-IND
More and more and more baby frogs come out from the side.

KS10: nemu kwiyep-eyo
very cute-IND
(They) are very cute.

(2) Setting Off Foreground Information from Background Information

Another pattern of tense shifts appeared motivated by the need to distinguish foreground information from background information. Two NES, ES10 and ES3, in Example 4 shifted from the present tense which marked a foregrounded event for the main protagonist to the past which described the background event related to the secondary character, the dog. Then there was another shift into the present, which marked descriptive/evaluative information.

Example 4

ES10
so he runs over and throws the little boy into the pond.

ES3
and the dog is shaking the tree where the beehive is connected to while the boy climbs on top of the tree.

→ dog was running along side.

3 The transcription of Korean examples follow the Yale system of Romanization. The following abbreviations are used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Accusative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTR</td>
<td>Attributive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM</td>
<td>Comitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPL</td>
<td>Completive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND</td>
<td>Indicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>Locative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASS</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
<td>Past tense marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Plural marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSS</td>
<td>Possessive marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRES</td>
<td>Presumptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROG</td>
<td>Progressive marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>Relative clause ender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESN</td>
<td>Reason connectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUAN</td>
<td>Quantity marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUOT</td>
<td>Quotative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Subject Marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>Topic marker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He didn’t pay too much attention, and starts yelling in a hole for the frog while the dog shook the tree so much that the beehive fell down.

For these two NES narrators, shifts out of the anchor tense also appeared motivated by a shift in agency. The Koreans’ tense shifts, on the other hand, did not occur in clauses that set off background from foreground information in terms of agency. Instead, their tense shifts seemed to mark a particular clause’s importance and relationship to the narrative as a whole. This strategy relates to what Hi-Ja Chong (1988) has suggested: tense shifts in Korean narratives function to separate one level of information from the other. In Example 5, KS10’s narration switched from the past, which reported an event related to the dog, to the present, which highlighted what she may have judged as a mainline event that should be foregrounded: the bees following the dog. Then the narration switched back to the past to report an event related to the main protagonist.

Example 5

KS10: kuriko yep-ey iss-en kay-nun peltong-i sinkiha-nci
and beside-LOC be-ATTR dog-TOP beehive-SM curious-PRES
peltong-i tal-li-n namuskaci-lul kyeysok huntul-ess-eyo.
beehive-SUB attach-PASS-ATTR tree branch-ACC continuously shake-PAST-IND
And the dog besides [the boy] kept shaking the branch to which the beehive hung, probably out of curiosity.

KS10: peltong-eyse suto ep-nun pel-tul-i nawa-se kay-hantey
beehive-from number not-ATTR bee-PL-SM come out-and dog-to

tallye-o-koiss-eyo.
Run-come -PROG-IND
Countless bees come out of the beehive and are running towards the dog.

KS10: hanpyenulo sonyen-un talun namu kumeng-ul tuleka-se
on the other hand boy-TOP different tree hole-to enter-and
kaykuli-lul chacapo-koiss-ess-eyo.
Frog-ACC search -PROG-PAST-IND
On the other hand, the boy went into a tree hole and was looking for the frog.

In Example 6, KS9’s tense shift to the present highlighted the boy’s act of calling the frog and the consequence (encounter with the groundhog) as the significant mainline event, while the initiation of the mainline event (beginning the search) and the action performed by the dog stayed in the past.
Example 6

KS9: Minku-nun kay-wa hamkkey sap-ul o-ko-se ku kaykuli-lul tasi chaeki
Minku-TOP dog-COM together forest-to go-and that frog-ACC again search
sicakha-ess-upnita,
begin-PAST-IND
Minku went into the forest with the dog and started looking for the frog again.

→ KS9: ttang sok kumeng-ey kaykuli-ka hoksi iss-ulka hayse ku kos-ey ka-se
                ground-in hole-LOC frog-SM maybe be-PRES that-place-to go-and
kaykuli-lul aytakey pullepo-pnita.
Frog-ACC desperately call-IND
[He] calls for the frog into the hole, wondering if the frog is there.

