

## Comprehension of Existential *There*-Constructions by Korean Learners of English

Min-Kyung Kim and Seung-Ah Lee \*

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This study addresses the lack of comprehension data in second language acquisition research by focusing on English existential *there*-constructions (ETCs) with a locative extension (e.g., *there is an X on the Y*). The post-copular noun X used in the present study consisted of two types: actual and nonsense. Participants included 40 native speakers, as well as 40 advanced and 40 intermediate Korean learners of English, who completed an online picture selection task. In one picture, X was placed on the nearby Y; in another picture, X was placed on the far Y. The choice of both pictures was the correct response because ETCs are used to describe the existence of something regardless of its distance. There was a statistically significant relationship between English proficiency and the interpretation of ETCs. However, there was no relationship between the noun type and the interpretation of ETCs. In the Korean English curriculum, the distinction between expletive *there* and locative *there* must be emphasized.

**Key words:** existential *there*-constructions, expletive *there*, locative *there*, picture selection task, second language comprehension, L2 English acquisition

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\*First Author: Min-Kyung Kim, Graduate Student, Department of English Language and Literature, Ewha Womans University

Corresponding Author: Seung-Ah Lee, Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Ewha Womans University; 52, Ewhayeodae-gil, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 03760, Republic of Korea; Email: [seungahlee@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:seungahlee@ewha.ac.kr)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The second language acquisition (SLA) of English existential *there*-constructions (ETCs) has been studied mainly in relation to production, as opposed to comprehension. The few second language (L2) studies (e.g., Lee, 2011) dealing with comprehension did not exclusively consider ETCs. Instead, an array of non-canonical word order constructions was examined in the context of information structure.

In this study, an ETC with a locative extension (e.g., *there is an X on the Y*) was selected as the target structure for analysis. One reason for this selection is based on the terminological confusion related to this construction (see section 2.1).

In ETCs, expletive *there* itself does not hold any semantic meaning. L2 English learners who lack expletive subjects in their first language (L1) may have difficulty acquiring ETCs. Languages without expletive subjects include Korean, Japanese, and Chinese. These three languages are considered topic-prominent languages as opposed to subject-prominent languages, such as English (Li & Thompson, 1976). Schachter and Rutherford (1979) examined the compositions produced by Chinese students and found an overproduction of ETCs such as *there is a small restaurant near the city*. Oshita (2004), on the other hand, noted the scarcity of ETCs in the Japanese and Korean data of the Longman Learners' Corpus (version 1.1, March 1993). According to Oshita (2004), Japanese and Korean L2 learners of English first learn expletive *there* "as part of the prefabricated structure of 'there-BE-DP-(PP)' taught in school and may not be able to use it as a pure expletive unless they reach a very advanced level in their English" (p. 120).

As these two studies illustrate, previous L2 studies of ETCs have been largely concerned with written production data. However, in order to understand L2 learners' difficulty with ETCs more fully, we need to examine not only production data but also comprehension data. Admittedly, the imbalance between L2 production and comprehension studies is a common shortcoming in SLA literature (Kanwit & Geeslin, 2014).

The present study aims to address the lack of comprehension data in SLA research by focusing exclusively on English ETCs with a locative extension. In English, the word *there* is a sort of homonym in that expletive *there* (as in *there is an X on the Y*) and locative *there* (as in *put the X there*) are distinct from each other. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether Korean learners of English with different English proficiency levels comprehend ETCs with a locative extension to the level of native speakers. In addition, since ETCs are learned as prefabricated or formulaic language (Oshita, 2004; Palacios-Martínez & Martínez-Insua, 2006), it would be interesting to examine whether the unknown or less-known word in ETCs affects their interpretation. Specifically, this study will explore the following research questions:

- 1) Does English proficiency affect the interpretation of ETCs?
- 2) Does the type of the post-copular noun (actual or nonsense) affect the interpretation of ETCs?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Characteristics of English ETCs

English existential *there*-constructions (ETCs), which express the existence of something or somebody, are non-canonical in the sense that expletive or dummy *there* occurs in the subject position and that a noun phrase (i.e., the entity or individual whose existence is under discussion) appears in the post-copular position. The present paper adopts this narrow definition and hence among the three examples in (1), only (1a) is regarded as an ETC.

- (1) a. There is one even prime number.
- b. One even prime number exists.
- c. There stood in the corner an empty coat rack and umbrella stand.

