

Relative pronoun in the acquisition of English relative clauses by Chinese EFL learners

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the properties of relative pronouns in the acquisition of relative clause by Chinese EFL learners. Based on the NPAH (noun phrase accessibility hierarchy), comparison and contrast of some aspects of English and Chinese relative pronoun, the paper conducts two experiments, and has proved the hypotheses that students’ performance generally follows the hierarchy of NPAH and students do have problems with relative pronoun involving prepositions. Besides, some pedagogical implications for foreign language teaching are discussed.

Key words: relative pronoun; NPAH; relative clause

1. Introduction

The importance of English relative clause for Chinese learners has been clearly pointed out by Celce-Murcia and Larsen- Freeman (1999), who stated that the acquisition of relative clause is important because of its high frequency in both spoken and written form, its complex form and function. Obviously, Chinese EFL learners face no easy task of learning English relative clauses, with problems arising from the complex syntactic structure of the relative clause itself, differences between Chinese and English in terms of prenominal vs. postnominal RC, and placement of the RC in relation to the head and gap strategies, etc. This study focuses on relative pronoun, a crucial feature that needs to be addressed in L2 learner’s acquisition process, also a crucial factor that may obstruct learners’ acquisition process.

2. Introduction of noun phrase accessibility hierarchy (NPAH)

NPAH, which is a typological universal in relative clause acquisition, was proposed by Keenan and Comrie in 1977. They hypothesized there is an acquisition order of relative clauses. This hierarchy is SU>DO>IO>OBL>GEN>OCOMP (>= more accessible than). Table 1 below is examples of NPAH.

Table 1 Examples of NPAH

(1) the man who met the girl	(SU)	(2) the man that the girl met	(DO)
(3) the man that the girl gave a book to	(IO)	(4) the desk that the girl put a book on	(OBL)
(5) the man whose book the girl took	(GEN)	(6) the man that the girl is taller than	(OCOMP)

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According to NPAH, the lower position on the hierarchy, the more difficulties learners will encounter in the acquisition process. Therefore, it can be assumed that learners may encounter more difficulty with relative pronoun lower down in the object of comparative relatives. Table 2 below shows the relative pronoun used in different positions of NPAH:

Table 2 Relative pronoun used in different positions of NPAH

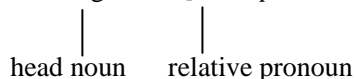
NPAH	SU	DO	IO	Oblique	Genitive	Ocomp
RP used	Who, that, which	Who, whom, that, which, Ø	Whom, that, which, Ø	Whom, that, which, Ø	Whose	Whom, that, which, Ø

3. Comparison and contrast between relative pronoun in English and Chinese

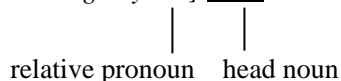
3.1 Comparison and contrast of the position of relative pronoun

In English, relative pronoun is variant, which always precedes relative clause and follows the head noun phrase, in contrast, Chinese relative marker “de” always follows relative clause and precedes head noun, as example (7) shows.

(7) a. I know the girl [*who speaks French*]



b. [*xiaoming mai de*] shu you yisi
 [*xiaoming buy DE*] book have interesting



The books which xiaoming bought are interesting.

3.2 Comparison and contrast of the functions of relative pronoun

English relative pronoun is characterized by Paris (1976) as morphemes which stand for nouns and vary morphologically in accordance with the function the noun which is relativized in the relative clause. When a relative pronoun is in the objective case, it can be optionally deleted. English relative pronoun also has the connective function and it also serves the function of narrowing down the possible role that the relativized noun phrase plays in the relative clause. However, Chinese relative clauses do not contain relative pronouns, but use an invariant relative marker “de” (TANG, 1979). In addition, the use of the relative marker is obligatory, not optional as English relative clauses are, as example (8) shows:

(8) Wo xihuan ec/ta de neige nuhai.
 I like ec/ta DE the girl

The girl whom I like

3.3 Comparison of pied piping and prepositional stranding in Chinese and English RCs

English relative clause have stranded preposition marking an IO or Oblique position in a clause. Both pied piping and prepositional stranding can be used in English RCs. Example (9) a is an example of prepositional stranding and example (9) b pied piping.

(9) a. This is the boy “whom” I spoke “with” yesterday.

b. This is the boy “with whom” I spoke yesterday.

In Chinese, prepositions always precede relative clause marker “de” and prepositional phrases don’t always follow verb in the relative clause, so, there is normally no prepositional stranding in Chinese RCs.

(10) Zhe shi wo zuotian he ta shuohua de nage nanhai.
 This is I yesterday with he spoke DE CL boy

这是我昨天和他说话的那个男孩。

As example (10) shows, preposition “he” precedes the relative marker “de”, and it does not follow the verb “shuohua” in the relative clause, which is very different from English relative clause in terms of prepositional stranding. It can be assumed that Chinese learners may encounter difficulty when prepositional phrase occurs in relative clause.

