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Effectiveness of Construction-based Instruction on Korean Middle School Learners' L2 Production and Engagement*

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ABSTRACT

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In second language (L2) instruction, integrating form and meaning is important for learners' ability to use language. However, it remains unclear how such integration can be realized in instructional practice, particularly in Korean middle school EFL classrooms. This study examined the pedagogical potential of construction-based instruction, which links sentence forms to the meanings of recurring events, to enhance sentence-level L2 production and promote learner engagement. To this end, forty-three second-year middle school learners received either construction-based instruction or conventional form-focused instruction. L2 production was assessed through written production tasks, including a sentence translation task and a guided writing task, administered at pretest and posttest following a four-week instructional period. Participants also completed a learner engagement questionnaire after the posttest. The results indicated that the construction-based instruction group showed significantly greater improvement in both written production tasks and reported overall higher engagement. These findings suggest that construction-based instruction can effectively support sentence-level L2 production and foster greater engagement among middle school EFL learners by linking sentence forms to event meanings.

KEYWORDS

construction-based instruction, L2 production, learner engagement, middle school learners, construction grammar

1. Introduction

In second language (L2) instruction, integration of grammatical form and meaning is widely recognized as important for learners' ability to use language appropriately in communicative situations (Ellis 2008, Long 2015, Nassaji and Fotos 2011). Early research questioned the role of grammar instruction in developing language proficiency (Krashen 1982, 1985), but subsequent scholars reached broad consensus that grammatical knowledge, when linked to meaning, can underpin communicative competence (Ellis 2006, 2008, Long 1991, 2015). Therefore, the core issue in contemporary grammar teaching is not whether grammar should be taught, but how to effectively support the integration of form and meaning.

Despite theoretical consensus, how form–meaning integration can be realized in EFL classroom instructional practices remains unclear. While many influential approaches to grammar instruction, such as focus on form, foreground the form–meaning connection, they presuppose conditions such as sufficient input and interaction (Ellis 2008, Long 2015). In Korean EFL middle school contexts, limited instructional time and exam-oriented curricula constrain opportunities for sustained meaning-oriented interaction (Nam 2011). Under these structural constraints, classroom instruction often prioritizes explicit form-focused explanation and test-oriented practice, leaving limited room for extended communicative interaction. Large class sizes, consistently identified as a major obstacle to communicative language teaching in Korean EFL settings across school levels (Jeon and Yin 2022), further restrict sustained interaction. Moreover, compared to ESL contexts, learners' exposure to English outside the classroom remains relatively limited, thereby reducing the cumulative input that supports the gradual consolidation of form–meaning relationships (Kim and Rah 2021). Under these circumstances, it becomes necessary to explore alternative pedagogical approaches, such as construction grammar, that can support form–meaning integration by drawing on the linguistic system of the target language as an organizing principle of instruction (Yang 2010).

From a construction grammar perspective, recurring sentence patterns in everyday language use are conceptualized as argument structure constructions, which encode core semantic relationships underlying recurrent event types (Bencini and Goldberg 2000, Goldberg 1995, 2003, 2006). Within this framework, grammar is characterized as an inventory of constructions, understood as conventionalized form–meaning pairings that link syntactic patterns with core semantic relations (Goldberg 1995, 2003, 2006). Previous research suggests that competence in argument structure constructions supports learners' language production and facilitates communicative use of language at the sentence-level (Kim et al. 2013, Rah 2014, Sung and Yang 2016). In the present study, form–meaning integration is examined at the sentence-level, where grammatical forms are systematically linked to core event meanings.

Construction-based instruction is an educational approach that assists learners in recognizing and utilizing recurring form–meaning pairs at the sentence-level to express core event meaning (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018). Despite its theoretical relevance, construction-based instruction has received limited attention in Korean middle school EFL classrooms. Most existing research has focused on Korean university EFL learners (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018, Rah 2014), with relatively scarce studies on middle school learners. Among the few studies targeting Korean adolescent EFL learners, Sung and Yang (2016) reported that explicit instruction on English transitive resultative construction yielded a significant effect on learners' ability to use the target construction. However, since the study employed a relatively short instructional period, provided instruction on only a single construction, and involved both middle and high school students, further research is needed to determine whether similar effects can be observed in more sustained classroom contexts, particularly at the middle school level. This is partly due to the limited research focusing on middle school learners, but more significantly

because middle school learners are at a stage where their ability to integrate grammatical form and meaning is still developing (Song and Kim 2018, Tukan 2024), yet the demand for them to construct sentences to express meaning is increasingly growing. Therefore, more empirical studies that investigate the pedagogical effects of construction-based teaching methods among EFL middle school learners remain necessary.

While there have been attempts to examine the effects of construction-based instruction on sentence-level L2 production, relatively little attention has been devoted to how such instruction influences learner engagement in classroom contexts. Learner engagement, commonly conceptualized as encompassing behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions, reflects learners' participation in tasks, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in understanding instructional content (Fredricks et al. 2004, Philp and Duchesne 2016). In middle school EFL classrooms, where opportunities for meaningful language exposure outside the classroom are limited, learner engagement plays a particularly important role in shaping how learners attend to instructional input and participate in classroom activities (Sulis 2022). A growing body of research has shown that learner engagement is closely related to learning outcomes in instructed language learning contexts (Lei et al. 2018, Philp and Duchesne 2016, Sulis 2022, Svalberg 2021). In spite of the central role of learner engagement in middle school EFL classrooms, there remains limited empirical evidence examining how construction-based instruction influences learner engagement.

