Interlingual Factors in Chinese College Students’ Acquisition of English Relative Clauses

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Abstract

The acquisition of English relative clauses has been studied from different angles by researchers. It is now generally acknowledged that the acquisition of relative clauses is determined by three factors: interlingual, intralingual and universal factors. This study aims to explore one of these factors—interlingual factors. On the basis of contrastive analysis of English and Chinese relative clause formation strategies, this study put forward three research questions and three corresponding hypotheses. With 112 Chinese college students as the subjects and three tasks (a composition task, a multiple choice test and a grammaticality judgment test) as the elicitation measures, this paper made a tentative study of English relative clause acquisition by Chinese college students from the aspect of interlingual factors. Careful analyses by means of the SPSS were made on the results of the study, and it was found that the Chinese college students underproduced English relative clauses and committed some errors related to interlingual factors in the use of relative clauses. In view of these findings, implications for teaching and further research were put forward.

Key words: interlingual factors; English relative clauses; Chinese college students; underproduction; errors

I. Introduction

The most frequently studied syntactic structure is the relative clause (RC). Schachter’s (1974) study found that in composition tasks Chinese learners made fewer mistakes in English relative clauses (RCs), and she discovered that the total number of RCs produced by them was also much smaller than that by other groups of subjects. Therefore, Schachter asserted that Chinese learners avoided using RCs because they had perceived the potential

Theoretically speaking, the term “avoidance” is problematic. The existence of avoidance as a strategy in second language acquisition is difficult to maintain…Avoidance is not available to learners either because the learners has not mastered the structure in question and thus any discussion of avoidance in this context is irrelevant, or the learner has mastered the target language structure and thus has no reason to avoid it (Touchie, 1983: 163-164).

So in this study, the term “underproduction” is used instead to generalize the phenomenon that ESL or EFL learners use certain English structure less frequently than native speakers do.

Avoidance can’t explain underproduction, nor can any other single factor. Just as Gass claimed, unifactor accounts were not sufficient in explaining the acquisition of English RCs by ESL learners. She suggested adopting a multifactor theory, which combined three factors: universal factors, specific facts about the learner’s native language, and specific facts about the target language (Gass, 1980: 140).

The researcher of this study has probed into the underproduction and errors of English relative clauses by Chinese college students from the aspects of interlingual factors, intralingual factors and universal factors. And the present paper mainly focuses on one of these factors—interlingual factors. “Errors caused by the interference of the learner’s mother tongue” are called “interlanguage errors” (Richards, 1971: 205).

A contrastive analysis of English and Chinese RCs will contribute to the discussion of interlingual factors.

II. Contrasts of English and Chinese RCF Strategies

The relative clause … “has some of the properties of a noun phrase consisting of head and postmodifying relative clause, the head and relative pronoun coalescing to form a single wh-element” (Quirk et al., 1985: 1047).

RELATIVE CLAUSES generally function as restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers of noun phrases and therefore functionally parallel to attributive adjectives…But they are positioned like postmodifying prepositional phrases (Quirk, et al., 1985: 1048).

According to Quirk et al., relative clauses have the following characteristics:

Part of the explicitness of relative clauses lies in the specifying power of the relative
pronoun. It may be capable of:

(i) showing concord with its antecedent, i.e. the preceding part of the noun phrase of which the relative clause is a postmodifier [external relation], and

(ii) indicating its function within the relative clause either as an element of clause structure (S,O,C, A) or as a constituent of an element in the relative clause [internal relation]. (1985:1245).

Keenan and Comrie’s (1977) study proposed several relative clause formation (RCF) strategies according to two independent parameters: the position of the head noun, and the presence or absence of a morpheme (preposition or pronoun). The RCF strategies include: adjacency to the head noun; retention or absence of the relative pronoun; position of the embedded clause as against the head noun; relative pronoun selection; case markings on the relative pronoun (variable vs. invariable marker); and preposition retention or absence.

Some RCF strategies in English and Chinese are different, as listed in the following.