4. Research questions and task

Based on the NPAH proposed by Keenan and Comrie’s concerning the acquisition of relative clause, and the comparison and contrast of some aspects of English and Chinese relative pronoun, the study comes up with two research questions: Is the incorrect usage of relative pronoun following the hierarchy of NPAH; Is relative pronoun in IO and Oblique relatives involving prepositions most problematic for Chinese EFL learners?

4.1 Subjects

The subjects of sentence combination task are forty Chinese first-year university students whose English proficiency levels are roughly the same, since relative clause is a complex construction that generally appears late in learners’ language development and university students were supposed to have learned and mastered this target structures in high schools.

4.2 Methods

There are two approaches in the study. The first is sentence combination task, which is used to test learners’ language performance. This section contains 12 sentences in which six types of RCs as appeared on the NPAH. Besides, prepositional phrases were also included to test the hypotheses. Picture elicitation task, which is to test learners’ intuition, is also designed targeted at six types of relatives in NPAH. Each picture has some descriptions and a question to be asked. The subjects are expected to answer each question by using a relative clause.

5. Findings

5.1 Results of sentence combination task

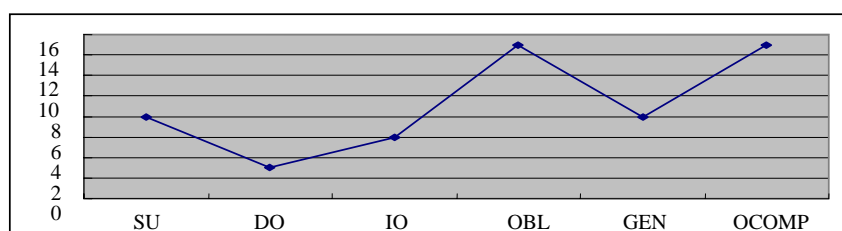


Figure 1 Number of incorrect usages of relative pronoun in sentence combination task

5.2 Analysis of sentence combination task

As the Figure 1 indicates, the number of incorrect usage of relative pronoun generally follows the hierarchy of NPAH. Students’ errors in OCOMP confirm the prediction that most relative pronoun errors occur in OCOMP. However, it is unexpected that they make many errors in subject relatives. By analyzing the sentences produced, the main reason is that they fail to make distinctions of animate and inanimate head noun, leading to the incorrect usage of relative pronoun. Besides, errors made in oblique relatives outnumbering genitive relatives are also worth noticing. The possible reason is that “whose”, as a unique relative pronoun for genitive, is easy to acquire if learners can figure out the possessive relationship between head NP and subject of relative clause. Though the comparatively more errors in oblique relative are not in full support with the first prediction, it supports the

second prediction.

The result also shows students do make many errors with relative pronouns in oblique and indirect object, especially in oblique relatives. They sometimes omit prepositions, like: “The bed which the baby slept is expensive”; wrongly positioned relative pronouns like “The bed is expensive which the baby slept in”; or passivized the oblique into subject relative like “the baby slept in bed which is expensive”; and they also use the wrong relative pronoun following the preposition like “Alice interviewed the taxi driver to who policeman gave a ticket”. The result also shows 13 out of 15 errors of relative pronouns in oblique and 5 out 6 in indirect object relatives involve prepositions. These illustrations and statistic analysis are in full support of the second hypothesis.

5.3 Results of picture elicitation task

Six CUHK postgraduate students have been tested in picture elicitation task. The Figure 2 below is the result of this task. The Figure 2 shows the number of incorrect relative pronoun produced generally follows the hierarchy of NPAH, and students do have problems with prepositions in IO and Oblique relatives. Since the number of participant is far from enough, the study only concentrates on the analysis of result of sentence combination task. Picture elicitation task is used as reference and its design will be improved for further study in relative clause.

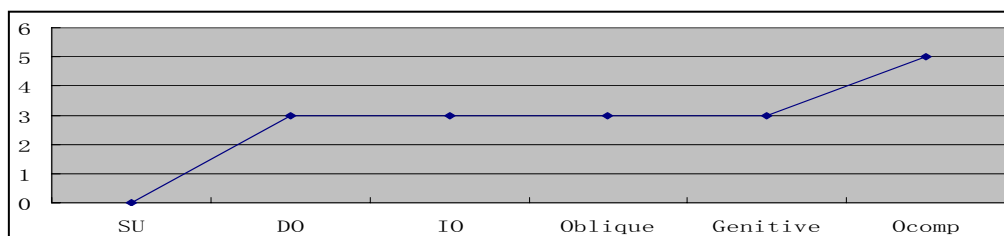


Figure 2 Number of incorrect usages of relative pronoun in picture elicitation task

6. Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that Chinese students do have problems in determining which relative pronoun to use. Chinese students' incorrect use of relative pronoun is due to the complex structure of English relative clause and the distinctions between English and Chinese relative pronoun. The experiment also proves that students' performance generally follows the hierarchy of NPAH with all types of errors concerned and students do have problems with relative clause involving prepositions. The result also implies that NPAH is a universal phenomenon, but there is still some influence from L1 interference in the acquisition process. This finding will give some hints to language teaching and will make language teaching and learning more effective.

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