Paper Title: The Animacy Status in the Production of English Relative Constructions by Japanese Learners in Spoken and Written Discourse

Name of Author 1: Megumi Okugiri
Institutional Affiliation: Tokyo Healthcare University
Contact: mokugiri@gmail.com (e-mail)

Proposed Program Stream: Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition
Keywords: Japanese Learners, English Relative Construction, Animacy, Corpus, Discourse, Production, Communication Strategy

Abstract
This study examines animacy of the head noun phrases of English relative constructions (hereafter, RCs) produced by Japanese learners at different levels of competence and compares their production in the spoken and written language. It focuses on three types of animacy status of the head noun phrases modified by relative clauses: Animate, Concrete Inanimate and Abstract Inanimate. Animate referents include human beings and animals (e.g., a man), Concrete Inanimate referents are concrete objects (e.g., a box), Abstract Inanimate referents include events and abstract concepts (e.g., a party or a feeling). Along with animacy status, this study will exhibit the influence of the mode of language and of learners’ proficiency on their acquisition of English RCs.

Samples of 1998 RCs were extracted from the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology Japanese Learner English Corpus (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2005) and the Nagoya Interlanguage Corpus of English (Sugiura, 2008); the former is a spoken corpus and the latter is a written corpus. The samples were extracted depending on their scores on the Test of English for International Communication: a low-intermediate group (n=160), a high-intermediate group (n=273) and an advanced group (n=244). A group of English native speakers was also available (n=48).
In terms of the difference between the modes, the low-intermediate and high-intermediate groups showed a strong tendency to produce Concrete Inanimate heads in the spoken mode and Animate heads in the written mode. The advanced group produced Animate heads much more frequently than Concrete and Abstract Inanimate heads in both modes. The native group produced more Concrete Inanimate heads in the spoken mode as well as the intermediate groups and more Abstract Inanimate heads in the written mode.

In written language, the writer may not even know the reader; in addition, the deictic referents, i.e. contextually presupposed noun phrases such as he or it, or any other referents visible to the writer and the reader are very few. Thus, the writer has an increased need to identify human referents in written language. In order to achieve it, the results of this study found that the learners, especially the more advanced learners, over-depend RCs when they identify human referents. For example, one of the learners tended to produce the person who got the death penalty for the person who was sentenced to death whenever she referred to the same human referent. On the other hand, the native speakers showed various ways to identify human referents, not only relative clauses but also other noun phrase types to express human referents, such as noun phrases with participle (e.g., murdering monsters), pronouns or other identifying NPs (e.g., most people convicted of first degree murder). The results suggest that more advanced learners become better at producing RCs, that are syntactically complex construction, but they depend heavily on RCs to introduce Animate referent into the discourse as a communication strategy as they become more advanced. In the presentation, I will show that planning time also affected their production of RCs.

I’ll need a computer and the projector (or a screen) using PowerPoint.