(McNally, 2011, p. 1830)

Sentences such as (1c), where verbs other than *be* occur, are called presentational *there*-constructions and will be of no further concern in this paper.

Expletive *there* in ETCs like (1a) has no lexical meaning itself and therefore should be distinguished from locative *there*, as in (2).

- (2) Don't leave your shoes there<sub>loc</sub>. (Ward, Birner, & Huddleston, 2002, p. 1391)

Locative *there* is an adverb that expresses locality or position. It means 'in that place' or 'at that location', whereas its antonym, *here*, means 'in this place' or 'at this location'. Historically, expletive *there* has developed from locative *there* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Ward et al., 2002). Yet it no longer has the original locative meaning and is simply "an empty grammatical element" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 944). The absence of locative meaning is clearly shown in the following ETCs, where expletive *there* co-occurs with *here*, as in (3a), or locative *there*, as in (3b).

- (3) a. There's a screwdriver here. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 1405)
- b. There's still no water there<sub>loc</sub>, is there? (Biber et al., 1999, p. 944)

Expletive *there* in ETCs, devoid of any semantic contribution, merely serves to fill the subject position. That is, its presence is accounted for by the overt subject requirement in English.

A distinction is made between bare existentials and extended existentials. A bare existential has the following simple clause structure: “*there + be + indefinite noun phrase*” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1406). On the other hand, extended existentials contain an extension, as in (4).

- (4) a. There’s one copy on the table.  
 b. There’s Sue to consider.  
 c. There were two sirens blaring.

(Ward et al., 2002, p. 1393)

Extended existentials with a locative extension such as (4a) and (5) are also sometimes called ‘existential-locative’ constructions (Lyons, 1968; Sornicola, 2006).

- (5) a. There is a book on the table.  
 b. There are two cats in the garden.

(Lyons, 1968, p. 394)

(Sornicola, 2006, p. 406)

Chang (2010, p. 262) and Kim and Shim (2011, p. 258) use the term “locative construction” to refer to sentences like (5a). However, this is something of a misnomer as well as a misinterpretation of Lyons (1968). For one thing, it has been held in the literature on locative alternation that locative constructions include a locative verb (e.g., *load*), the figure argument (e.g., *hay*), and the ground argument (e.g., *wagon*), as in (6).

- (6) a. Kim loaded the wagon with hay.  
 b. Kim loaded hay onto the wagon.

(Bley-Vroman & Joo, 2001, p. 208)

In this paper, sentences like (5a) will be referred to as existential *there*-constructions (ETCs) with a locative extension (e.g., *on the table*).

## 2.2. Previous SLA Studies of English ETCs

While English ETCs have been discussed extensively in the fields of syntax, semantics and pragmatics, relatively little attention has been devoted by SLA researchers to the empirical study of these constructions. Moreover, most of the previous SLA studies of English ETCs examined only learners’ production data and ignored comprehension data.

These production studies broadly fall into three categories according to the data collection method. The first category examined learners' written compositions (Rutherford, 1983; Schachter & Rutherford, 1979). The second category concerns native and non-native written English corpora. Studies in this category compared learner corpora with native reference corpora (Kim & Heine, 2011; Palacios-Martínez & Martínez-Insua, 2006; Park, 2021). The third category concerns written production data obtained from a picture describing task (Kim & Shim, 2011).

To the best of our knowledge, one study dealt with both L2 production and comprehension. Lee (2011) examined the L2 acquisition of non-canonical constructions including ETCs from the perspective of information packaging. By employing a pragmalinguistic judgment task, Lee (2011) investigated whether the post-copular noun phrase (NP) in ETCs is new to the hearer/reader.

The results of these studies vary. According to Kim and Heine (2011), Korean learners of English displayed a native-like frequency of ETCs. By contrast, Kim and Shim (2011) found that Korean learners of English had difficulty in producing and correctly using ETCs. Sixty-five percent (26 out of 40) of the Korean students avoided using ETCs. Of particular interest is the fact that instead of beginning a sentence with *there*, these students put a noun phrase in the initial position of the sentence, as in (7).

- (7) a. Closed window is exist.
- b. Chairs are in existence.