To address these gaps, the present study examines the effects of construction-based instruction on Korean middle school learners' sentence-level L2 production and learner engagement. To this end, this study compares construction-based instruction with conventional form-focused instruction in terms of learners' sentence-level production and engagement. Sentence-level production is assessed through translation and guided writing tasks, while engagement is measured across behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions through a self-report questionnaire administered after the instructional intervention. By focusing on Korean second-year middle school learners and assessing both sentence-level production and learner engagement, the study extends previous research on construction-based instruction into a middle school EFL context and brings learner engagement into focus alongside production outcomes. Accordingly, the present study addresses the following research questions.

1. Does construction-based instruction lead to greater improvement in Korean middle school learners' English sentence production ability than conventional form-focused instruction?

2. Does construction-based instruction result in higher levels of learner engagement than conventional form-focused instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Form-Focused Grammar Instruction in Korean Secondary EFL Classrooms

Previous research has consistently reported that grammar instruction in Korean secondary EFL classrooms tends to adopt a predominantly form-focused orientation, characterized by an emphasis on discrete grammatical forms, explicit rule explanation, and isolated pattern practice (Jeon and Yin 2022, Kang 2017). Classroom-based analyses suggest that grammar instruction is frequently organized around the identification and manipulation of target structures, with limited attention to how those structures are used to express meaning in extended discourse (Whitehead 2017). Within such instructional practices, grammar is often treated as a body of rules to be mastered

independently of communicative purpose, reflecting what Larsen-Freeman (2003) describes as a form-oriented approach to grammar instruction.

A growing body of research has raised concerns that this instructional orientation restricts learners' opportunities to develop an understanding of how grammatical forms function to convey meaning in actual language use (Biber et al. 2002, Nassaji and Fotos 2011). Analyses of middle school English textbooks in Korea similarly indicate that instructional materials are largely dominated by decontextualized form-focused activities, offering relatively few opportunities for learners to engage in meaning-oriented language use (Jeong and Kim 2017, Lee 2024). As textbook activities often shape classroom practices, such emphases may further limit learners' exposure to tasks that require them to produce sentences with communicative intent. Classroom-based research has also reported that learner engagement in form-focused instructional contexts tends to remain low, with learners showing reduced participation and limited involvement in sentence-level production beyond controlled practice (Kang 2017).

These findings point to a persistent separation between grammatical form and communicative meaning in conventional form-focused instruction, where accuracy at the level of isolated structures is frequently prioritized over meaning-making and discourse-level use (Ellis 2006, Larsen-Freeman 2003). In EFL contexts such as Korean middle school classrooms, where learners' exposure to English is largely confined to instructional settings, this separation may be particularly consequential. When grammar instruction does not explicitly address how forms contribute to meaning, learners have fewer opportunities to use grammatical knowledge as a resource for communication. This instructional context underscores the need for approaches to grammar teaching that foreground the relationship between grammatical form and communicative meaning, rather than treating grammar as an end in itself.

2.2 Construction Grammar and Argument Structure Constructions

Construction grammar conceptualizes grammar as a network of conventionalized form–meaning pairings that emerge from recurrent language use (Goldberg 1995, 2006). From this perspective, learning progresses as learners encounter constructions, understood as recurring patterns that integrate syntactic forms with their associated meanings in context, a view consistent with usage-based theories of language learning (Bybee 2010, Ellis 2003, Tomasello 2003). Within the framework of construction grammar, argument structure constructions represent a core set of sentence-level schematic patterns that encode recurring event types such as transfer, motion, and change of state (Goldberg 1995, 2003, 2006).

Goldberg (1995) identified six major argument structure constructions, as shown in Table 1. Each construction links a specific syntactic frame to a corresponding event meaning such as transfer, change of state, or movement. These six constructions constitute a network of related patterns, in which each construction elaborates on a shared schematic meaning (Goldberg 2003).

Table 1. Argument Structure Constructions in Goldberg (1995)

	Construction	Meaning	Form
1	Ditransitive	X causes Y to receive Z	Subj V Obj1 Obj2
2	Caused Motion	X causes Y to move Z	Subj V Obj Obl
3	Intransitive Motion	X moves Y	Subj V Obl
4	Intransitive Resultative	X becomes Y	Subj V Xcomp
5	Resultative	X causes Y to become Z	Subj V Obj Xcomp
6	Transitive	X acts on Y	Subj V Obj

Note. Obl = oblique (typically a prepositional phrase)

Table 1 summarizes the six major constructions, each reflecting a distinct event type that becomes clearer when considered in more detail. The ditransitive construction expresses a transfer-of-possession event (e.g., Tom gave her a book), whereas the caused-motion construction involves an agent bringing about the movement of an entity to a new location (e.g., She pushed the box into the room). The intransitive motion construction depicts self-initiated movement (e.g., The boy ran into the room), and the intransitive resultative construction indicates that the subject undergoes a change of state (e.g., The milk turned sour). The resultative construction shows an agent bringing about a change of state in an object (e.g., They wiped the table clean), while the transitive construction depicts an event in which one participant affects another (e.g., She opened the box). Although their surface forms vary, these constructions share the common function of expressing recurring event types that arise in everyday communicative situations (Goldberg 2003).

Understanding how learners interpret these constructions requires examining how they map syntactic form onto meaning. According to the Scene Encoding Hypothesis (Goldberg 1995), each construction evokes a schematic scene such as transfer, motion, or change, and learners draw on these scenes when interpreting grammatical patterns. For instance, the ditransitive construction evokes a giving scene involving someone who gives, something that is given, and someone who receives it (i.e., agent, theme, recipient), which clarifies its link to a transfer-of-possession meaning. Likewise, the caused-motion construction evokes a movement-to-location scene involving someone who causes the movement, something that moves, and a destination (i.e., agent, theme, goal). Making these scene-based mappings explicit helps learners integrate syntactic form with intended meaning and draws their attention to the semantic and discourse functions of each construction. This process supports more contextually appropriate grammatical use than approaches centered on rule explanation and isolated form practice.