KS9: kulena o-la-ten kaykuli-nun o-ci an-ko tuteci-ka nawa
but come-QUO-ATTR frog-TOP come not-and groundhog-SM come out
i-kos-un kaykuli cip-i ani-ko na-ui cipila-ko hamye
this-place-TOP frog house-SM not-and I-POSA house-QUO say-and
Minku-evkey mwela-ko ha-pnita.
Minku-to something-QUO say-IND
But a groundhog, instead of the frog [he] called for, comes out and tells
Minku that it is [his] house.

but dog-SM beehive-ACC touch-COMP-PAST-IND
Then the dog had touched the beehive by accident.

Tense shifts in both the NES’s and the Koreans’ narratives seem to set off foreground events from background information. However, there seems to be cultural differences in the perception of what foregrounded information should be: actions and events related to the main protagonist were consistently highlighted as the foregrounded events in the NES’s narratives, while the highlighted foreground information in the Koreans’ narratives reflected its relevant importance in relation to the whole story regardless of the agent.

(3) Setting Off Narrative Orientations and Appendages from the Main Body of the Story

Tense shifts in both the NES’s and the Koreans’ narratives set off clauses that serve different narrative structural functions – such as orientations and appendages – from the main events of the story. KS2, in Example 7, provided narrative orientation that led to the “frog’s disappearance” episode in the present tense, while the main event was told in the past.

Example 7

KS2: acu cak-un kkoma hana-ka pang an-eyse kangaci-wa hamkkey
very little-ATTR boy one-SM room in-LOC dog-COM together
yulipyeng an-ey iss-nun kaykuli-lul acu humushakey cikyepo-koiss-upnita.
glass jar in-LOC be-ATTR frog-ACC very satisfactorily watch-PROG-IND
A very little boy is looking at a frog satisfactorily in a jar with his dog, in his room.

KS2: kuliko cam ca-l sikan-i twoy-esae ai-nun kangaci-wa and sleep sleep-ATTR time-SM become-RESN kid-TOP dog-COM

hamkkey chimtay-ey nuwe-se kulkul ca-koiss-upnita. together bed-LOC lie-and zzz sleep-PROG-IND

Then the boy, together with the dog, is sleeping soundly in a bed as it’s time to sleep.

KS2: ku sai kaykuli-nun yulipyeng-ul nawa salkumsalkum that while frog-TOP glass jar-ACC come out sneakingly (onomatopoeia)

keleka-ss-upnita. walk-PAST-IND

In the meantime, the frog came out of the jar and tiptoed out.

KS2: kele nawa-se etilonka ka-pelye-ss-upnita. walk come out-and somewhere go-COMPL-PAST-IND

then (the frog) went somewhere.

Likewise, in ES5’s narration, a narrative appendage – prologue – was set off in the past, while the main story was told in the present:

Example 8

ES5: and I guess the boy assumes that’s where they are now.
ES5: so they both look over.
ES5: the one he caught and his mate and their kids in water.

Example 9

ES8: Um there’s this little boy sitting his room has a pet frog in a jar.
ES8: and a dog is trying to get into the jar wants to be playing with the frog.

Another NES, ES7, used a similar strategy. ES7’s shift to the past marked the episode

(4) Marking Episode Boundaries or Highlighting Initiating Events/consequences
The NES’s use of contrasting tenses seemed to set off different episodes in the story or distinguish consequences from the initiating events. The ES8’s tense shift separated the episode that described the boy and the dog’s scene with the frog from the next episode in which the frog leaves them.

Example 9

ES8: um the little boy and the dog went to sleep.
ES8: the little boy and the dog wake up.

Another NES, ES7, used a similar strategy. ES7’s shift to the past marked the episode
boundary for the “search inside the room” episode and marked the beginning of a new episode of “search outside.”