(Kim & Shim, 2011, p. 267)

Lee (2011) also reported Korean learners' difficulty in both production and comprehension of ETCs. In the production task, unlike native speakers, who preferred using ETCs (e.g., *there is a pen on the table*), the most frequent sentence type used by all levels of learners was the canonical word order (e.g., *a pen is on the table*). In the comprehension task (i.e., pragmalinguistic judgment task), canonical word order sentences and ETCs with a preposed locative (e.g., *on the table, there is a pen*) were rated best by lower proficiency learners in contexts where it was more appropriate to use ETCs. Both Kim and Shim (2011) and Lee (2011) draw attention to the neglect of the communicative functions of ETCs in English language textbooks used in Korean schools. They highlight the importance of presenting ETCs in discourse contexts so that learners can be aware of the placement of NPs carrying new information.

The literature presented in this subsection supports a systematic investigation of the comprehension data. The present study has been conducted to address the lack of comprehension data in SLA studies of English ETCs.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The three most well-known comprehension assessment methods in language acquisition research include the truth-value judgment task, the act-out task, and the picture selection task (Schmitt & Miller, 2010). In this study, the picture selection task was used because it can “assess nearly all types of linguistic comprehension abilities” (Gerken & Shady, 1996, p. 125) and can be applied to SLA research despite its origins in L1 acquisition research (Ionin, 2012). In a picture selection task, the subject is “presented with some linguistic stimulus (e.g., a word or a sentence) and asked to select from a set of pictures the one that best corresponds to it” (Gerken & Shady, 1996, p. 125).

#### 3.1. Participants

A total of 120 subjects participated in the present study. The native speaker (NS) group consisted of 40 (21 male and 19 female) speakers of American English (mean age: 30.6, range: 22-37) studying or working in Seoul. Three NSs were university students at the time of participation and the remaining 37 held at least a university degree. The Korean L2 learners of English were divided into two levels of proficiency (i.e., intermediate versus advanced) based on their scores on the first grammar section (highest possible score: 50) of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT; Allan, 1992). The advanced learner (AL) group was composed of 40 (19 male and 21 female) participants (mean age: 29, range: 21-37) whose OPT scores were in the range from 29 to 48 ( $M = 34.8$ ,  $SD = 4.85$ ), while the intermediate learner (IL) group was composed of 40 (21 male and 19 female) participants (mean age: 27.4, range: 21-37) whose OPT scores were in the range from 14 to 26 ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 3.46$ ). Eighteen ALs and 19 ILs were university students at the time of participation, and the other learners held at least a university degree. They were all studying or working in Seoul. None of the learners had resided in the English-speaking country for more than a year. The participants' fields of study were non-language-related subjects. All participants received an electronic coffee voucher for participating.

#### 3.2. Materials

##### 3.2.1. Task and target items

A picture selection task (Gerken & Shady, 1996) also known as a picture matching task (Ionin, 2012) was used in this study. Table 1 presents the complete list of the test sentences used in the current study.

**TABLE 1**  
**Test Sentences Used in the Current Study**

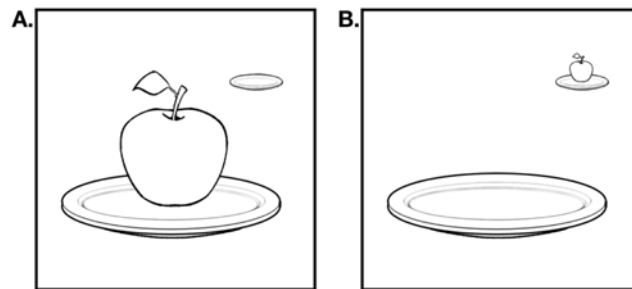
Target Items		Non-Target Items	
Type 1 (Actual Noun)	Type 2 (Nonsense Noun)	Type 3	Type 4
<i>There is an apple on the plate.</i>	<i>There is a WUG on the chair.</i>	<i>This is a TOR. Now there is another one. There are two of them.</i>	<i>Here's my magic pen.</i>
<i>There is a cup on the table.</i>	<i>There is a GUTCH on the roof.</i>	<i>This is a WUG. Now there is another one. There are two of them.</i>	<i>Here's my credit card.</i>
<i>There is a book on the desk.</i>	<i>There is a KAZ on the sofa.</i>	<i>This is a CRA. Now there is another one. There are two of them.</i>	<i>Here's my new book.</i>

As indicated in Table 1, there were 12 items in total, divided into four types. Type 1 and 2 were the target items, and Type 3 and 4 were the non-target items (i.e., fillers). There were three tokens for each type. Each token sentence of target items was composed of ‘*there is a(n) + a singular noun (X) on the + a singular noun (Y)*’ (e.g., *there is an apple on the plate*).