2.3 Prior Studies on Construction-based Instruction

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of construction grammar, researchers have developed construction-based instruction approaches that explicitly link grammatical form and meaning. In this approach, constructions are treated as meaningful resources rather than abstract rules or isolated patterns, with instruction focusing on how sentence forms encode recurring event meanings in language use. Prior empirical research has explored how construction-based instruction influences learners' sentence-level L2 performance. Within the Korean EFL context, several influential studies have contributed to laying the groundwork for construction-based instruction. Notably, Rah (2014) provided pedagogical insights into the application of construction grammar in Korean EFL classrooms, highlighting the instructional value of form–meaning mapping for supporting adult learners' sentence-level production. Building on this line of work, Rah and Kim (2018) examined Korean university learners' acquisition of English resultative constructions through instruction that integrated visual scenes and explicit explanation of constructional networks, using a grammaticality judgment task and a picture description task to assess receptive and productive knowledge. Their findings showed that learners who received construction-based instruction demonstrated greater gains on both measures than those taught through conventional form-focused approaches. Extending this instructional framework, Kim and Rah (2021) further refined the use of visual scenes and constructional networks among argument structure constructions as central components of instruction, reporting that construction-based instruction enhanced learners' understanding of constructional meaning and led to more accurate sentence-level production. Collectively, these studies provided early empirical evidence for the instructional potential of construction grammar in Korean EFL classrooms.

Meanwhile, empirical studies of construction-based instruction at the middle school level in Korean EFL contexts remain scarce. One of the few studies is Sung and Yang (2016), which investigated the effects of

construction-based instruction on secondary school learners' acquisition of the English transitive resultative construction. A notable aspect of the findings is that, although the instruction targeted a single construction, the authors observed gains not only in the instructed resultative construction but also in the caused-motion construction. Sung and Yang (2016) interpreted these transfer effects as evidence that learners were able to generalize constructional knowledge across the network of semantically related constructions. Despite these promising findings, the study examined both middle school and high school learners rather than focusing exclusively on middle school students, with limited evidence specific to middle school learners in Korean EFL classrooms.

Overall, prior studies suggest that construction-based instruction can support EFL learners' sentence-level L2 performance by foregrounding the relationship between grammatical form and meaning. At the same time, the limited scope of research in secondary EFL classrooms, particularly at the middle school level, underscores the need for further empirical investigation. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines the effects of construction-based instruction on learners' sentence-level production in Korean middle school EFL classrooms.

2.4 Learner Engagement in EFL Classroom

In research on second language learning, learner engagement has increasingly been recognized as a key construct for understanding how learners interact with instructional input and classroom activities (Fredricks et al. 2004, Philp and Duchesne 2016). A widely adopted framework conceptualizes engagement as comprising behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions, reflecting learners' participation in tasks, emotional involvement in learning activities, and cognitive investment in processing instructional content (Fredricks et al. 2004). Previous research has shown that learner engagement is closely related to language learning outcomes in instructed language learning contexts, and that affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement are commonly highly related to improved learning outcomes across studies (Lei et al. 2018, Sulis 2022, Svalberg 2021).

Building on earlier empirical work, Lei et al. (2018) examined the relationship between learner engagement and academic achievement. Synthesizing findings from 69 independent studies, the analysis showed a consistent positive association between engagement and achievement across behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Behavioral engagement exhibited the strongest relationship with academic performance, followed by cognitive and emotional engagement. Adopting a classroom-based perspective, Sulis (2022) examined learner engagement as a dynamic process unfolding over time in intact L2 classrooms. Using classroom observations and stimulated recall, the study showed that engagement fluctuates within and across lessons in response to task demands, classroom interaction, and learners' momentary perceptions of competence. Rather than functioning as a stable learner characteristic, engagement was shown to vary in response to classroom conditions, highlighting its close connection to instructional tasks and classroom contexts in L2 learning.

From a more language-focused perspective, Svalberg (2021) conceptualized engagement as engagement with language, emphasizing learners' active orientation toward form–meaning relationships of language. In this account, engagement was understood in terms of learners' attention to linguistic patterns, reflection on form and meaning, and interactional work around language within classroom activity. Drawing on classroom-based research, Svalberg (2021) suggested that instructional practices that integrate attention to form within meaningful language use are more likely to foster learner engagement.

Taken together, research indicates that learner engagement, encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions, is closely linked to language learning in second language contexts (Fredricks et al. 2004, Lei et al. 2018, Philp and Duchesne 2016) and is understood as a construct shaped by classroom conditions and instructional tasks (Sulis 2022). In addition, Svalberg (2021) highlighted the pedagogical relevance of integrating form and

meaning in classroom instruction, emphasizing the importance of engaging learners with form–meaning relationships within classroom contexts where form and meaning are considered together.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

The present study adopted a quasi-experimental design to examine the effectiveness of construction-based instruction in enhancing Korean second-year middle school learners' L2 production ability and to investigate learner engagement during instruction. A total of 43 students participated in the study, conducted at a private language institute. Participants were assigned to either the experimental or control group using convenience sampling. To ensure baseline comparability, two written production tasks were administered as pretest. The instructional intervention spanned a four-week period comprising eight sessions. Following the instructional period, the two pretest writing tasks were re-administered as a posttest to examine between-group differences. A survey of engagement was conducted to investigate learners' engagement.

3.2 Participants

Participants in the study were 43 Korean second-year middle school students in Gyeonggi Province, South Korea, who attended after-school English classes at a private language institute. All participants had achieved a B grade or higher on the school-administered midterm English exam. Most students had no experience of living abroad, and only two students reported short stays outside Korea. Table 2 presents the demographic and language learning background information of the participants.