First, English has postnominal (head-first) RCs while Chinese has prenominal (head-final) RCs. For instance, in English, people say “The pen [that I found] is his”, while in Chinese, the RC form should be “[我捡到的] 那支笔是他的”.

Second, English relative markers consist of relative pronouns (that, which, who, whom and whose) and relative adverbials (when, where and why). English relative pronouns are variable and the selection of the relative pronoun is based on the case of the relative pronoun in the embedded clause, as a subject, an object or a possessive, and also on the gender of the head noun, human or non-human. On the other hand, the relative marker in Chinese is invariable, with de as the only choice. What’s more, the relative pronoun in English is obligatory, with the only exception of the relative pronoun as the object in the embedded clause, which can be optionally omitted. In Chinese the relative pronoun de is always obligatory.

Third, the resumptive pronoun (pronominal reflex) is not permitted in English in any position on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) (cf. Keenan and Comrie, 1977), while in Chinese, it is optional in the position of direct object (DO), and it is obligatory in the positions of indirect object (IO), object of a preposition (OPREP), genitive (GEN) and object of a comparative (OCOMP). The resumptive pronoun refers to the appearance of a personal pronoun in the relativized position. “The resumptive pronoun serves… to identify the role of the nominal as copied by the wh relativizer into structure projected by the relative clause” (Cann, Kaplan & Kempson, 2005: 1555). Examples of English RCs and Chinese RCs in terms of the resumptive pronoun in different positions are given as follows:

1. In the subject position

[那个刚进来的]男孩是我的弟弟。
That boy [who has just come in] is my brother.

2. In the direct object position

[约翰打了(他)的]那个男孩子来了。
The boy [that John hit (him)] came.*
The boy that John hit came.

3. In the indirect object position

这是 [我给他书的] 那个学生。
This is the student [whom I gave the book to him]. *
This is the student to whom I gave the book.

4. In the object of a preposition position

[他用之写字的] 铅笔断了。
The pencil [which he wrote with it] is broken.*
The pencil (which) he wrote with is broken. or The pencil with which he wrote is broken.

5. In the genitive position

我已经见到了 [她妈妈是工程师的] 那个女孩。
I have already seen the girl [whose her mother is an engineer]. *
I have already seen the girl whose mother is an engineer.

6. In the object of a comparative position

我认识 [玛丽比他高的] 那个男孩。
I know the boy [whom Mary is taller than him]. *
I know the boy (whom/who) Mary is taller than.

Fourth, there are both restrictive relative clauses (RRs) and non-restrictive relative clauses (NRRs) in English. But in Chinese there are only RRs. So, English NRRs are usually translated into two independent Chinese sentences.

Fifth, RCs often occur in there-be and have-existential structures in English, but in Chinese it is the other case.

Li and Thompson (1981) put forward the idea that languages could be divided into two kinds: one was “topic-prominent” and the other was “subject-prominent” (457-489). Chinese belongs to the former, while English belongs to the latter. In the topic-prominent Chinese, the basic structure of a sentence reflects the relationship between the topic and the description of the topic rather than the relationship between the subject and the predicate (Xu, 2002: 293). Affected by their L1, Chinese students often produce ungrammatical sentences like (7):

7. There are so many Taiwan people ★ live around the lake.* (ibid.)

In this sentence, the learners may regard the part before “★” as the topic, and the part after “★” as the description of the topic, and take “there are/is” as the introductory words of the topic, which are equal to the Chinese word “you”. The production of (7) is influenced by the Chinese corresponding sentence (8) (ibid.).

8. 有许多台湾人住在湖边。 (ibid.)

But in the subject-prominent English, every sentence should have a surface subject, which may be referential or non-referential. “Dummy subjects”, which are non-referential empty words, mainly function as surface subjects (Zhu, 2007: 14). For example, in (7), “there”
is just a dummy subject without any reference, only to fill the position of the subject. However, in the topic-prominent Chinese, no dummy subject is needed, as in (9).

9. 有人正站在门口。  
A man is standing at the door. Or There is a man standing at the door.