In our study, in order to assess participants’ abilities to comprehend ETCs with a locative extension (e.g., *there is an X on the Y*), two pictures, each containing two Ys (e.g., two plates, as in Figure 1), were presented side by side. The first picture showed an object or thing (i.e., X in the target sentence) placed close to the participant’s view; the second showed the object or thing placed at a distance from the participant’s view. That is, in one picture, X (the post-copular noun in the ETC) was placed on the nearby Y (the post-prepositional noun in the ETC), while in the other picture, X was placed on the far Y. Throughout the task, subjects had to choose the picture(s) that best describes the target sentence (i.e., the underlined sentence, as in Figure 1) by selecting only one of the three answer options: (i) A, (ii) B, and (iii) both A and B. As shown in Figure 1, these three answer choices were offered as a list underneath the two pictures. The “both” option (i.e., choosing two pictures instead of just one) was the correct (or preferred) response because ETCs are used to describe the existence of something regardless of its distance. The choice of the far option, option (ii), indicates a possible confusion between expletive *there* and locative *there*. As noted in section 2.1, locative *there* means ‘in that (not this) place’ or ‘at that (not this) location.’ It is possible to assume that participants interpret expletive *there* as locative *there* and accordingly choose a picture where the object or thing is placed at a distance from their view. As for the choice of the near option, option (i), one could conjecture that participants were careless and did not pay attention to the both option. Alternatively, participants may have believed that the subject of a painting or photograph should be in the foreground.

**FIGURE 1****Example Display for Type 1 Questions**

Q1. There is an apple on the plate.



- (i) A
- (ii) B
- (iii) Both A and B

For Type 1 questions, three actual nouns (*apple*, *cup*, and *book*) were used, whereas three nonsense (i.e., nonce) nouns (*WUG*, *GUTCH* and *KAZ*) were used in Type 2. See Figure 2 in Appendix A for an example display for Type 2 questions. As noted by Kim and Shim (2011), in Korea ETCs with a locative extension (e.g., *there is an X on the Y*) first appear in the first grade of middle school English textbooks, sometimes accompanied by pictures. Some examples are presented in (8).

- (8) a. There is a letter on the desk. (Textbook K)
- b. There is a telephone on the desk. (Textbook D)
- c. There is a family picture on the desk. (Textbook D)

(Kim & Shim, 2011, pp. 270-271)

Palacios-Martínez and Martínez-Insua (2006) state that English ETCs are introduced early in Spanish L2 curricula and that Spanish students may learn them “as chunks or fixed expressions” (p. 218). Thus, in order to weaken the degree of formulaicity of ETCs with a locative extension, half of the target items (i.e., Type 2 questions) contained nonsense nouns.

### 3.2.2. Non-target items

The non-target items were also divided into two types: Type 3 and Type 4. Type 3 contained the word *another* in an ETC (i.e., *there is another one*). Two pictures were given: in one picture, there were two things that looked exactly the same; in the other picture, there were two things that looked different from each other. See Figure 3 in Appendix A for an



example display for Type 3 questions. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 3, Type 3 questions are partly identical to the wug test (Berko, 1958). The nonsense nouns included in Type 3 questions were expected to distract participants from the aim of the study.

Type 4 included ‘*here*’s + a noun phrase with the possessive pronoun *my*’ (e.g., *here’s my magic pen*). In English, the *here is* construction is used ‘when giving or showing something to someone’ (<https://www.1doceonline.com/dictionary/here>). It is also used ‘in speech and informal writing to introduce a person, subject, or action’ (<https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/here>). One picture depicted two boys, one of whom was showing a thing to the other boy. In another picture, there were two desks: one was placed close to the participant’s view while the other desk was placed at a distance from the participant’s view. In the latter picture, a thing was laid on the desk placed close to the participant’s view. See Figure 4 in Appendix A for an example display for Type 4 questions.

As mentioned earlier, three answer options were given for all 12 test questions: (i) A, (ii) B, and (iii) both A and B. For the target items, the both option was the correct (or preferred) response because ETCs are used to describe the existence of something regardless of its distance. Therefore, apart from their usual roles, the main purpose of filler items used in this study was to exclude the possibility of the both option: the correct answer to Type 3 questions was the picture in which there were two identical things, while the correct response to Type 4 questions was the picture containing two boys.