Table 2. Participant Information

Variable	Experimental	Control	Total
Number of students	23	20	43
Gender (M/F)	12 / 11	11 / 9	23 / 20
Years of English study	6.5	6.7	6.6
Study abroad experience	1 student, 1-month stay	1 student, 2-month stay	2 students, short-term stays
Baseline comparability	No significant difference ($p > .05$)		

Note. Baseline comparability was measured through sentence translation, guided writing tasks.

Students attended the institute twice a week and had three 45-minute sessions on each visit: reading, grammar, and listening. Under regular instruction, listening sessions used materials modeled on nationally administered English listening assessments, reading sessions used graded reading materials, and grammar lessons focused on individual grammar points aligned with the school curriculum, typically involving teacher explanation and controlled practice. For four weeks, the regular grammar session was replaced with the experimental instruction (eight sessions in total). The two intact classes ($n = 23$ and $n = 20$) were assigned to the experimental and control conditions. Before the instructional treatment, a Korean-to-English sentence translation task and a guided writing task were administered to assess baseline production ability. Independent-samples t-tests indicated no significant differences between the two groups.

3.3 Instruction Procedure

The instructional intervention was delivered across eight sessions over a four-week period for both the construction-based instruction and the conventional form-focused instruction. Both groups learned six argument structure constructions described in Goldberg (1995), including the intransitive motion, intransitive resultative, caused motion, transitive resultative, transitive, and ditransitive constructions. The constructional network proposed in construction grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2003) served as a theoretical reference. Table 3 summarizes the weekly sessions and target constructions.

Table 3. Instructional Treatment Sessions

Week	Session	Target Constructions
1	1-2	Intransitive Motion, Intransitive Resultative
2	3-4	Caused-motion, Transitive Resultative
3	5-6	Ditransitive, Transitive
4	7-8	Integrated session for six constructions

Note. Weeks 1–3 introduced two constructions per week, and Week 4 focused on integrated practice with all six constructions.

Each instructional session followed a three-phase structure consisting of a 10-minute introductory phase, a 20-minute main instruction phase, and a 10-minute practice activity, following previous studies (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018). The introductory and practice phases were identical for both groups to ensure equivalent exposure. During the introductory phase, all learners viewed visual scenes depicting everyday events related to the target constructions. Learners were encouraged to orally produce as many sentences as possible to describe the presented scenes. This activity was designed to help learners make initial connections between sentence forms and their meanings without explicit grammatical explanation. In the practice phase, learners completed brief picture-based sentence writing tasks to reinforce the target constructions introduced during the session. Examples of the visual scenes are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