In Chinese, there-be and have-existential structures often occur in this structure: (NP1) + V1 + NP2 + (XP) (ibid.). In this structure, NP1, which is a phrase of direction or position, can be omitted in the there-be structure, but in the have-existential structure, NP1 often occurs as the subject of the sentence. V1 is “you (有)” in Chinese, which is equal to “there be” in there-be structures or “have” in have-existential structures in English. NP2 is a noun phrase, which connects the two verbs both before and after it. XP is the structure which describes NP2. (10) and (11) are examples of the there-be and have-existential structures in Chinese and English.

10. (动物园里)有只猴子跑了。  
A monkey in the zoo fled. Or There was a monkey in the zoo which fled.
11. 我有个姐姐[住在上海]。  
I have a sister who lives in Shanghai.

As can be seen from (10) and (11), NP2 can function as the subject of XP as well as the object of V1 in Chinese, but in English, such a structure does not exist, and therefore a relative pronoun (“which” in (10) or “who” in (11)) is indispensable. This difference often poses great difficulties for Chinese learners in learning English RCs. Thus they often produce English RCs with there-be and have-existential structures in this wrong form: there-be + NP + V (as in (7)), or NP1+ have + NP2 + V (as in (12)), with the relative pronoun missing.

12. I have a sister lives in Shanghai.*

III. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Three research questions arise from the above comparison of English and Chinese RCF strategies. First, will Chinese college students underproduce English RCs due to the great differences? Second, will they underproduce NRRs? Third, will they commit any errors related to interlingual factors?

In response to the research questions and on the basis of the analysis of English and Chinese RCF strategies, three hypotheses may be put forward.

First, the Chinese college students may underproduce English RCs, as was found by many researchers such as Schachter (1974) and Zhao (1989). Though Schachter and Zhao attributed underproduction to different factors (avoidance, which was claimed by Schachter (1974), or transfer of the distribution frequency, functions and forms of Chinese
RCs, which was claimed by Zhao (1989), in fact both of them explored the issue from the same facet—interlingual factors, i.e., the influence of L1 on the acquisition of English RCs. Second, Chinese college students may underuse NRRs, for in Chinese there’s no NRR at all. Third, when using English RCs, Chinese college students may make many errors in such interlingual aspects as relative clause preposing, resumptive pronouns, absence of relative pronoun, and using a personal pronoun instead of the relative pronoun.

IV. Research Design

In this study, multiple measures were used in order to give a more reliable and complete account of the learners’ linguistic output. Three tasks were designed: a composition task, a multiple choice test and a grammaticality judgment test. The first one aimed to elicit information regarding the subjects’ productive knowledge, and the other two aimed to gain information regarding their receptive knowledge. The composition task was designed to investigate the subjects’ actual output of English RCs. The task was a timed composition with a given topic. The subjects were required to write a composition of about 400 to 500 words within 70 minutes. The topic of the composition was as follows:

Topic: Great inventions and discoveries of the 20th century and their impact on people’s lives (one per interview—computer, television, etc.) No reference tools are used. (cf. LOCNESS: Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays).

The multiple choice test (cf. Appendix 1) consisted of ten incomplete English RCs, each missing an element (except the first one) concerning the RCF.

The grammaticality judgment test (cf. Appendix 2) contained twenty English RCs, three grammatical and seventeen ungrammatical. The subjects were instructed to judge whether the sentences were right or wrong and to correct those which they considered as wrong.

The design of the two tests—the multiple choice and the grammaticality judgment was based on the one Touchie (1983) used to investigate the acquisition of English relative clauses by Arabic learners. Some modifications were made to the original design in order to suit the Chinese learners’ situation and the purpose of the present research. The multiple choice test in Touchie’s study consisted of twelve RCs, but in this study, two of them were deleted, because one aimed to test the subject-verb agreement, which was not the focus of the present study, and the other aimed to test the relative pronoun morphology and presence, which were already tested in other sentences in this study. As for the grammaticality judgment test in Touchie’s study, which was made up of twenty-four RCs, the following modifications were made in this study. First, four RCs were deleted, for they aimed to test errors which were typical for Arabic learners but were not for Chinese learners. The four categories of errors are listed as follows:

a. Repetition of the identical NP
   eg. The knife he cut with the knife is sharp.*
b. Shifting of the subject of the relative clause
   eg. This is the boy what rides.*

   c. Use of the definite article instead of the relative pronoun
      eg. The man the came here is rich.*

   d. Use of a preposition immediately after a relative pronoun
      eg. The boy whom to I sent a letter is Ali.* (Touchie, 1983: 100-101)