### 3.3. Procedures<sup>1</sup>

All 12 questions were pseudo-randomized so that questions that belong to the same type were not presented consecutively. There was one practice trial (using a comparative construction) prior to the main trials. After completing the main task with 12 trials, the participants had to select the reason for choosing their responses in the main task. The given four options were as follows:

- (9) a. *There* is used to refer to something or somebody that is farther away.
- b. *There* is used to refer to something or somebody that is nearby.
- c. *There* is used to refer to something or somebody that exists regardless of its distance.
- d. Other (please specify)

Due to the pandemic, the data collection was administered in an online form using the Google Forms platform. Before starting the picture selection task, participants were asked to fill in the form requesting their background information. All written instructions as well as

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<sup>1</sup> This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Ewha Womans University.

the answer options in (9) were given in Korean to the learner groups and in English to the NS group. After answering question (9), the learner groups were advised to take a 2-3 minute break and then they were asked to answer 50 questions (as well as two practice questions) of the OPT. The instructions for the OPT were provided in English.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The participants' answers to 12 trials of the picture selection task were initially coded by the first author according to the three answer options: (i) A, (ii) B, and (iii) both A and B. The coded data were then converted into correct versus incorrect responses. The subjects' task was to choose the picture(s) that best describes the target sentence by selecting one and only one answer among the three options provided. Option (iii), the both option, was the correct answer since ETCs are used to describe the existence of something regardless of its distance. In this study, option (i), the near option, and option (ii), the far option, were converted as incorrect answers because they were not the best possible answer for the question at hand. Subjects scored 1 point for each correct response and 0 point for each incorrect response. These converted data have been manually checked several times by both authors.

For statistical analyses, SPSS version 28.0.1.1 was used. In the case of the six target items (i.e., Type 1 and Type 2 questions), the independent variables were English proficiency (NS, AL, IL) and the noun type (actual versus nonsense). Originally, the dependent variable was categorical with three levels. The participants' interpretation of ETCs was sorted into one of the following three categories: near, far, or that both were possible. As the dependent variable was frequency data, Pearson's chi-square test was used. Two chi-square tests were conducted: the first one between English proficiency and the interpretation of ETCs (a 3 x 3 contingency table analysis), the second one between the noun type and the interpretation of ETCs (a 2 x 3 contingency table analysis). In the case of the converted quantitative data, the dependent variable was the participants' scores on the picture selection task. Therefore a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with English proficiency as the between-subject factor and the noun type as the within-subject factor. An alpha level of .05 was set for all statistical analyses.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Treatment of Dependent Variable as Categorical

The first research question investigated the effect of English proficiency on the

interpretation of ETCs, while the second research question examined the influence of the noun type on the interpretation of ETCs. Tables 2 and 3 display response frequencies on the six target items (i.e., Type 1 and Type 2 questions).

**TABLE 2**  
**Distribution of Responses Across Groups and Noun Types (Actual and Nonsense) for the Six Target Items (Type 1 and Type 2 Questions)**

Group	Response	Actual		Nonsense	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
NS	Both	108	90	108	90
	Near	12	10	12	10
	Far	0	0	0	0
AL	Both	81	68	83	69
	Near	18	15	14	12
	Far	21	18	23	19
IL	Both	52	43	52	43
	Near	30	25	31	26
	Far	38	32	37	31

**TABLE 3**  
**Contingency Table for the Six Target Items (Type 1 and Type 2 Questions)**

Variable	Both		Near		Far		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
English Proficiency								
NS	216	90	24	10	0	0	240	100
AL	164	68	32	13	44	18	240	100
IL	104	43	61	25	75	31	240	100
Total	484	67	117	16	119	17	720	100
Noun Type								
Actual	241	67	60	17	59	16	360	100
Nonsense	243	68	57	16	60	17	360	100
Total	484	67	117	16	119	17	720	100

*Note.* In Table 3, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

A chi-square test investigating the relationship of English proficiency on the interpretation of ETCs (as measured by a categorical “both,” “near,” or “far” scale) found that these two variables were related ( $\chi^2 = 129.991$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In terms of descriptive data presented in Table 3, 90% of the NS group’s total responses were correct (= the choice of the both option) whereas the far option constituted 0% of this group’s total responses. In contrast, 68% of the AL group’s total responses and 43% of the IL group’s total responses were correct. The far option was ranked second in each learner group constituting 18% of the AL group’s total responses and 31% of the IL group’s total responses. A 2 x 3 contingency table analysis was conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between the noun type and the interpretation of ETCs. The chi-square result is  $\chi^2 = .094$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .954$ , indicating that

these two variables are not related. In other words, the noun type did not significantly influence the interpretation of ETCs.