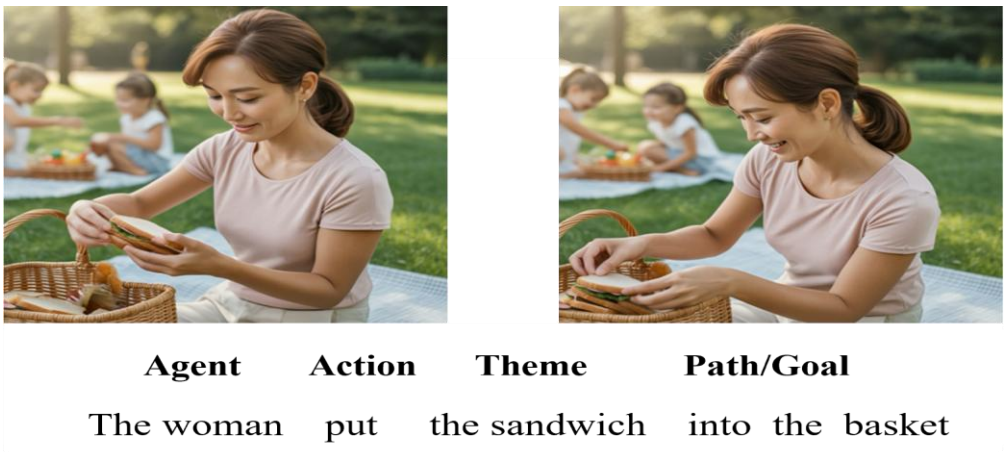

Figure 1. Sample Visual Scene of Caused-Motion Construction

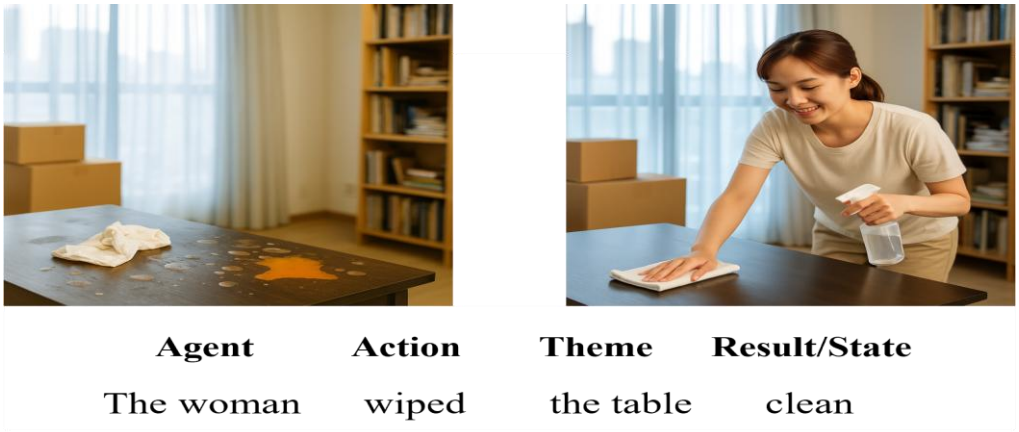

Figure 2. Sample Visual Scene of Resultative Construction

The two groups differed only in the main instructional phase. In the construction-based instruction, the visual scenes from the introductory phase were revisited to highlight the event types expressed by each construction and to explain how syntactic forms map onto core semantic roles such as agent, theme, and recipient. These scenes were also used to illustrate how the constructions are semantically related within the framework of constructional network (Goldberg 1995, 2003). To exemplify the semantic network, the intransitive motion and intransitive resultative constructions were paired to contrast a change of location (e.g., The boy went outside) with a change of state (e.g., The lights went out). Likewise, the caused-motion and transitive resultative constructions were contrasted to show how the object undergoes either a change of place (e.g., She pushed the ball into the box) or a change of state (e.g., She pushed the ball flat). These constructions were then linked to the ditransitive construction, which represents a change of possession (e.g., She handed her friend a ball) to contrast their event meanings.

In contrast, the conventional form-focused instruction relied on explicit rule explanations and sentence pattern analysis. Instruction in the control group focused on the identification of sentence components and their structural arrangement. However, unlike the experimental group, learners were not introduced to the semantic roles (e.g., agent, theme, recipient) encoded by sentence components, nor were they taught how individual constructions are semantically related within the constructional network (Goldberg 1995, 2003). Instead, learners engaged in activities such as detecting grammatical errors, completing fill-in-the-blank items, translating between English and Korean, and rewriting target sentences. These tasks emphasized attention to form rather than the semantic roles or meanings expressed in the sentences.

To ensure that any observed differences were attributable to the instructional treatments, all aspects of the procedure other than the main instructional phase were held constant across groups. Both groups received the same visual materials and target sentences, and brief reactive clarifications on basic grammatical forms were provided in the same manner when needed, such as pointing out minor tense or subject–verb agreement errors. Both instructional conditions were implemented by the same instructor to keep the instruction consistent across groups.

3.4 Assessment Instruments

For both the pretest and posttest, learners' L2 production was assessed through written production tasks, including a sentence translation task and a guided writing task, to elicit sentence-level production of the target constructions. Both instructional groups completed the same assessment tasks under identical conditions, and the same scoring criteria were applied across groups to ensure comparability. The translation task consisted of twenty-

four items and the guided writing task included eighteen items. Each task was completed within a 20-minute time limit. The sentence translation task required learners to produce 24 English sentences by translating the provided Korean prompts. The task included six target constructions, with four items representing each construction. During the guided writing task, learners watched a 10-minute silent video clip and were required to describe selected scenes in written production, following the procedure used in Kim and Rah (2021). A total of 18 scenes were chosen, with three scenes representing each of the six target constructions.

A learner engagement questionnaire consisting of fifteen Likert-type items and two open-ended questions was administered immediately after the posttest. The Likert-type items measured affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement on a five-point scale. Example items included "I found the grammar instruction and class activities enjoyable," "I actively participated in the class activities and tasks during the lesson," and "I tried to apply the grammar knowledge learned in the lesson in sentence production," representing affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, respectively. The open-ended questions asked learners to describe the aspects of the instruction that they found particularly engaging or challenging. The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. The questionnaire was grounded in Fredricks et al.'s (2004) three-dimensional model of engagement and adapted from previous studies that developed and validated classroom-based engagement scales in second language learning (Eerdemutu et al. 2024, Guo et al. 2023). The items were revised to align with the instructional focus of this study, and the resulting scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement (Cronbach's α = .78–.84).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over five weeks including a four-week instruction period as shown in Table 4. In preliminary session, all participants completed a background questionnaire and a pretest consisting of a sentence translation task and a guided writing task. From week 1 to week 4, learners participated in eight instructional sessions, with the experimental group receiving construction-based instruction, and the control group receiving conventional form-focused instruction. At the end of week 4, all participants completed a posttest and a learner engagement questionnaire. Prior to the data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents, and participation was voluntary.

Table 4. Overview of Data Collection Procedure

Period	Experimental Group	Control Group
Preliminary Session	Background Questionnaire Survey & Pretest (Sentence Translation Task, Guided Writing Task)	
Week 1-4 (8 sessions)	Construction-based Instruction	Form-focused Instruction
Week 4 (End of week)	Learner Engagement Questionnaire & Posttest (Sentence Translation Task, Guided Writing Task)	

3.6 Data Coding and Analysis

All responses from the translation and guided writing tasks were coded according to the following criteria. The scoring procedure was based on two criteria, adapted from Kim and Rah (2021). First, the analysis evaluated

whether each sentence included the core components of the target construction. Second, it examined whether those components appeared in the appropriate order. A response was coded as correct and given 1 point when it contained the required elements in the expected order (e.g., Tom gave her a book). Responses that omitted any required element (e.g., Tom gave her) or presented the elements in an incorrect order (e.g., Tom gave a book her) were coded as incorrect and assigned 0 points. Grammatical features not directly related to constructional knowledge, such as articles, verb inflections, noun inflections, or spelling, were not included in the scoring because the evaluation focused on learners' ability to produce the target constructions accurately. All written responses were independently scored by two raters, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

To examine the effects of the instructional treatments, 2 × 2 mixed-design ANOVAs were conducted for the sentence translation and guided writing tasks, with Group as the between-subjects factor and Time as the within-subjects factor. Learner engagement scores were analyzed using independent samples t-tests to compare the group means. In addition to these quantitative analyses, responses to the two open-ended questions were examined qualitatively. Learners' written comments were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to learners' experiences with the instructional activities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Effects of Instructions on Sentence-level Written Production

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for the two written production tasks across the experimental and control groups. Overall, both groups showed higher scores on the post-test than on the pretest, although the size of improvement differed by instructional condition. The construction-based group demonstrated greater gains in two tasks, while the conventional form-focused group showed relatively smaller increases.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Written Production Task Scores