The second modification was to delete an RC with the subject-verb agreement error, which was not the focus of the present study. Third, a there-be structure containing an RC was added to the test, for it was assumed that Chinese learners may have difficulties in this structure.

And following a pilot study, which was carried out to ensure the validity and reliability of the tests, some further revisions were made to the design. In the grammaticality judgment test, several sentences (such as Sentence 10, 13, 14, 16 and 18) were judged as wrong by some subjects due to the disagreement in the tenses between the matrix clause and the embedded clause, so the tenses were changed into the same inside each sentence so that no distraction existed in this aspect.

The three tasks were given in two separate class sessions, the composition in one session and the other two in the other. The composition task was administered first so that the subjects could get no hint at all about the use of RCs from the other tests. Then some days later, the other two tests were given to the subjects in one class session of 30 minutes. The order of the two tests in the test paper was arranged so that the multiple choice test was put first and the grammaticality judgment test second. The subjects were allowed to ask questions about the requirements of the tests and were told to answer all the items in the test paper. During and immediately after the tests, the supervisors examined each subject’s test paper to ensure that no item was left unfinished.

Criteria for right and wrong in the tests were made by the researcher of the study and two foreign teachers. The test papers were scored by the researcher and two other inter-raters, with 99 percent inter-rater reliability.

The subjects in this study were made up of 112 Chinese college students, who were from 17 to 23 years old. Of the subjects, 35 were elementary English learners, 47 intermediate learners and 30 advanced learners. Both the elementary and intermediate subjects were non-English majors, whose majors ranged from computer, mechanical manufacturing, communications engineering to international trade and law. All the elementary learners, who came from a general higher institution, got the score of around 400 in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and the score of less than 60 percent in the English exam of the NCEE. This study was made on them about one month after they had begun the college life. The intermediate subjects, who were sophomores at the university where the writer works, had just passed the CET-4 (College English Test – Band 4) before this study was carried out on them. The advanced subjects, who were English majors studying at two universities, had passed the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors – Band 4) before this study. All the subjects were randomly chosen.

To confirm the first two hypotheses of this study, the number of RCs produced by the Chinese college students in the composition task needs comparing with that produced
by English native speakers in the same task, so the corpus of 43 English native students' ready-made compositions was used as a reference in the study. These native speakers’ compositions, which came from LOCNESS, Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, were of the same topic as the one the Chinese subjects in this study wrote about so as to make sure that these compositions were comparable.

V. Results and Analyses

Based on the three hypotheses, the results of this study were analyzed as follows:

i. Underproduction of RCs
In order to confirm the first hypothesis—whether the Chinese subjects in this research underproduced English RCs or not, the number of words and that of RCs in each composition were counted (cf. Table 1).

| Table 1. Actual Number of Words and RCs in the Subjects’ Compositions |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                  | Native Students (N=43) | Chinese Students |                |
|                                  | Group A (N=35)      | Group B (N=47)  | Group C (N=30) | Total (N=112)  |
| The Number of Words in the compositions | 16,502    | 10,248       | 16,558       | 10,317       | 37,123        |
| The Number of RRs                | 193        | 44           | 111          | 75           | 230           |
| The Number of NRRs               | 13         | 1            | 22           | 10           | 33            |
| The Total Number of RCs          | 206        | 45           | 133          | 85           | 263           |

Group A: the elementary students; Group B: the intermediate students; Group C: the advanced students.