#### 4.2. Treatment of Dependent Variable as Quantitative

In this subsection, we answer the two research questions by analyzing the converted quantitative data (i.e., numerical scores). As noted in section 3.4, participants scored 1 point for each correct response (the both option) and 0 point for each incorrect response (the near or far option). Table 4 shows descriptive statistics for the mean scores of Type 1 questions (i.e., ETCs involving actual nouns) and Type 2 questions (i.e., ETCs involving nonsense nouns). As there were three tokens for each type, the highest possible score was 3 for Type 1 and Type 2 questions each.

**TABLE 4**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Skewness and Kurtosis Values for the Mean Scores of Type 1 and Type 2 Questions**

	Actual			Nonsense		
	NS	AL	IL	NS	AL	IL
<i>N</i>	40	40	40	40	40	40
<i>M</i>	2.7	2.0	1.3	2.7	2.1	1.3
<i>SD</i>	0.9	1.3	1.3	0.9	1.3	1.5
Skewness	-2.8	-0.8	0.2	-2.8	-0.9	0.3
Kurtosis	6.2	-1.2	-1.8	6.2	-1.2	-1.9

Note. Maximum score = 3

As presented in Table 4, in our study, the values of skewness and kurtosis are smaller than absolute 3 and absolute 8, respectively; therefore, the assumption of normality is satisfied (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). Table 5 presents the results of a repeated-measures ANOVA for Type 1 and Type 2 questions. Mauchly's test of sphericity was undefined as there were only two levels of a repeated-measures factor (actual versus nonsense). Accordingly, Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used in Table 5.

**TABLE 5**  
**Results of Repeated-Measures ANOVA on Type 1 and Type 2 Scores for English Proficiency Groups and Actual Versus Nonsense Noun Types**

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta p^2$	Power
Between subjects							
English proficiency	78.533	2	39.267	15.093	<.001	.205	.999
Within subjects							
Noun type	.017	1	.017	.048	.828	.000	.055
Noun type x Eng. proficiency	.033	2	.017	.048	.954	.001	.057

The results of a repeated-measures ANOVA displayed in Table 5 found no significant main effect of the noun type on Type 1 and Type 2 scores ( $F(1, 117) = .048, p = .828$ ). In addition, no significant interaction effect was found between the noun type and English proficiency ( $F(2, 117) = .048, p = .954$ ). However, a significant main effect of English proficiency on Type 1 and Type 2 scores was observed ( $F(2, 117) = 15.093, p < .001$ ). This means that the mean scores of Type 1 and Type 2 questions differed significantly across three English proficiency groups: NS, AL, and IL. Because the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated, Games-Howell was used as a post-hoc test. The results of the Games-Howell post-hoc test are presented in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**  
**Results of Post-Hoc Test for Paired Comparison of the Mean Scores of Type 1 and Type 2 Questions**

Relation Pattern	<i>M</i> Difference	Standard Error	<i>p</i>
NS-AL	0.65	0.226	.016*
NS-IL	1.40	0.235	<.001*
AL-IL	0.75	0.298	.036*

\* $p < .05$

As shown in Table 6, the AL group was significantly different from the other two groups ( $p < .05$ ). Also, the difference between the NS and IL groups was significant ( $p < .001$ ). The mean differences for each of the pairwise comparisons (i.e., NS-AL, NS-IL, and AL-IL) were 0.65, 1.40, and 0.75, respectively. The NS group scored higher than the AL and IL groups, and the AL group scored higher than the IL group. In sum, the post-hoc test found that all of the group scores were statistically different from each other ( $ps < .05$ ), confirming that participants' English proficiency played a role in the scores that they received on Type 1 and Type 2 questions.

### 4.3. Survey Question

As mentioned in section 3.3, after completing the picture selection task, the participants had to select the reason for choosing the answer they marked from the given four options. The results of survey question (9) are summarized in Table 7. Eighty-eight percent of the NS group chose the correct answer, while none of this group chose the far option. As for the AL group, 80% chose the correct answer, and 20% selected the far option. In the case of the IL group, only 55% chose the correct answer, and 40% selected the far option.