Example 10

\[\begin{align*}
\text{ES7: } & \text{and the boy looks into his boots and crawled around the room.} \\
\text{ES7: } & \text{he knocked the stool over.} \\
\text{ES7: } & \text{He opens the window and call for him.}^4 
\end{align*}\]

However, there was no incidence of using contrasting tenses that marked episode boundaries in the Koreans’ Korean narratives.

2) The Koreans’ Tense-Switching in their English Narratives

As already discussed in the quantitative analysis of the use of tenses, five of the twelve Koreans failed to establish an anchor tense in their English narratives. Qualitative analysis of the five Koreans revealed that their frequent tense switching can be largely understood by three explanations: 1) a primitive strategy of continuing to use the switched tense once the tense is switched with or without a stylistic or thematic purpose, 2) failure to use past forms of irregular verbs, and 3) a reflection of simple grammatical error. In the following example, KS6 showed evidence of the first and second pattern:

Example 11

\[\begin{align*}
a) \text{KS6: } & \text{next day the boy and dog get up.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{and they learn the frog disappeared [from] the bottle.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{the boy and dog searched [for] the frog in the boots under the bed and all the room.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{but they didn’t [find] the frog.} \\
\text{} & \text{(Middle passages omitted)} \\
b) \text{KS6: } & \text{the boy fell down and the owl followed the boy.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{the boy run away from the owl.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{and he catch the branch.} \\
\text{KS6: } & \text{but it is not a branch.}
\end{align*}\]

KS6 was correct to switch to the past tense from his anchored present tense to refer to an event that happened prior to the reference time. However, this motivated him to continue with the past tense, until he used an irregular verb that he failed to transform to a past tense. From that point on, he switched to the present and continued with it. In the second excerpt from his narrative, he had been using the past tense for a while, and was able to use the

^4 Hereafter, the narrator talks about the boy and the dog’s attempt to search for the frog outside.
correct past form for the irregular verbs “fall.” However, he failed to use correct past forms for the verbs “run” and “catch” and switched to the present from then on. He later switched again to the past once he was able to use the correct past form of the verb “fall”, which he seemed to have control over.

KS11 in Example 12 showed the third pattern of making a simple grammatical error.

Example 12

KS11: so he went to the forest and yelling frog, frog.

→ KS11: he wondered whether the frog go down to the groundhog’s house near the place.

KS11: so he yelled into the hole.

→ KS11: then groundhog suddenly jumped [out] and bite his nose.

KS11’s narrative demonstrates that she did not yet have a control over the English tense system. Although her anchored tense seems to be the past, she failed to use conjoined verbs: “he went … and yelling.” Likewise, although the frog’s action of going into the groundhog’s place is prior to the boy’s state of wondering, she made a grammatical error and said “he wondered whether the frog go down.” In addition, she failed to use the past form of the irregular verb “bite”, and made another grammatical error of using different verb tenses for each of the conjoined verbs: the groundhog “jumped and bite”, instead of the groundhog “jumped and bit.”

The Koreans who did establish an anchor tense in their English narratives showed similar patterns of tense-switching to those of their Korean narratives and the NES’s English narratives: 1) setting off evaluation from the narrative events and 2) marking episode boundary or imposing internal structure on episodes. However, their tense-switching strategy in English was not as sophisticated or varied as in their Korean narratives: None of the tense shifts set off foreground events from background information, nor were they used strategically in setting off different narrative structural elements (i.e., appendages, orientation, etc.).

(1) Setting Off Evaluation from the Narrative Events in the Koreans’ English Narratives

Tense-switching in the Koreans’ English narratives occurred in clauses that highlighted particularly three types of evaluation – expressions of emotion/cognition (i.e., “sad”, “happy”, “think”, etc.) use of direct/indirect reported speech (i.e., “He said, ‘where are you’”, “The moose told him where the frog was”, etc.), and negations (i.e., “He wasn’t there any more”, “The dog did not help at all”, etc.).

