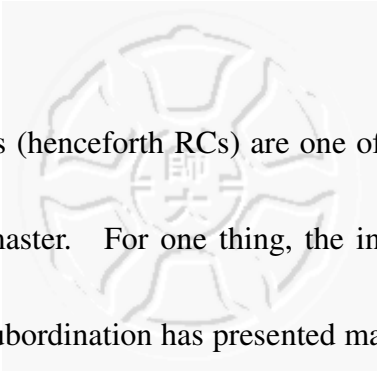


Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Motivation



English relative clauses (henceforth RCs) are one of the most difficult grammar targets for L2 learners to master. For one thing, the internal structural complexity ascribed to their nature of subordination has presented many formidable challenges of form (Sadighi, 1994: 141). L2 learners have to acquire knowledge of where to place an RC in relation to the head NP and how to choose an appropriate relative marker with reference to the case role and animacy of the antecedent. Moreover, they need to cope with the syntactic diversity of RCs in English (at least 40 different types, as claimed by Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 579) and process the anaphoric relationship between the relative marker in the embedded clause and its co-referent NP in the matrix clause. Such syntactic complexities may lead to the late development of RC formation not only in first language acquisition but also in second language acquisition (SLA) (Schumann, 1980).

Further compounding structural difficulties is L2 learners' native background. If their RC formation in L1 is grossly different from that in English, they would be more susceptible to L1 interference and thus need to make more efforts than normally required to adjust and approximate their inter-language system to the target system of English (Wei, 1997; Chan, 2004a, b).

Difficulties also arise from the subtle difference between restrictive and non-restrictive RCs in English. L2 learners, even with a high level of proficiency, often have considerable trouble distinguishing between restrictive RCs, which serve to delimit the domain of reference, and non-restrictive RCs, which serve to provide additional information (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 604). Accordingly, they tend to overgeneralize the use of restrictive RCs to contexts where non-restrictive RCs should be much preferred, making such “fallacious” sentences as (1), where the restrictive RC differentiates the father working in Taipei from the others working elsewhere:

(1) ?My father *who works in Taipei* is going to retire next week.

Sentence (1) is pragmatically anomalous in the sense that normally, everyone should have only one biological father. Hence, it should have been written as *My father, who works in Taipei, is going to retire next week*, where the non-restrictive RC does not specify a particular father from a group of possible referents, but merely elaborates on the referentially accessible NP *my father*.

Finally, it may be difficult for L2 learners to achieve mastery of the pragmatic/discourse functions of English RCs. Exposed to the context-reduced, mechanical drill of sentence-combining (or “the linear teaching method,” as termed by Nakamori, 2002: 30), L2 learners generally have a hard time perceiving how RCs

are employed in different contexts to perform such functions as identifying, characterizing, presenting, interpolating, and backgrounding. As their L2 proficiency increases, they may have little difficulty “constructing” an RC grammatically, but may still encounter great difficulty “using” it appropriately in context. Consider the following passage in (2), written by a Taiwanese college freshman:

- (2) 1 Last Mid-autumn Festival, I got together with my family in the night.
2 We sat in the front yard appreciating the clear moon. 3 We all ate lots of delicious mooncakes. 4 We also ate some peanuts. 5 Peanuts represent for foreverness. 6 After eating, brother and I went to set off the beautiful fireworks. 7 Setting off the fireworks makes us cheerful and excited....

(from Chang, 1997: 80)

As suggested by Chang (1997), because sentences 5 and 7 are not crucial to the development of the main ideas that the student wants to express and because they merely supply extra information, they should be subordinated to their preceding sentences as non-restrictive RCs—respectively as *We also ate some peanuts, which represent eternity* and *After eating, my brother and I went out to set off fireworks, whose beauty made us cheerful and excited*. What the passage shows is that in the absence of a full understanding of the functional aspects of RCs, L2 learners are very likely to subconsciously underproduce RCs where they should in effect be used for pragmatic/discourse as well as stylistic considerations (Li, 1996)—in this example, for “backgrounding supportive materials” and “interpolating parenthetical assertions.”

In the light of these various sources of difficulties afflicting L2 learners, research on the acquisition of English RCs is warranted to inform language teachers of learners' common problems with RCs so that they will be in a better position to direct their instruction toward addressing learners' needs and facilitating their RC acquisition.

1.2 Significance of the Present Study

Over the past decades, quite a number of researchers in language acquisition have been interested in the study of English RCs among L2 learners. However, the vast majority of previous RC studies have been conducted in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts (e.g. Cook, 1973; Schachter, 1974; Schachter et al., 1976; Ioup & Kruse, 1977; Gass, 1979,1980; Schumann, 1980; Gass & Ard, 1984; Yip, 1991; Wolfe-Quintero, 1992; Sadighi, 1994; Flanigan, 1995; Gisborne, 2000; Yin, 2001; Izumi, 2003; Chan, 2004a, b), whereas little is known about RC acquisition in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. Furthermore, these studies tend to be concerned only with restrictive RCs to the exclusion of non-restrictive RCs. More importantly, their research focus has long been on the syntactic aspects of RC acquisition, in terms of either L1 interference, i.e. structural transfer caused by cross-linguistic differences (e.g. Schachter, 1974; Schachter et al., 1976; Wei, 1997; Gisborne, 2000; Yin, 2001; Chan, 2004a, b) or universal factors, i.e. structural

difficulties caused by processing problems (e.g. Cook, 1973; Ioup & Kruse, 1977; Gass, 1979,1980; Schumann, 1980; Gass & Ard, 1984; Yip, 1991; Wolfe-Quintero, 1992; Kutoba, 1993; Sadighi, 1994; Flanigan, 1995; Izumi, 2003). Comparatively few attempts have hitherto been made to delve into L2 learners' RC acquisition from a functional perspective—namely, how L2 learners acquire English RCs with respect to their pragmatic/discourse functions.

The present study is intended as a preliminary investigation into the use of English RCs by Taiwanese EFL learners of senior high school, with an attempt to extend the line of previous research by (1) examining L2 learners' acquisition of non-restrictive RCs; and (2) exploring their use of RCs for such functions as identifying, characterizing, presenting, interpolating, and backgrounding. It is hoped that the results yielded can offer insightful pedagogical implications for language teachers and textbook writers alike regarding how to effectively assist L2 learners in mastering English RCs.