**TABLE 7**  
**Reason for Choosing Answer**

	NS (N = 40)		AL (N = 40)		IL (N = 40)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
a. Far	0	0	8	20	16	40
b. Near	3	8	0	0	2	5
c. Correct Answer	35	88	32	80	22	55
d. Other	2	5	0	0	0	0

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study attempted to examine how successfully Korean L2 learners of English comprehend English ETCs. The answers to the two research questions can be summarized as follows. First, there was a statistically significant relationship between English proficiency and the interpretation of ETCs. The AL group in our study performed better than the IL group but worse than the NS group. Second, there was no relationship between the type of the post-copular noun (actual or nonsense) and the interpretation of ETCs. The second result implies that when comprehending ETCs, it does not matter whether the post-copular noun is an actual or nonsense word.

The interpretation of the first result needs a more thorough discussion. As ETCs are used to describe the existence of something regardless of its distance, if participants fully comprehend ETCs, they should choose both pictures. In our study, 90% of the NS group's total responses were correct (= the choice of the both option). The near option was ranked second in the NS group constituting the rest 10% of this group's total responses. That is, the far option constituted 0% of the NS group's total responses. However, in the case of both learner groups, the far option was ranked second while the near option was ranked third. As shown in Table 3, the far option constituted 18% of the AL group's total responses; the near option comprised 13% of this group's total responses. The percentages were noticeably higher in the IL group than in the AL group: the far option constituted 31% of the IL group's total responses; the near option comprised 25% of the total responses for the IL group.

This difference between the NS group and the two learner groups implies that Korean learners of English, especially lower proficiency learners, may have a difficulty distinguishing between expletive *there* and locative *there*. Because locative *there* means 'in that (not this) place' or 'at that (not this) location', learners interpret expletive *there* as locative *there* and accordingly choose a picture where the object or thing is placed at a distance from their view.

The results of survey question (9) also support learners' confusion between expletive *there* and locative *there*. First, it is noteworthy that none of the NS group chose the far option in

the survey, as well as in the picture selection task. Furthermore, it is notable that in the case of the learner groups, the percent of correct responses is higher in the survey question than in the picture selection task (see Table 7 and Table 3). This result may imply that some Korean L2 learners were hindered by their L1 during the picture selection task even though they had knowledge of English ETCs. In other words, when they performed the task, they chose the picture which describes the object that is placed at a distance due to the interference of the Korean word *ceki* (an equivalent of the English locative *there*).

However, the findings of this study should not be taken as evidence for L1 transfer only since the present study mainly focused on the L2 learners of English who speak the same L1. Therefore, another possible explanation is that in SLA of English ETCs, locative *there* is used as the basis for acquiring expletive *there* in ETCs. It is found that in child L1 acquisition, children produce locative *there* in the early stage of the developmental stages of ETCs and the use of expletive *there* gradually emerges in the later stage (Inoue, 1993; Johnson, 2001). According to Johnson (2001), three main stages are observed when children acquire ETCs. He found that in child L1 acquisition, children use locative *there* as the basis to acquire expletive *there* in ETCs. In the first stage, a locative *there*, which holds the meaning ‘in/at that place’, occurs either in the initial or final position of a sentence. In the second stage, locative *there* appears to overlap with expletive *there*, as in (10). Lastly, in the final stage, children can distinguish between locative *there* and expletive *there* in ETCs.

(10) There factory right there.

(Johnson, 2001, p. 132)

The performance of the IL group in this study may be attributable to such developmental stages of ETCs shown in child L1 acquisition. As Ortega (2009) puts it, “many errors that at first blush might be attributed to the influence of the mother tongue can be, in fact, unrelated to the L1 and instead reflect developmental universal processes that have been attested in the acquisition of human language in general” (p. 51). The findings of the present study, therefore, are not mainly explained by L1 transfer only. Rather, they may indicate that some of the IL group are in the middle of the developmental stages in acquiring ETCs

The present study has some limitations. First, because the present study dealt with comprehension data, hasty generalizations should be avoided. Additional studies should be done in order to fully evaluate the claim that Korean learners of English acquire ETCs through the same developmental stages shown in child L1 acquisition. Second, since the present study only involved L2 learners with the same L1 background, it might be difficult to conclude that such developmental stages are universally identified or not. Third, in order to test the effect of L1 transfer more systematically, future research should include two L2 learner groups with different L1 backgrounds: languages with and without overt expletives,

as in (11) and (12), respectively.<sup>2</sup>

(11) French

Il y a une pomme dans l'assiette.  
 it Loc has a apple on the plate  
 'There is an apple on the plate.'