However, because both the number of the subjects in each group and the length of the composition written by each subject were totally different, the frequency of the RC use in each group was not comparable according to the actual number of RCs. Therefore the comparison of RC frequency was made according to the number of RCs per 500 words. By means of the SPSS, the comparison of RC frequencies by the five groups of subjects was made, as is shown in Table 2.

| Table 2. RC Frequencies of the Five Groups of Subjects in the Composition Task |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| N                              | Minimum | Maximum | Mean     | Std. Deviation |
| A                              | 35       | .00      | 8.48     | 2.0451   | 2.73067  |
| B                              | 47       | .00      | 9.93     | 3.9473   | 2.35173  |
| C                              | 30       | .00      | 8.24     | 4.1770   | 1.88660  |
| D                              | 43       | 1.21     | 14.65    | 6.2119   | 3.72808  |
| E                              | 112      | .00      | 9.93     | 3.4144   | 2.52477  |

Valid N (listwise) 30

A: the Elementary Chinese Group; B: the Intermediate Chinese Group; C: the Advanced Chinese Group; D: the Native Speaker Group; E: the Total Chinese Students Group.
The RC frequency mean of the native students was 6.2119, while that of the Chinese students was 3.4144. An independent-samples t-test (cf. Table 3) was done. In the Levene’s test for equality of variances, F was 9.453, the significance was 0.002, which indicated that the variances of the two groups were unequal at the 0.01 level. So we should refer to the second line of the statistics “equal variances not assumed” : t=4.537, df=57.420, and the two-tailed significance was 0.000, smaller than 0.01. Therefore it was concluded that the RC frequencies of use between the native students and the Chinese students were significantly different. That is to say, generally speaking, the Chinese college students produced much fewer RCs in the composition task than native students did.

Even the advanced Chinese group also underproduced English RCs according to the independent-samples t-test (cf. Table 4). The two-tailed significance was 0.003, greater than the one (0.000) in Table 3, which indicated that the performance of the advanced Chinese students was closer to that of the native students than that of the total Chinese students as a group was, but still smaller than 0.01. So the advanced Chinese college students also underproduced English RCs, compared with the English native college students. Therefore, the phenomenon of underproduction did exist among the Chinese college students, which confirmed the first hypothesis of this study.

From Table 2, it can also be found that difference in the RC frequencies in the composition task existed among the three different levels of Chinese college students. The RC frequency mean of the elementary group was 2.0451, that of the intermediate group was 3.9473, and that of the advanced group was 4.1770. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to see whether the difference was significant. From Table 5, we can see that the significance was 0.000, which was smaller than 0.05, so the null hypothesis that English proficiency didn’t have
any significant effect on the RC frequency should be rejected, i.e., English proficiency greatly affected the RC frequency of use. The higher the proficiency level was, the more RCs were used and vice versa.

**Table 5.** One-Way ANOVA on RC Frequencies of the Three Chinese Groups in the Composition Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between (Combined)</td>
<td>96.416</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>48.208</td>
<td>8.598</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear Term</td>
<td>73.416</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>73.416</td>
<td>13.094</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted</td>
<td>77.388</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>77.388</td>
<td>13.802</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviation</td>
<td>19.028</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.028</td>
<td>3.394</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>611.151</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>5.607</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>707.567</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then to further investigate the effect of language proficiency on the production of English RCs, post hoc multiple comparisons were done to show the relationships between the RC frequency means of every two levels of students. The results were shown in Table 6. The difference between the advanced and the elementary students was statistically significant (Significance=0.000, smaller than 0.05), and so was the difference between the intermediate and the elementary. But the difference between the advanced and the intermediate was not significant, for the significance value was 0.679, which was greater than 0.05. The results implied that language proficiency led to the great difference between the number of RCs produced by the elementary students on the one hand, and the advanced students and the intermediate students on the other hand. On the contrary, language proficiency didn’t make much difference between the RC production of the advanced students and that of the intermediate students.

