

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This chapter first gives a brief summary of the present study, then considers pedagogical implications of the research findings, and finally discusses experimental limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

5.1 Summary of the Present Study

The present study examines the use of RCs by 120 Taiwanese EFL learners of senior high school, categorized into two groups based on average years of English study (i.e. first- and third-graders), in an RC judgment test, a context translation test, and a passage-rewriting test.

As shown in the review of previous literature, although the acquisition of English RCs has been an object of study for a long time, most SLA researchers have concerned themselves with restrictive RCs only and, above all, have taken a purely structural stance (as opposed to a functional one) on RC acquisition, with their attention revolving around such phenomena as L1 interference and universal factors. To extend the line of RC research, this study aims at investigating the following three issues concerning how Taiwanese EFL learners use RCs: (1) their acquisition of non-restrictive RCs; (2) their ability to employ RCs in different pragmatic/discourse contexts for identifying, characterizing, presenting, and interpolating; and (3) their ability to utilize RCs in written discourse for backgrounding supportive materials.

The following are the major findings from the three elicitation tasks.

First of all, the subjects' acquisition of NRRCs was found to be flawed with two inadequacies—an absence of a well-drawn distinction between RRCs and NRRCs in their mental grammar of English RCs, and a lack of a full understanding of when to use NRRCs—respectively manifesting themselves in the subjects' tendency to overuse RRCs in most contexts and to confine the use of NRRCs to uniqueness-referring NPs in particular. The two deficiencies in the subjects' acquisition of NRRCs are expounded in terms of L1 transfer, cognitive complexity, input frequency, and instructional effects.

In the second place, the subjects were observed to make little use of RCs in presentative and parenthetical contexts, for which they tended to employ independent clauses. The results are not only ascribable to the failure by EFL instruction to adopt a discourse-based approach to grammar teaching and to accentuate the communicative context for using NRRCs, but also suggestive of a lack of awareness of pragmatic differences between Chinese and English in their preferred structure for a given context. The subjects also exhibited a tendency to misuse *the* with RCs in a characterizing context; this tendency may be explained by false instruction and input of RC types.

As regards discourse grounding, the subjects performed fairly well in utilizing

RCs in writing to background secondary idea units. Besides years of learning, another factor interacting with the extent of their RC use was the propensity to use *and*- or *because*-clauses to package information. The inclination can be seen as a corollary of inappropriate transfer of oral clause-combining strategies into written registers.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study—which identify some problems in Taiwanese EFL learners' use of RCs, including their overuse of RRCs, limited use of NRRCs, underuse of presentative RCs and parenthetical RCs, misuse of *the* with characterizing RCs, and overuse of oral clause-linking strategies in place of RCs—all underline the need for language teaching to take a broader view of grammar which accounts for not only form (i.e. how a grammatical structure is formed) but also use (i.e. why and when it is used). As argued by Larsen-Freeman (2001: 252), grammar should best be defined in a way that takes into consideration both the structure of the target language and its communicative use:

Since our goal is to achieve a better fit between grammar and communication, it is not helpful to think of grammar as a discrete set of meaningless, decontextualized, static structures. Nor is it helpful to think of grammar solely as prescriptive rules about linguistic form, such as injunctions against splitting infinitives or ending sentences with prepositions. Grammatical structures not only have form (morphosyntactic), they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate use (pragmatics)....

Accordingly, language teachers cannot be content with having helped learners achieve

a certain degree of formal accuracy; rather, they should further assist learners in using the target structure meaningfully and appropriately. To make a successful transition from form-focused to use-oriented instruction, language teachers would have to adopt a context-based approach to grammar pedagogy. The following are some context-driven teaching principles that aim to effectively inform L2 learners of how to use English RCs.

Utilize context-embedded examples to facilitate learners' understanding of how NRRCs are used in accordance with context. As contended in the study, the key to enabling learners to well distinguish NRRCs from RRCs and to properly employ NRRCs where necessary is sensitizing them to the close relationship between NRRCs and referential accessibility. To do that, teachers may at the outset explain to learners the notion of referential accessibility, for example, by contrasting the referential status of head NPs between RRCs and NRRCs. Then, teachers can enumerate examples of various non-restrictive NP contexts (such as those used in the RC judgment test), and ask learners, in pairs or groups, to justify the preference for NRRCs over RRCs in these examples by citing relevant contextual information to demonstrate how context renders these NPs readily identifiable and warrants the use of NRRCs. By doing so, learners can gradually grasp the seemingly elusive concept of referential accessibility, and better anchor the use of NRRCs in the referential

status of antecedents, rather than particular NP contexts.