(12) Korean

cepsi-ey sakwa-ka iss-ta.  
 plate-on apple-Nom exist-Decl  
 'There is an apple on the plate.'

As for the pedagogical implications of the current study, explicit instruction and various inputs consisting of diverse structures of ETCs should be offered in school step by step taking into consideration each level of Korean learners of English. It seems that even though most Korean students are taught ETCs in the first year in Korean middle school, they have some difficulty using such constructions (Kim & Shim, 2011; Lee, 2011). Concerning this issue, Kim and Shim (2011) pointed out that most Korean textbooks do not offer sufficient resources dealing with diverse structures of ETCs. In school, Korean learners of English first encounter the basic structure of ETCs (e.g., *there is a(n) + N*) in English textbooks, which might not be sufficient for them to reach the target-like level of developmental stages. For instance, if students are in the first level, a more advanced structure of ETCs (e.g., *there + be + NP + PP*) should be provided to help them move toward the next level of developmental stages.

Also, in the Korean English curriculum, more emphasis and focus should be placed on the distinction between expletive *there* and locative *there*. For example, the locative *there* in (13a) is stressed while the expletive *there* in (13b) is not necessarily fully stressed.

- (13) a. There's Juan.  
 b. There's wine.

(Ross, 1974, p. 569)

More importantly, unlike locative *there*, expletive *there* is an example of "non-meaning-bearing syntactic place-holders to preserve canonical sentence form" (Rutherford, 1983, p. 366). Other such case is expletive or dummy *it*, as in (14).

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in (11)-(12) are as follows: (i) Loc: locative, (ii) Nom: nominative, (iii) Decl: declarative. In this paper, the Yale romanization of Korean is used.



- (14) a. It's raining.  
b. It is appropriate that he goes.

(Sornicola, 2006, p. 405)

In school, Korean students of English are taught ETCs through writing exercises (Kim & Shim, 2011). In order to teach the accurate distinction between locative *there* and expletive *there* more clearly, teachers can use a picture description task in class, similar to that used in the present study. In doing this task, students can understand that expletive *there* is used to describe the existence of something or somebody regardless of its distance. Additionally, abstract nouns (e.g., *love*, *passion*) can be used to teach such distinction. Even though the present study found that the post-copular noun does not have any impact on the comprehension of ETCs, if teachers use abstract nouns that cannot be described by pictures placed in any location, students may understand that expletive *there*, unlike locative *there*, does not hold any meaning. Despite some possible shortcomings, it is hoped that this study has contributed new findings to L2 comprehension research and instruction.

Applicable levels: Secondary, tertiary

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Task Displays

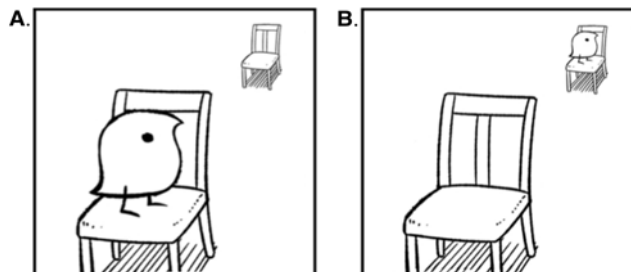
#### FIGURE 2

##### Example Display for Type 2 Questions

Q4. This is a WUG

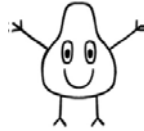


There is a WUG on the chair.



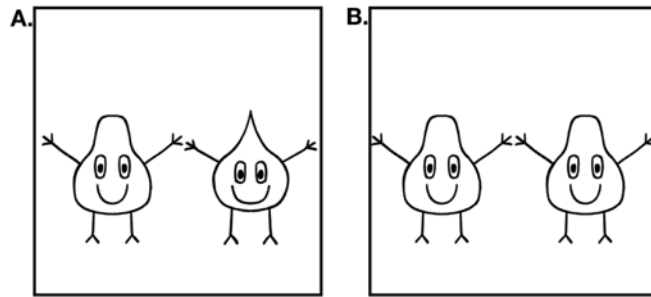
**FIGURE 3**  
**Example Display for Type 3 Questions**

Q3. This is a TOR.



Now there is another one.

There are two of them.



**FIGURE 4**  
**Example Display for Type 4 Questions**

Q2. Here's my magic pen.

