

# 主論文の要約

## (Summary of Dissertation)

論文題目 Overpassivization Errors Made by Japanese EFL Learners:  
Intransitive Verb Class, Learners' English Proficiency and Subject Animacy

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### 論文内容の要約

This dissertation's primary aim is to examine Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' overpassivization of intransitive verbs that should not be passivized. Passivization errors regarding three kinds of intransitive verbs—alternating unaccusatives with transitive counterparts, non-alternating unaccusatives with usage only as intransitives, and unergatives with agents as subjects—are examined to determine if they support Oshita's (2001) Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis (UTH). How subject animacy affects passivization errors besides the lexical meanings of verbs is also explored.

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces overpassivization errors made by Japanese learners of English, affected by the lexical meaning of verbs, learners' English-language proficiency, and subject animacy. Chapter 1 also addresses the three research questions. Chapter 2 presents the literature review. Chapters 3 through 6 present the results of four case studies conducted with high school and university students: a voice production task (VPT) with high school students in Chapter 3 and university students in Chapter 4; and a voice judgment task (VJT) with high school students in Chapter 5 and university students in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 discusses the results of all four case studies. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the results and presents the contributions and implications of this research.

More precisely, Chapter 1 introduces the dissertation's main points, exploring: the distinctions between unaccusatives and unergatives appear through input during middle school; the distinctions differ by learners' proficiency; the distinctions are clearer among university students; and subject animacy affects overpassivization errors.

A critical difference between second language learning and first language acquisition is whether the language is taught explicitly or learned implicitly through input. Japanese high school students who have studied English for four to six years have learned to transform active sentences into passive ones. However, many have not been taught that some verbs cannot be passivized. This has led to the three research questions set up for this dissertation, pertaining to the target population:

- RQ 1: Does the intransitive verb class predict overpassivization errors made by Japanese high school or university students?
- RQ 2: Does the level of English proficiency predict overpassivization errors made by Japanese high school or university students?
- RQ 3: Does the animacy of the subject predict overpassivization errors made by Japanese high school or university students?

Chapter 2 reviews the literature, focusing on three key issues: the lexical meaning of verbs, learners' proficiency, and subject animacy. First, the lexical meaning of verbs affects learners' grammaticality judgments on passivization (No & Chung, 2006; Shin, 2011). Further, lexical meanings indicate that nouns positioned as sentence subjects or objects differ in terms of their relation to verbs; such differences include whether nouns are regarded as agents/patients, targets/experiencers, or experiencers/targets (Shin, 2011). The key insight of the Unaccusative Hypothesis (UH) is that the noun phrase and verb (NP-V) structure with unaccusatives can be explained by the subject's NP movement (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978) and that the subject of unaccusatives is derived by NP movement from the object position, whereas the subject of unergatives is underived.

Further, Oshita's (2001) UTH predicts that learners begin to overpassivize unaccusatives at the intermediate stage after becoming aware of the distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs. The main points of the U-shaped developmental stages of the UTH can be summarized as follows: at the early stage of grammar learning, unaccusatives are rarely overpassivized because unaccusatives with experiencer subjects and unergatives with agent subjects are both treated as having a simple NP-V structure. Eventually, learners begin to analyze the lexical and grammatical differences between unaccusatives and unergatives. They overpassivize unaccusatives with experiencer subjects to avoid the "experiencer subject + verb" structure. Learners' proficiency proceeds further, and they eventually clearly identify unaccusatives as intransitive verbs with experiencer subjects.

In terms of subject animacy, it is deeply related to the choice of voice. Ferreira (1994) argues that an "agent" is the voluntary cause of some action and, therefore, tends to be animate, typically taking the earlier position in an active sentence. Similarly, Aissen (1999) states that the association of the agentive role with a person/animate subject is the most robust of generalizations in syntactic markedness. While the Agent First principle (Jackendoff, 2002) describes the unmarked structure of a language with an agent in the subject position, the First Noun principle relates to language processing (VanPatten, 1996), describing how humans naturally assign the agentive role to the first noun of a sentence when processing linguistic input. Despite the difficulties of investigating an interaction effect between verb type and subject type, learners of English who are native speakers of Asian languages tend to overpassivize sentences with inanimate subjects (Hinkel, 2002; No & Chung, 2006; Pae et al., 2014).