**Table 6.** Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons of the RC Frequency of Use on the Composition Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) Language Proficiency</th>
<th>(J) Language Proficiency</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LSD</td>
<td>the Elementary Group</td>
<td>1.90220(*)</td>
<td>.52867</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Intermediate Group</td>
<td>-1.90220(*)</td>
<td>.52867</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Advanced Group</td>
<td>-2.13186(*)</td>
<td>.58915</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Intermediate Group</td>
<td>the Elementary Group</td>
<td>1.90220(*)</td>
<td>.52867</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Advanced Group</td>
<td>-2.22966</td>
<td>.55335</td>
<td>.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Advanced Group</td>
<td>the Elementary Group</td>
<td>2.13186(*)</td>
<td>.58915</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Intermediate Group</td>
<td>.22966</td>
<td>.55335</td>
<td>.679</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Through the above analysis, it is clear that language proficiency is a working factor in the use of English RCs by the Chinese college students, which needs more attention.
ii. Use of NRRs
To confirm the second hypothesis of this study—whether the Chinese students underproduced NRRs or not, the number of NRRs was counted. The analysis of t-test indicated that as a group, the Chinese students did not underuse NRRs. So the second hypothesis was not borne out here. But the English proficiency level made some difference among the Chinese students. The elementary level of students tended to underuse NRRs while the other two levels of students did not, which implied that the effect of L1 transfer depended on proficiency and it diminished with the increase of the proficiency level.

Though the Chinese college students as a whole used almost the same number of NRRs in the composition task, they did not completely comprehend the real meaning of NRRs and the differences between RRs and NRRs. It was found that the distinction between RRs and NRRs was the biggest difficulty for all levels of the Chinese students. In the multiple choice test, the percentages of this error for the elementary, the intermediate and the advanced students were 62.86 percent, 64.89 percent and 60 percent respectively, and in the grammaticality judgment test, the percentages of this error were 97.14 percent, 97.87 percent and 96.67 percent respectively. It is implied that intralingual factors should also be considered as one of the most important factors influencing the English RC acquisition of the Chinese college students.

iii. Errors in Relation to Interlingual Factors
As was hypothesized, the subjects were found to have committed many errors in the three tasks, which were related to the influence of mother tongue, such as relative clause preposing, resumptive pronouns, absence of relative pronoun, and using a personal pronoun instead of the relative pronoun.

A. Relative Clause Preposing
The English relative clause preposing error is caused by direct transfer of the Chinese RCs order. In Chinese the RC is prenominal, while in English it is postnominal. This category of errors stood out in the two receptive tests—the multiple choice test and the grammaticality judgment test. In the former test, the percentage of the relative clause preposing error for the three levels of students, the elementary, the intermediate and the advanced, were 20 percent, 8.51 percent and 13.33 percent respectively; and in the latter test, the frequencies were 54.29 percent, 10.64 percent and 6.67 percent respectively. But in the productive task this category of error was so minor that no serious attention deserved. Examples of this error from the corpus are illustrated as follows.

13. [I am reading] the book is very interesting.* (GJ-2)
   [我正在读的]这本书很有趣。
14. Which of the following sentence is correct? (MC-1)
   A. The girl wrote a letter to Susan never answered it.*
   B. The girl Susan wrote a letter to never answered it.
   C. [Susan wrote a letter to] the girl never answered it.*
   [苏珊写信给她的]那个女孩从未回信。
The finding that the relative clause preposing error occurred much more frequently in the receptive tasks than in the productive task seems to imply that difficulties in learning sometimes conceal themselves until they are forced to be exposed, and transfer is a psychological process. When producing a certain structure, learners may give correct answers, but when facing the inducement of what resembles their native language, such as those sentences with relative clause preposing in the multiple choice test and the grammaticality judgment test in this study, they tend to judge the ungrammatical forms as grammatical.

B. Resumptive Pronouns

The appearance of the resumptive pronoun seems to be an evidence of language transfer in the interlanguage of learners (cf. Schachter, 1974; Gass, 1980; Touchie, 1983).