Task	Group	*n*	Pre Mean (*SD*)	Post Mean (*SD*)	Mean Difference
Sentence Translation	Experimental	23	13.57 (2.09)	19.92 (2.25)	6.35
	Control	20	13.20 (1.70)	17.50 (1.99)	4.30
	Total	43	13.40 (1.90)	18.79 (2.44)	5.40
Guided Writing	Experimental	23	8.57 (1.65)	15.61 (3.09)	7.04
	Control	20	7.85 (1.27)	11.70 (2.60)	3.85
	Total	43	8.23 (1.51)	13.79 (3.45)	5.56

As shown in Table 5, the construction-based group recorded noticeably larger mean differences in both tasks, particularly in guided writing. The conventional form-focused group also improved, but the overall magnitude of change was more modest.

4.1.1 Sentence translation task

To examine whether the descriptive differences observed in Table 5 were statistically significant, a 2 × 2 mixed-design ANOVA was conducted for the sentence translation task, with Group (construction-based vs. form-focused) as the between-subjects factor and Time (pretest vs. posttest) as the within-subjects factor.

Table 6. Mixed-design ANOVA Results for Sentence Translation Task

Effect	*df*	*F*	*p*	η^2p
Time	1, 41	127.70	< .001	.757
Group	1, 41	11.84	.001	.224
Time × Group	1, 41	4.72	.036	.103

Note. Group = construction-based vs. form-focused; Time = pretest vs. posttest; η^2p is reported as the measure of effect size.

As indicated in Table 6, the mixed-design ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of Time, $F(1, 41) = 127.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .757$, indicating that learners' sentence translation performance improved from pretest to posttest across instructional conditions. The main effect of Group was also significant, $F(1, 41) = 11.84$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2p = .224$, indicating an overall difference in mean performance between the two instructional conditions. These main effects were qualified by a significant Time × Group interaction, $F(1, 41) = 4.72$, $p = .036$, $\eta^2p = .103$, indicating that the magnitude of improvement differed across the two groups. This interaction effect suggests that organizing instruction around constructional form–meaning mappings may have facilitated stronger development in learners' ability to produce target constructions in sentence translation tasks.

4.1.2 Guided writing task

To determine whether the descriptive differences observed in Table 5 were statistically meaningful for the guided writing task, a 2 × 2 mixed-design ANOVA was conducted, with Group (construction-based vs. form-focused) as the between-subjects factor and Time (pretest vs. posttest) as the within-subjects factor.

Table 7. Mixed-design ANOVA Results for Guided Writing Task

Effect	*df*	*F*	*p*	η^2p
Time	1, 41	121.18	< .001	.747
Group	1, 41	22.00	< .001	.349
Time × Group	1, 41	10.41	.002	.203

Note. Group = construction-based vs. form-focused; Time = pretest vs. posttest; η^2p is reported as the measure of effect size.

As shown in Table 7, the mixed-design ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of Time, $F(1, 41) = 121.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .747$, indicating that learners' guided writing performance improved from pretest to posttest across instructional conditions. The main effect of Group was also significant, $F(1, 41) = 22.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .349$, indicating an overall difference in mean performance between the two instructional conditions. The main effects were further qualified by a significant Time × Group interaction, $F(1, 41) = 10.41$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2p = .203$, indicating differential gains across the two groups. Specifically, the construction-based group demonstrated substantially greater gains in guided writing than the form-focused group. This pattern indicates that organizing instruction around constructional form–meaning mappings was particularly beneficial when learners were required to generate sentences more independently based on visual prompts.

4.2 Effects of Instructions on Learner Engagement

Table 8 summarizes the independent samples *t*-test results for the three dimensions of learner engagement. Across all three areas of engagement, the experimental group reported higher mean scores than the control group. The specific question items and mean scores are presented in Appendix A.

Table 8. Independent-sample T-test Results for Learner Engagement

Engagement Type	Group	Mean	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Affective	Experimental	4.04	0.46	2.39	.022 *	0.73
	Control	3.70	0.48			
Behavioral	Experimental	4.00	0.53	2.55	.015 *	0.78
	Control	3.57	0.58			
Cognitive	Experimental	3.90	0.50	2.12	.040 *	0.65
	Control	3.57	0.50			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

As shown in Table 8, affective engagement showed a significant group difference, with the experimental group reporting higher scores than the control group, ($t = 2.39$, $p = .022$, $d = 0.73$). This suggests that the construction-based instruction enhanced learners' interest, enjoyment, and positive emotional involvement during the lessons. Behavioral engagement also significantly differed between groups ($t = 2.55$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.78$), indicating that learners in the experimental group participated more actively and stayed more focused during the lessons. Although this overall pattern favored the experimental group, one behavioral item showed a very small difference in favor of the control group, specifically the item asking whether learners submitted homework within the due date. Cognitive engagement likewise showed a significant difference ($t = 2.12$, $p = .040$, $d = 0.65$), suggesting that learners perceived the instruction as supportive for understanding and applying the target constructions during classroom activities. A similarly minimal difference appeared in one cognitive question item, in which the control group reported slightly higher attempts to construct accurate sentences. The scores for individual questionnaire items are presented in Appendix A.

Learners' written comments further supported the quantitative results. Students in the construction-based group frequently mentioned that interpreting visual scenes and linking them to sentence structures made the lessons more engaging, and less stressful, and several described experiencing noticeable progress in their written production. In contrast, some learners in the control group expressed uncertainty about how the grammatical rules and knowledge are connected to the actual sentence production. The written responses are presented in Appendix B.