According to the Verb Island Hypothesis (Tomasello, 1992), learners at the early developmental stage do not acquire abstract verb structures but do acquire individual verbs based on the input experience of how and with what kinds of words the verb is frequently used. Thus, many researchers have focused on verb class simplification such as that between intransitive and transitive verbs or two types of intransitive verbs, between unaccusatives and unergatives or two types of unaccusative verbs, or alternating or non-alternating unaccusatives.

A pilot study that investigated overpassivization errors in essay writing by high school students unexpectedly showed many overpassivization errors of unergatives, which did not support the UTH. Nonetheless, the data was insufficient because only a limited number of target errors can be collected in essay writing and the proportion of animate and inanimate subjects cannot be controlled. To overcome these problems, a VPT with allotted verbs and clear subject animacy was administered to high school students as Case Study 1 in Chapter 3. Another purpose of this VPT was to make the learners unconsciously choose the

active and passive voice forms. Given the result of a significant three-way interaction, subject animacy played an important role in the choice of voice; the effect came from first language transfer and/or the First Noun principle. There is another possible explanation: the frequency of textbook input. The hypothesis is that if the inputs of inanimate subjects with unaccusative verbs are scarce just as they are for unergative verbs, learners overpassivize the verbs to avoid the minor verb islands of inanimate subjects with active verbs. However, this was not the case: there were more inanimate subject sentences for alternating unaccusatives and equally abundant numbers of inanimate subject sentences for non-alternating unaccusatives. Thus, the input of inanimate + active voice verb islands did not work as positive feedback leading to the acquisition of this pattern. The First Noun principle of input processing seemed to override the effect of frequency.

The same task was given to university students as Case Study 2 in Chapter 4; the two case studies suggest that the animacy effect for non-alternating unaccusatives fades away during the course of language development while it lasts longer for alternating unaccusatives and transitives. This difference may be explained by the effect of input frequency, which seems to play a role later in the developmental phase. Learners need to realize that non-alternating unaccusatives come only in active forms regardless of subject animacy. It takes time for the frequency effect of positive feedback to override the human nature of input processing principles such as the First Noun Principle. The participants showed the sign of independency from input processing principles for the non-alternating unaccusatives while remaining affected by these principles for alternating unaccusatives and transitives, whose input is more complex with both active and passive forms. Having both voices and two arguments (subject and object) with several combinations of animacy is too complex for learners to determine the correct usage of alternating unaccusatives from the input. While input provides only positive feedback for non-alternating unaccusatives, it may not be favorable in case of alternating unaccusatives, misleading learners to interpret that alternating unaccusatives can be used in passive forms.

To examine the effects of the task differences, Chapter 5 adopted a VPT, a forced choice between two voices (active and passive), with the same sentences administered to the same high school students as Case Study 3. Before conducting the VJT, another pilot study was carried out by administering No and Chung's (2006) grammaticality judgment task to high school students. Even though the sentences were partially modified according to the students' vocabulary level, a substantial amount of unclear data was still obtained. Since the task for incorrect items was demanding, the participants may have been inclined to respond by circling "correct."

To overcome the problems associated with the second pilot study, a different form of voice judgment task (VJT) was conducted to see if the same results as case study 1 could be obtained. The effects of animacy on verbs and three-way interactions (proficiency, verbs, and animacy) were similar in both tasks, despite some differences regarding the effects of learners' proficiency on overpassivization, especially between alternating unaccusatives with animate subjects and other verb types. As learners advance in proficiency, they develop the ability to use passive forms correctly. Once they master passive forms, learners can choose an animate subject as an agent in an active sentence and an inanimate subject as a patient/target in a passive sentence. Thus, learners gradually learn to correctly passivize transitive verbs with inanimate subjects, whereas they are quite slow to acquire active forms for unaccusative verbs. On the contrary, learning occurs for both unaccusatives and transitive verbs with animate subjects. It can also be inferred that while

learners begin to overly produce passive forms as they learn this form, they remain conservative when choosing the correct form of voice.