---

5 He also failed to use correct third-person singular verb forms, “runs” and “catches.”

6 These categories of evaluative devices are discussed in Peterson & McCabe (1983).
KS2 in Example 13 switched from the anchored present tense to the past, which highlighted defeat of expectation. Then she shifted back to the present to talk about the unfolding sequence of narrative events.

Example 13

KS2: and they decide to go out.
KS2: and they are calling [for] the frog.
→ KS2: but at first they met a beehive.
→ KS2: dog is very happy.
KS2: and the boy finds some hole.

KS4’s narration switched to the past from the present-anchor tense when presenting an indirect reported speech:

Example 14

KS4: at that time the dog is [being] chased by the bees.
KS4: also the boy is [being] chased by the owl.
→ KS4: finally the boy [goes] up one big rock and he cried where the frog is.
KS4: he doesn’t know [that] behind the rock there [is a] deer.
KS4: at that time they can [hear] the voice of [frogs].
→ KS4: so the boy ordered the dog to be quiet.
KS4: there [is] a small hollow log.
KS4: so he [goes] to the hollow log very quietly.

In both cases, KS4 switched tenses only for the verbs that convey indirect reported speech; “cry” and “order.” All other verbs were in the present tense. KS4’s strategy contradicts Schiffrin’s (1981) account that “using the present tense with [verb of saying] is another way in which the narrative framework replaces the situation of speaking in order to make the reported material more immediate” (p. 58).

KS12’s tense shift to the past for the verb “surprise”, shown in Example 15, highlighted the boy’s emotional state:

Example 15

KS12: [while] the dog runs away the boy climbs on the tree [to] find the frog in the hole.

7 In this case, “cry” and “order” are verbs of saying that were used to report what were actually said. More specifically, instead of saying “He cried, ‘where are you frog’,” the narrator made it an indirect speech (“He cried where the frog was.”). Likewise, “The boy ordered the dog to be quiet” was substituted for “The boy ordered, “Dog, be quiet.”
KS12: he also was surprised because [an] owl [comes] out suddenly [from] the hole.

(2) Imposing an Internal Structure on Episodes
In the following example, KS1 reported durative information and the initiating events in the present. But the consequence was told in the past.

Example 16
KS1: um that time, the boy [is] looking [up] the tree.
KS1: but the tree [has] only [an] owl.
KS1: the owl [flies] suddenly.
→ KS1: then the boy fell [off] the tree.
KS1: um the boy [runs] away from the owl.

As the contrasting tense was reserved for the consequence, the episode boundary was highlighted in KS1’s narrative: it marked the end of the “search on the tree” scene and the beginning of “running away to the rock” scene.

Overall, alternating tenses for enacting certain discourse functions does not seem to be culture- or language-specific, as the comparison of the NES’s and the Koreans’ narratives in their native languages showed. However, the Korean EFL learners have not gained complete control or mastery of tense use in English at the discourse level, and thus often failed to achieve similar effects as in their native language narratives. Their linguistic or grammatical incompetence in English seemed to limit their ability to tell a story as stylistically and effectively as in their Korean narratives.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
This study aimed to investigate whether Korean EFL learners are able to achieve discourse cohesion through strategic use of tense and tense switches in English and whether their use of tense and tense alternations in Korean discourse can explain the similarities and/or differences between the native English speakers’ and Korean EFL learners’ use of such features in English extended oral discourse.

On the whole, the Koreans’ difficulties in establishing discourse coherence in their English narratives were detected through their failure to establish an anchor tense and their tense alternating strategies which deviated from the native English speakers’ discourse production norms. This finding is in agreement with previous studies which demonstrated lack of systematic tense use in non-proficient L2 learners’ narratives (Schumann, 1987; Trévise,
Thus, the Korean EFL learners’ inability to use tense alternating strategies for thematic and stylistic purposes, partly due to their difficulty in maintaining an anchor tense, may indicate their lack of linguistic skill at adhering to a narrative frame in English. That is, their relative lack of linguistic competence in English may have constrained them to focus on their sentence-by-sentence performance, rather than considering how each sentence/clause relates to the narrative whole. In other words, they were so preoccupied with the task at hand, that of conveying the story, that they could not consider the pragmatic function within the discourse context and thus failed to demonstrate sensitivity to the listeners’ needs.