4.3 Summary and Interpretation of the Findings

The first research question examined whether construction-based instruction promotes greater improvement in Korean middle school learners' English sentence production ability than conventional form-focused instruction. The result revealed that learners who received construction-based instruction obtained higher posttest scores than those in the form-focused group across two written production tasks. This group difference was especially evident in the guided writing task, where learners had to interpret what was happening in the presented visual scenes and represent them using appropriate sentence forms. As the guided writing task required learners to construct sentences drawing on their own interpretation without any linguistic prompt, it revealed more pronounced effects of the construction-based instruction than the sentence translation task. In addition, larger between-group differences emerged in producing sentences that express changes of state, namely, the intransitive resultative and transitive resultative constructions (see Appendix C). Both groups began with low scores in producing the two resultative constructions, in line with previous research documenting the difficulty of resultative constructions for EFL learners (Rah and Kim 2018, Sung and Yang 2016). However, while the control group showed only minimal improvement in producing the two constructions, the experimental group demonstrated substantial improvement at posttest. In sum, the effects of the construction-based instruction were most pronounced when learners were

required to generate sentences without any linguistic prompts and to produce constructions that are known to be challenging for EFL learners.

These findings can be interpreted in two ways in light of prior research. First, presenting syntactic and semantic properties of target constructions in close association with visual scenes was more effective in enhancing learners' sentence production (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018). As Kim and Rah (2021) noted, teaching form–meaning alignments of sentences in relation to corresponding scenes may have facilitated learners in internalizing the construction information and using it when producing target constructions in given contexts. Second, explicit explanation about the constructional network helped learners to notice how the constructions were similar or different, which in turn made it easier for them to process and retrieve the appropriate constructions during sentence production. This explanation aligns with previous findings on construction-based instruction suggesting that highlighting relationships among constructions supports learners' ability to retrieve and apply constructional knowledge during sentence production (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018, Sung and Yang 2016). This interpretation is also consistent with earlier research suggesting that constructions are more readily acquired when learned in relation to other constructions (Goldberg and Casenhiser 2008). Overall, the findings for the first research question suggest that the benefits of construction-based instruction observed in adult and university-level EFL contexts (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018, Rah 2014) are also evident among Korean middle school learners.

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that learners who received construction-based instruction reported higher levels of affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement than those who received conventional form-focused instruction. At the affective engagement, learners in the construction-based group reported more positive emotional responses to classroom activities, including greater enjoyment of the lessons, reduced stress during English sentence writing, and increased confidence in their ability to produce sentences in English. These quantitative results were supported by learners' open-ended responses, which frequently referred to heightened interest in the instructional activities and a reduced sense of difficulty during sentence production (see Appendix B). Taken together, these responses suggest that explicitly linking syntactic form, semantic roles, and event meaning may have alleviated processing demands during sentence production, thereby contributing to more positive affective engagement.

Behavioral engagement also differed across instructional conditions. Learners in the construction-based group reported higher levels of participation in classroom activities, closer attention to instructional explanations, greater effort in completing assigned tasks, and more time devoted to lesson preparation. Differences were likewise observed in cognitive engagement. Learners in the construction-based group appeared to approach sentence production with greater cognitive investment, attending more closely to meaning and drawing on grammatical knowledge acquired during instruction. This interpretation is consistent with learners' open-ended responses, which indicated that understanding constructions and their associated meanings made sentence production easier than relying on memorization of sentence patterns.

Taken together, the findings suggest that construction-based instruction may foster higher levels of affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement by treating grammatical knowledge as a resource for interpreting and expressing meaning, rather than as a set of isolated forms to be memorized. As discussed in previous studies, instructional practices that foreground form–meaning relationships can create conditions in which learners are more willing to participate, invest effort, and engage cognitively during language use (Svalberg 2021). From this perspective, the engagement patterns observed in the present study can be attributed to instructional practices that consistently linked grammatical form to meaning in use. The engagement differences between the construction-based group and the conventional form-focused group observed in the present study are consistent with prior

research highlighting a close relationship between learner engagement and learning outcomes in classroom contexts (Lei et al. 2018).

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the effects of construction-based instruction on Korean middle school learners' sentence-level L2 written production and learner engagement, in comparison with conventional form-focused instruction. The findings showed that learners who received construction-based instruction achieved greater gains in sentence-level production across both written production tasks. In addition, construction-based instruction fostered higher levels of affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement compared to form-focused instruction.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that construction-based instruction can support English sentence production among Korean middle school EFL learners, whose sentence production abilities are still developing. By extending previous research conducted with adult and university-level learners (Kim and Rah 2021, Rah and Kim 2018, Rah 2014), the present findings show that the instructional benefits of construction-based approaches are also evident in a middle school EFL context.

The learner engagement results help explain how learners experienced and responded to construction-based instruction. Learners in the construction-based group reported lower perceived difficulty and emotional burden, greater involvement during classroom activities, and stronger efforts to connect grammatical knowledge with sentence production. These findings suggest that linking syntactic forms with semantic roles and corresponding event meanings reduced perceived difficulty during sentence formulation and supported more active engagement during instruction. The observed engagement patterns reflect how learners approached sentence production and participated during instruction. These findings highlight the potential of form–meaning oriented instruction to support active classroom participation, even among learners whose sentence production abilities are still developing.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings offer several implications for grammar instruction in Korean middle school EFL classrooms. First, grammar instruction may benefit from explaining how sentence forms encode meaning in concrete situations, rather than focusing on grammatical rules or isolated sentence patterns. In this respect, the use of visual scenes can help integrate form and meaning by making explicit how particular sentence forms correspond to specific event meanings. This instructional support appears to facilitate sentence production, especially for constructions that involve changes of state. Second, presenting constructions as part of a network of form–meaning pairings may help learners draw on grammatical knowledge more effectively during sentence production, as it highlights relationships among constructions with closely related meanings (Goldberg 2003). In EFL contexts, where learners are exposed to limited input and have fewer opportunities for meaningful interaction, providing well-organized input that integrates form and meaning may help address constraints associated with the instructional context (Kim and Rah 2021, Yang 2010). In light of these implications, instructional input that links sentence forms to event meanings may be particularly valuable in Korean middle school EFL classrooms, where learners have limited exposure to English. This perspective underscores the value of designing grammar instruction that foregrounds form–meaning mappings as a foundation for developing learners' English sentence production (Rah and Kim 2018, Sung and Yang 2016, Yang 2010).