This category of error was very serious for all the three levels of students in the grammaticality judgment test. There may be two reasons for this. Firstly, the sentence itself with the resumptive pronoun, which is presented to the students for judgment, becomes a psychological inducement for the students. Secondly, the students whose native language has the pattern of resumptive pronouns tend to unconsciously accept those RCs with resumptive pronouns as grammatical without careful thinking. The prediction made by the contrastive analysis is that there may be the fewest resumptive pronoun errors in the subject position, for both English and Chinese do not permit the resumptive pronoun in the subject position. The result coincided with the prediction. Resumptive pronouns in all the other five lower positions were not equal in the number. More resumptive pronouns were used in the lower positions and in the OCOMP position there were the most resumptive pronouns.

Resumptive pronoun errors in the multiple choice test were also serious, for resumptive pronouns were only tested in the three lower positions, in the OPREP position, in the GEN position and in the OCOMP position. And unanimously resumptive pronouns in the OCOMP position ranked the highest for every level of students.

In the composition task, only two resumptive pronoun errors were made, which was very surprising.

Examples of resumptive pronoun errors in the corpus are shown in the following.

15. The woman that Salwa is taller than her is here. * (MC-3)
16. The pen which I wrote with it is red. * (MC-4)
17. The girl who her brother left is called Samira. * (MC-8)
18. The boy saw the girl who she hit him.* (GJ-3)
19. Do you know the man that I gave a book to him?* (GJ-6)
20. This is the cupboard which I put my clothes in it.* (GJ-11)
21. The book which I gave it to John was exciting.* (GJ-14)
22. We found the boy who his mother went away.* (GJ-15)
23. The woman that Salma was taller than her entered the room.* (GJ-16)
24. Mobile phones have given us a lot of convenience that we need it very much.* (Composition)
25. Pollution is the first problem that we must face and try to solve it.* (Composition)
L1 transfer can account for the fact that the resumptive pronoun occurs the least frequently in the subject position, but it can not explain why there are always the most resumptive pronoun errors in the lowest position of the NPAH. So other factors may also contribute to the resumptive pronouns. The acceptance of resumptive pronouns in the lower positions may suggest a strategy used by all L2 learners in understanding complex structures (Gass, 1980: 135). The intermediate and the advanced students produced more resumptive pronouns in the GEN and OREP positions than in other positions on the NPAH, and in some higher positions (such as subject and direct object) very few resumptive pronouns were found. This result seems to imply that for the intermediate and the advanced students, L1 transfer had little influence and instead the language universal property, i.e., the natural ordering of difficulty, played a major part in the retention of resumptive pronouns. However, it was the other case for the elementary students. There were many resumptive pronouns in every position though resumptive pronouns occurred more frequently in the lower positions. So maybe for the elementary students, both L1 transfer and language universal properties functioned together. It seems that transfer is developmental and it tends to be used less frequently in more advanced stages of second language acquisition. Reliance on native language structures is frequent in the early stages of acquisition, but almost absent in later stages. It is implied from the above analysis that language universal properties are also very important in deciding the English RC acquisition of the Chinese college students.

C. Absence of the Relative Pronoun

Absence of the relative pronoun was found to be the most serious error in the composition task and it was also found in the other two tests. In the multiple choice test, the percentage of this error for the elementary group was 54.29 percent, for the intermediate group was 14.89 percent, and for the advanced group was 16.67 percent. In the grammaticality judgment test, the error percentages were 51.43 percent, 21.28 percent and 8.33 percent respectively. And as to the there-be structure, the percentages were 38.57 percent, 7.45 percent and 3.33 percent. In the composition task, the percentage of the error in the there-be structure was 28.13. The errors of this category from the corpus are illustrated below:

26. The dish ________ fell on the floor broke in half. (MC-6)
   A. that B. who C. \ (No word is needed, for the sentence is complete.)*
   27. There are some students stand at the door.* (GJ-4)
   28. I saw a man was looking for you.* (GJ-19)
   29. There are many other new things emerged in the 20th century.* (Composition)
   30. Every day there are millions of events happened all over the world.* (Composition)
   31. There are some psychological diseases result from the mobile phone.* (Composition)

(27), (29), (30) and (31) are of the same structure—the there-be structure. The error of relative pronoun absence is derived from the Chinese syntactic pattern of the there-be structure—(NP1) + V1 + NP2 + (XP). Sentence (28) has the same syntactic structure with the there-be structure and its Chinese equivalent is “我看见一个人在找你”. Sentence (26) is
also a typical example of transfer from Chinese. “The dish fell on the floor broke in half.” is equivalent to the Chinese sentence “碟子掉在地上摔成两半”, whose syntactic structure is NP + V1 + V2.