Exploit authentic texts as an ideal medium for promoting learners' awareness of the presentative and parenthetical use of RCs. In attempting to acquaint learners with RC functions, teachers would be well served by focusing RCs at the suprasentential level, i.e. within a meaning-loaded discourse context (Chen, 2004). As such, the optimal occasion for teaching RC functions is not in the grammatical presentation of RCs but during reading, in which learners very often stumble across presentative RCs and parenthetical RCs. As an illustration, consider (90), a reading passage containing an RC as a topic-presenting device:

- (90) Scientists also face challenges that arise from cloning recently extinct animals. For one, a clone must have a substitute mother. The young animal does not have to grow inside an animal of its own species, but the mother's species must be similar to that of the cloned animal. An ox, for example, could have a cow for a mother, but definitely not a monkey. What about an animal as unique as the panda? What species could possibly serve as a substitute mother for China's endangered panda? Scientists are pondering that question right now.

--"Someone Help! I'm Extinct"

(from Sanmin English Textbook of Senior High School)

Teachers can have learners first read only the topic sentence, next make predictions about what the main topic of the passage should be and what will be talked about in the remaining sentences, and then read on and discuss how the topic sentence is related to the content of the whole paragraph. At the end of the discussion, teachers can draw learners' attention to how the RC used in the thesis statement helps present

the discourse topic *challenges* by pointing out two facts: (1) that the RC increases the prominence (i.e. topicality) of the NP *challenges* by furnishing it with a salient initial representation; and (2) that the RC also leads to the development of the topic *challenges* by coding information about it that is about to be elaborated in the subsequent discourse. Furthermore, teachers can suggest to learners how they can apply to reading and writing RCs occurring in the beginning of a discourse unit: in reading, such RCs can be used as a vehicle for anticipating the topic and content of a given passage; in writing, such RCs, often with existential *there* or presentative verbs, can be used as a rhetorical means of topic construction in discourse development. Likewise, a reading passage like (91) may be exploited to illustrate the use of RCs as an information-adding interpolator:

(91) In addition to Snoopy, Charles Brown and Lucy, the “Peanuts” gang includes many other characters, each with his or her own distinctive and charming traits. There are Lucy’s brother Linus, who is always holding onto his “security blanket,” Peppermint Patty, who gets a D-minus on every test, Patty’s friend Marcie, who calls everyone “Sir,” and many others. Perhaps what is most charming about them is that they all have faults and yet they all seem to accept each other as is—and they seem to accept themselves as well. It’s no wonder that we have also accepted them as our friends for so many years

--“Peanuts”

(from Far East English Textbook of Senior High School)

Learners can be directed to read text (91) in two times— first, in its entirety, and then, with the exclusion of its NRRCs. After that, they are to discuss the function of these NRRCs by focusing on such questions as “Is there any difference between the two

readings in your understating of the text?” “Does the absence of the NRRCs detract from your comprehension of the text?” and “Why does the author want to provide those pieces of information coded in the NRRCs?” Finally, accounts are given of the parenthetical nature of these NRRCs in relation to information needs (perhaps through paraphrasing with independent clauses in parentheses), and so are practical applications of NRRCs in reading and writing: in reading, learners can draw on NRRCs for additional information to arrive at a better understanding of a text (especially technical terms in it); in writing, learners can avail themselves of NRRCs in place of independent clauses to *throw in* secondary but relevant information while at the same time maintaining discourse unity and coherence.

Employ context-rich activities to help learners further differentiate between identifying RCs and characterizing RCs. To enable learners to make a proper distinction between two functional subtypes of RRCs, i.e. RRCs that identify definite NPs as known entities and RRCs that characterize indefinite NPs as particular types, teachers can use such communicative activities as picture-cued questions or definition questions. In picture-cued questions, learners look at a picture featuring people of different walks of life, and use RRCs to pinpoint a person of a particular work field by portraying how he/she is dressed (e.g. T: Could you tell me which person is a janitor? S: The man who is wearing a T-shirt and brown shorts is a janitor.). In definition

questions, learners take turns using RRCs to give definitions of objects and guessing what the object in question is (e.g. S1: It is an instrument which we can use to measure temperature. What is it? S2: A thermometer.). By putting the use of RRCs in context, teachers may be in a better position to mitigate learners' tendency to misuse the definite article *the* with RRCs in a characterizing context.