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the participants were drawn from a single middle school and represented a limited range of proficiency levels, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Second, future research would benefit from examining the effects of construction-based instruction over

a longer instructional period. Third, the present study focused on written production tasks; further studies could extend this line of inquiry by incorporating additional task types or modalities to examine how construction-based instruction supports sentence production across different language use contexts. In addition, future research should incorporate complementary receptive measures to examine whether construction-based instruction facilitates not only productive performance but also receptive abilities, thereby providing a more balanced evaluation of its instructional effects in comparison with conventional form-focused instruction.

Another limitation concerns the measurement of learner engagement. Learner engagement was primarily assessed through post-instruction self-report, which limits the extent to which engagement can be examined as it unfolds during instructional activities. Future research could complement self-report measures with observational or process-based methods to provide a more fine-grained account of learner engagement (Sulis 2022).

Despite these limitations, the present study provides empirical evidence that construction-based instruction can support both sentence-level L2 production and learner engagement in Korean middle school EFL classrooms. By demonstrating how grammatical form and meaning can be integrated in classroom instruction, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about grammar teaching approaches that align more closely with communicative goals in secondary education.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Secondary

Appendix A

Descriptive Statistics of Learner Engagement and Questionnaire

1. Affective Engagement	Experimental	Control	Difference
1-1. I found the grammar instruction and class activities enjoyable.	4.09	3.85	0.24
1-2. The lesson increased my confidence in English sentence production.	4.08	3.60	0.48
1-3. I felt motivated to complete the assigned sentence production task.	4.17	3.71	0.46
1-4. The lesson content and example sentences were interesting.	3.88	3.65	0.23
1-5. The lesson made it easier and less stressful to write sentences in English.	4.00	3.69	0.31
Total	4.04	3.70	0.34
2. Behavioral Engagement	Experimental	Control	Difference
2-1. I actively participated in the class activities and tasks during the lesson.	3.83	3.42	0.41
2-2. I submitted the assigned homework within the due date.	3.78	3.80	-0.02
2-3. I completed all required activities during the lesson.	4.13	3.49	0.64
2-4. I paid close attention to the teacher's explanations and example sentences.	4.22	3.54	0.68
2-5. I spent extra time preparing for the lesson.	4.04	3.60	0.44
Total	4.00	3.57	0.43
3. Cognitive Engagement	Experimental	Control	Difference
3-1. I tried to apply the grammar knowledge learned in the lesson in sentence production.	3.96	3.40	0.56
3-2. I made an effort to produce sentence forms accurately.	3.74	3.77	-0.03
3-3. I carefully considered whether the sentence structure was being used appropriately.	3.83	3.60	0.23
3-4. I tried to connect what I learned in the lesson with grammar I already knew.	4.00	3.54	0.46
3-5. I made an effort to produce sentences that convey appropriate meaning.	3.96	3.54	0.42
Total	3.90	3.57	0.33
4. Open-ended Questions			
4-1. Please describe which part of the instruction you found most helpful or interesting.			
4-2. Please describe any part of lesson that you found difficult or unhelpful, and explain why.			

Appendix B

Categorization of Open-Ended Responses (Experimental Group)

Categorization	Student Responses
Increased Motivation and Interest	"Seeing what was happening and describing it was interesting." "I became more interested in grammar as I realized that grammar knowledge helps me produce sentences."
Use of Construction Knowledge	"Understanding the constructions and how they are connected in meaning helped me write sentences more easily, instead of just memorizing them."
Reduced difficulty in Sentence Production	"Understanding the meanings of sentence components made it easier to write a sentence," "Now I can write down actual situations more easily."
Increased Participation in Learning Activities	"I paid closer attention and tried to complete all the activities during the lesson," "Since the sentences were easier to understand, I found myself working harder during each task."

Appendix C

Construction-Specific Mean Scores for Two Written Production Tasks

Sentence Translation							
Group	Time	CM	D	IM	IR	T	TR
Experimental	Pre	2.35	2.48	2.13	2.00	2.52	2.09
	Post	2.96	3.43	3.61	3.09	3.70	3.13
	Gain	0.61	0.95	1.48	1.09	1.18	1.04
Control	Pre	2.25	2.35	2.20	1.80	2.50	2.10
	Post	2.70	2.95	3.20	2.45	3.50	2.70
	Gain	0.45	0.60	1.00	0.65	1.00	0.60
Guided Writing							
Group	Time	CM	D	IM	IR	T	TR
Experimental	Pre	1.52	1.35	1.65	1.00	1.70	1.35
	Post	2.52	2.39	2.74	2.35	2.96	2.65
	Gain	1.00	1.04	1.09	1.35	1.26	1.30
Control	Pre	1.45	1.35	1.55	0.85	1.55	1.10
	Post	2.00	2.05	2.10	1.50	2.55	1.50
	Gain	0.55	0.70	0.55	0.65	1.00	0.40

Note. CM = Caused-motion; D = Ditransitive; IM = Intransitive Motion; IR = Intransitive Resultative; T = Transitive; TR = Transitive Resultative; gain scores were calculated by subtracting pretest means from posttest means for each construction and task.

