

English Restrictive Relative Clauses in Chinese Learners' Writing

Query Syntax Design, Learner Preferences and Typical Errors in Learner Corpora

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Fangzhou Zhu

Department of Linguistics and English Language (LAEL)

Lancaster University, UK

f.zhu@lancaster.ac.uk

Linguistics and
English Language



Abstract

One of the most difficult syntactic structures to learn in English is the relative clause, thus exploring its appropriate use and typical errors has huge benefits for improving learners language proficiency.

This study used the Longman Learner Corpus as the source of data, with carefully designed syntax queries that previous studies seldom illustrated, to search and analyse the distribution and errors of restrictive relative clauses in English (RRC). It reveals that Chinese learners use more subjective relative clauses than any other types, while the adverbial relative clauses are less frequently used. Error analysis found that the misuse of relative markers, the verb agreement with head noun number and tense, the redundant pronoun or adverb are the main errors among Chinese learners.

Research Questions

1. Do Chinese learners have any preferences when using restrictive relative clauses in English? If so, what types of restrictive relative clauses do they use most/least frequently?
2. What are the typical errors that Chinese learners often make in producing restrictive relative clauses in English writing?

Methods

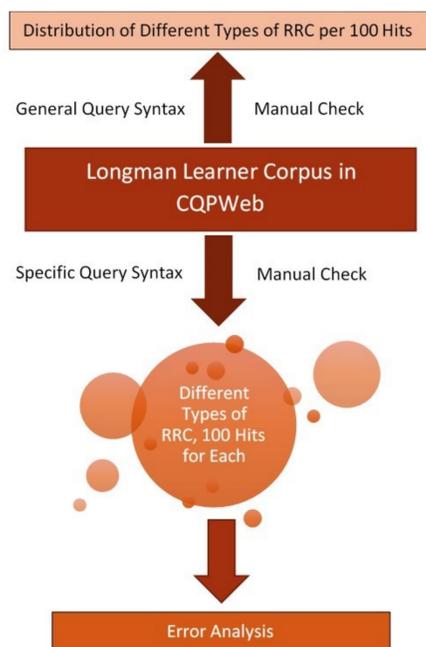


Figure 1: Research Procedures

Query Syntax Design

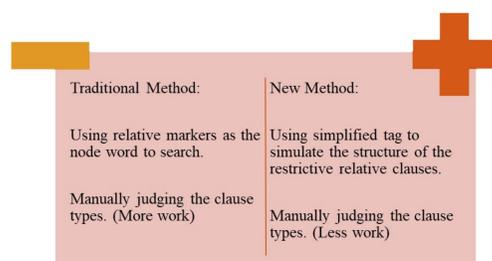


Figure 2: Comparison of Search Strategies

1) General query for all types of RRC

```
(_{N}|_{PRON}) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{PREP})?
(who|whom|which|that|whose|where|when|why) ((_{ART})? (_{ADV})* (_{A})*
(_{N})+| (_{PRON}) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{ADV})* (_{V})
```

2) As the subject of clause

```
(_{N}|_{PRON}) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (who|that|which) (_{ADV})* (_{V})
```

3) As the object of clause

```
(_{N}|_{PRON}) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (who|that|whom|which) ((_{ART})? (_{ADV})* (_{A})*
(_{N})+| (_{PRON})+ (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{ADV})* (_{V})
```

4) As the object of preposition

```
((_{N})| (_{PRON})) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{PREP}) (whom|which)
```

5) Possessive

```
(_{N}|_{PRON}) (_{ADV})* (_{A})* whose ((_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{N})
```

6) Time, Place and Reason

```
(_{N}) (where|when|why) ((_{PRON})+ (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{ART})? (_{ADV})* (_{A})* (_{N})+
(_{ADV})* (_{V})
```

Figure 3: Query Syntaxes Used in This Study

Results

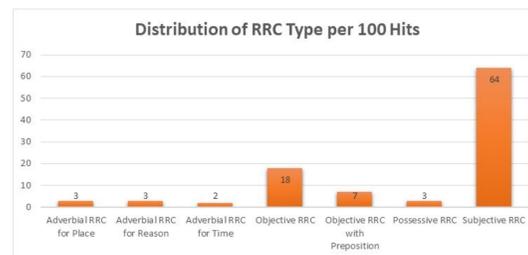


Figure 4: RRC Distribution

Nature of Typical Errors: the Function of Head-noun in RRC

Subject-Verb Mismatch

If the score is amounted to eighty, the side who get the score is a successful side.

Misuse of Relative Marker

...with the local and world news to adapt in the society which I live.

Redundant Pronoun or Adverb

If you want to be a person that everyone respect you, you must be honest.

I would pay a wonderful visit to the Lin Yin Temple where I could enjoy the exquisite ancient architecture there.

Conclusions and Implications

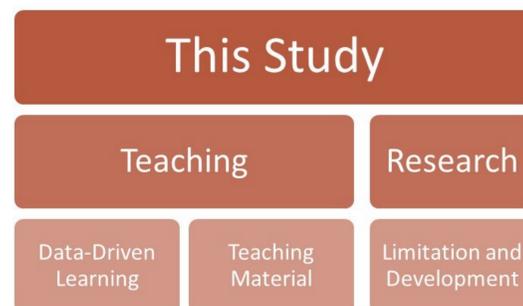


Figure 5: Potential Implications for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate Chinese learners preferences and errors of restrictive English relative clauses in essay writing. It revealed that Chinese learners use more subjective relative clauses than any other types, while the adverbial relative clauses are less frequently used in the context. Error analysis found that the misuse of relative markers, the verb agreement with head noun number and tense, redundant pronoun or adverb are the main errors occurred among Chinese learners, and most of them happened due to the lack of careful analysis on grammar function of head noun in the clauses and the negative transfer from first language. The solution for teachers is to ask students to think aloud about the role the head noun plays in the relative clause based on the its basic rules.