Make good use of sentence-combining to enhance learners' facility with RCs in discourse grounding. Sentence-combining can be extremely useful for guided practice in developing linguistic resources for highlighting key information and subordinating minor information in writing, as well as producing specific grammatical structures (Frodesen, 2001: 241). This is commonly accomplished in the form of text conversion. Using a modified version of a short passage, like the one used in the present study, teachers can have learners rewrite those pragmatic mismatches by packaging its ideas units with such appropriate structures as RCs. Alternatively, an excerpt from students' writing drafts, like (92) below, can be used for learners to revise areas where further clausal integration can achieve a better flow of information through clearer connections between ideas:

(92) It was a warm day, and we were feeling like nothing could happen to us because we were young, and everything looked so beautiful in the mountains, and we went to pick up my brother because he was coming with us. We began our bicycle trip from my brother's house, and he lived not so far from the mountains, and so we rode directly in the direction of the mountains, and we felt the warm breeze on our faces and bodies, and after

about one half-hour we reached the mountains, and it was cooler there....

(from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 487)

In (92), the underlined sequences may well be revised with RCs, respectively as *we went to pick up my brother, who was coming with us, We began our bicycle trip from my brother's house, which was not far from the mountains, and we reached the mountains, where it was cooler.* With excerpt (92), teachers can easily bring it home to learners that their repeated use of such oral conjunction strategies as *and* and *because* for stringing multiple clauses does not produce normal-sounding prose, and that there are other cohesive devices than *and* and *because* which they can use to express their thoughts more specifically and effectively.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to some limitations, there are important aspects of RC use that are not explored in the present study. For example, the study has concentrated on particular types of RCs. For the sake of research focus, the scope of the study is confined to those prototypical, fully-fledged RCs. Other possible RC types, such as adverb RCs, reduced RCs, free RCs, cleft RCs, and non-finite RCs, are not considered. The issue may well warrant investigation of how these *variant* types of RCs are used by L2 learners and what problems they may present to L2 learners in the acquisition.

Moreover, the study has observed the use of NRRCs solely in a written context.

The researcher is concerned primarily with how competent learners are to correctly

and appropriately employ NRRCs in written English, based on their performance in two paper-and-pencil tests, i.e. an RC judgment test and a context translation test. However, since NRRCs, especially those with sentential antecedents, are as commonly, if not more frequently, used in spoken English, it is worthy of further research whether L2 learners can effectively draw on NRRCs in interpersonal conversations as a communicative strategy for providing an elaboration or explanation, expressing an attitude or opinion, or giving a confirmation.

Another limitation relates to the weaknesses of elicitation instruments used for examining the acquisition of RC functions. For such RC functions as identifying, characterizing, presenting, and interpolating, the study adopts a context translation test. Although the test additionally provides contextual information to help the subjects focus more on finding the appropriate structural counterpart in English for a given context, its nature of translation and use of Chinese in the creation of a context are very likely to prompt some subjects to simply give a literal, word-by-word English rendition of Chinese as in a traditional context-reduced translation exercise, and to make them more susceptible to the influence of Chinese, especially when considering structural equivalents in English for presentative and parenthetical contexts. As for the backgrounding function, the study employs a passage-rewriting test. However instrumental in offering a quick glimpse of their ability to properly use RCs for

integrating idea units in writing, the test imposes a great deal of control on the subjects regarding what they should write and this inevitably raises some doubts as to whether its results can be extrapolated to a real writing context where one can decide not only how but also what to write. Moreover, the RC type targeted in the passage-rewriting test may even cast doubt on the validity of the results. The test elicits only the OS type, namely, right-embedded RCs with subject relative markers, which, according to the Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis and the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hypothesis, is the easiest of all RC types. The relative ease of producing this RC type may have contributed to the subjects' frequent use of RCs (56.67% to 80.83%, as indicated in Table 17) in packaging non-essential information in their rewriting. With the foregoing experimental weaknesses, the study has only been able to scrutinize L2 learners' RC use in a stimulated and controlled mode of language performance. In view of potential test effects, further research is called for which utilizes more spontaneous and productive test methods, for example, composition tests with writing prompts, to shed light on L2 learners' competence in using RCs in a more natural, communicative context for a variety of pragmatic/discourse functions.