The same VJT was given to university students as Case Study 4 in Chapter 6. Compared with high school students, the results of the forced-choice task (VJT) as well as of the verb form production task (VPT) showed higher accuracy rates among university students, even though subject animacy clearly affected the choice of voice. The contradictory results of the two types of unaccusatives, either due to the input processing principles or the effect of input frequency, imply that it takes time for the frequency effect of positive feedback to override the human nature of input processing principles.

Chapter 7 discusses the general results of the four case studies. Learners made more overpassivization errors with inanimate subjects as their English proficiency improved and their acquisition of passive forms developed. This can be explained from the second language acquisition (SLA) viewpoint that the argument structure “subject agent + active form” is linguistically universally unmarked and natural even in participants’ native language. Since unergative verbs usually have animacy subjects, they are not overpassivized as much. In terms of unaccusative verbs, no unaccusatives were overpassivized with animate subjects more than with inanimate subjects in a statistically significant way. This may also be the case with the results for both types of tasks, implying little task difference.

The UTH contends that the higher learners’ proficiency, the clearer the unergative–unaccusative distinction. However, the present EFL learners may not have realized the lexical meanings of verbs or argument structure of unaccusatives, merely following the unmarkedness of this structure. This can be proven by the fact that inanimate subjects not only caused overpassivization with unaccusative verbs but also induced passivization with transitive verbs. This is likely not because EFL learners realized the unaccusative-unergative distinction as their proficiency developed but because they came to use passive forms with an inanimate subject, following the unmarkedness of this argument structure. Following the First Noun principle of input theory and the Agent First principle, alternating unaccusatives are more often overpassivized even with animate subjects while the transitive counterparts of unaccusatives are passivized with animate subjects. The results of all case studies confirmed that non-alternating unaccusatives are rarely passivized with animate subjects because of learners’ knowledge from input.

Using the results of the four case studies, Chapter 8 concludes that as learners proceed in language proficiency and master passive forms, they passivize intransitives with inanimate subjects more often than with animate subjects partly because of the frequency effect of implicit learning and mostly because of the human nature of input processing principles. Therefore, overpassivization errors are caused not by the distinction of unaccusatives and unergatives but by the distinction of subject animacy.

This dissertation is expected to contribute to the second language acquisition research field in three ways. First, overpassivization errors of unaccusative and unergative verbs were analyzed using two voice production and voice judgment tasks with the same sentences and participants. Second, the point-biserial correlation coefficient was calculated based on the total scores of the 10 tasks which used transitive verbs to investigate the differences between verb class and individual verbs. Finally, all the studies aimed to investigate the effects of subject animacy on passivization errors.

Furthermore, three implications for future research are proposed. First, participants with broader levels of language proficiency from different types of educational environments could be recruited. Second,

the criteria for proficiency and stages of learning development should be standardized to compare all participants. Third, longitudinal studies should be conducted to reduce the obstacles in acquiring adequate results, such as differences in learning environments. In general, we believe future research on overpassivization errors can benefit the SLA field.

Finally, this study investigated overpassivization errors in three types of intransitive verbs made by Japanese high school and university students, which have three main implications for language teachers. The first is that developing the learners' English proficiency and their acquisition of passive forms will promote their correct usage of active intransitive verbs and help them overcome overpassivization errors of those verbs. The second implication is helping learners' explicit learning by requesting them to pay careful attention to the sentences with the target verbs which appear in their English textbooks. The third implication for language teachers is the importance of language instruction focusing on processing instruction (VanPatten, 2003). In conclusion, the three implications for language teachers are that instruction to overcome overpassivization errors in intransitive verbs should be conducted not by explicit learning with metalinguistic knowledge on thematic roles of subjects with intransitive verbs, but instead, by the instruction of active and passive forms.