In addition, the significant differences found in their use of tenses – they used present tense more than 60% of the time in their English narratives while they mostly used past tense (92%) in their Korean narratives – further supports the observation that they were not yet linguistically competent in English. They may have preferred present-tense verbs in English to avoid the extra step of transforming the verb into the past form. Their relatively unsophisticated and stylistically less varied use of tense switching mechanisms in English also shows lack of control over discourse-producing strategy as well as incomplete linguistic competence in English. In a sense, where the Korean EFL learners in this study may be in terms of interlanguage pragmatic development seem to be where 5- and 6-year-old children are on the developmental spectrum of their first language acquisition. In fact, studies that looked at children’s use of tense and tense shifts mostly documented children’s inconsistent adherence to a narrative time frame which also explained tense shifts that were not thematically or stylistically motivated as those of adults (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hemphill et al., 2001).

Acquiring the target language’s language- and culture-specific narrative style is one of the most important and difficult parts of second/foreign language learning. The adult Korean EFL learners in this study have studied English as a Foreign Language for at least six years and have presumably gained considerable knowledge of linguistic forms and rules in English. However, they were still limited in producing oral narratives in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner by 1) lack of control over the formal system of English and by 2) lack of experience in overcoming the culturally determined strategies of their native language. The findings from this study shed further light on the difficulties Korean EFL learners may have in other domains of EFL performance, such as reading comprehension and writing, as proficiency in narrative discourse is considered to be related to a range of literacy skills (Griffin, 1998).

In sum, this study shows that Korean EFL learners need an awareness of culture-specific properties of English discourse, as well as more training in using English linguistic knowledge and oral language skills effectively, strategically, and purposefully in extended discourse. At the same time, the findings from this study draw our attention to the need for EFL teachers to better understand the specific difficulties EFL learners face in terms of
gaining mastery over certain linguistic features, such as tense, and help them apply such linguistic knowledge in their discourse production in English in promoting a target-like use of oral discourse strategies.

In order to maintain a reasonable scope for this study, however, only specific difficulties related to their tense use were documented. Thus, this study did not investigate the difficulties Korean EFL learners may have with aspect or other formal linguistic devices. Further studies which examine Korean EFL learners’ use of other linguistic features, including tense and aspect, across different kinds of oral and written discourse are certainly needed to get a more complete picture of what they may have difficulty with in engaging in native-like discourse. This study was also limited in terms of generalizability due to its modest sample size. Thus, studies with larger sample sizes, with hopefully varied English proficiency levels and backgrounds, should be conducted both to explore the general patterns of tense use and tense shifts in Korean narrative discourse in relation to EFL discourse production and to further understand the extent to which language proficiency has effects on discourse skills in the target language. In fact, Bardovi-Harlig (2000) suggested that level of L2 proficiency could be an important factor in determining the distribution of verbal morphology relative to achieving discourse effects. Finally, studies that investigate EFL learners’ narrative performance in different modalities (oral vs. written) are called for in order to highlight the differences in what they know and what they can do in extended discourse, as Ellis (1987) found clear modality effects by showing ESL learners’ highest use of appropriate past tense in planned writing and least in unplanned oral narratives. Despite its shortcomings, however, this study did make an important first step forward in showing Korean EFL learners’ inability to achieve textual coherence and discourse effects by using appropriate tense and tense alternating strategies in an English extended oral discourse.

REFERENCES


Applicable levels: secondary, college

Key words: discourse analysis, Korean EFL learners, tense, tense shifts, discourse strategies

Yusun (Jennifer) Kang
Language and Literacy
Harvard Graduate School of Education
302 Larsen Hall, 13 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
USA
Tel: 617)441-8162
e-mail: kangje@gse.harvard.edu

Received in February, 2005
Reviewed in March, 2005
Revised version received in May, 2005