Therefore, the relative pronoun absence is “direct” “inferencing” transfer, as was discussed by Touchie (1983: 135). This error was very common among the elementary students and not rare among the intermediate and the advanced students. Negative transfer from the native language is apparent to all the ESL or EFL learners though it decreases with the increase of the proficiency level.

D. Using a Personal Pronoun Instead of the Relative Pronoun
This error was found in the grammaticality judgment test. It originated from the transfer of Chinese. Some English RCs sometimes can be translated into two Chinese clauses with a comma in between, as in (32b) or (32c).

32a. He gets a friend who speaks English.
   b. 他有一个朋友，他说英语。
   c. 他有一个朋友，这个人说英语。

In English, this Chinese sentence should either be relativized as (32a) or be translated into two independent sentences as in (33).

33. He gets a friend. The friend speaks English.

Chinese learners often transfer this Chinese sentence pattern directly to English, so the following errors result.

34. He gets a friend he speaks English.*
35. He gets a friend the one speaks English.*

The error in (34) is derived from the direct English translation of (32b) and that in (35) from the direct English translation of (32c).

VI. Conclusion and Implications
It was concluded from this study that due to the influence of interlingual factors, the Chinese college students did underproduce English RCs, but did not underuse NRRs. Besides, many mistakes in the use of RCs were caused by interlingual factors. Deeply influenced by their L1 knowledge, the subjects tended to transfer the distribution, rules and functions of the L1 to the system of the target language. The first and third hypotheses were confirmed, while the second was not. It was also found that English proficiency influenced the learners’ use of RCs.

In view of these findings, some implications for teaching and further research can be
obtained.

First, contrastive analysis of target language structures and similar L1 structures is dispensable in ESL or EFL teaching.

Second, various exercises and activities should be designed so as to induce learners to use certain structures and to find out their potential difficulties, for knowledge of certain structure does not improve the frequency of and ensure correctness of learners’ use of the structure.

Third, the influence of language proficiency is worth discussing further.

Finally, interlingual factors can only account for part of RC acquisition, so further studies should be carried out in the aspects of intralingual factors and universal factors so that a complete picture of Chinese college students’ RCs acquisition may be obtained.

Notes

1. LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) is a corpus of native English essays made up of: British pupils’ A level essays: 60,209 words; British university students’ essays: 95,695 words; American university students’ essays: 168,400 words. Total number of words: 324,304. (http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/etan/cecl/Cecl-Projects/Icle/locness1.htm)

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**Appendix 1  The Multiple Choice Test**

**Choose the correct answer to complete the following sentences.**

1. Which of the following sentence is correct?
   - A. The girl wrote a letter to Susan never answered it.
   - B. The girl Susan wrote a letter to never answered it.
   - C. Susan wrote a letter to the girl never answered it.

2. My brother, who is an engineer, came to visit us. This sentence means that ________.
   - A. I have one brother only.   
   - B. I have more than one brother.   
   - C. Neither A nor B.

3. The woman that Salwa is taller than ________ is here.
   - A. who   
   - B. her   
   - C. \ (No word is needed, for the sentence is complete.)

4. The pen which I wrote with ________ is red.
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A. it B. \ (No word is needed, for the sentence is complete.) C. which
5. The book ________ I borrowed from the library is new.
   A. who B. whom C. which
6. The dish ________ fell on the floor broke in half.
   A. that B. who C. \ (No word is needed, for the sentence is complete.)
7. The men ______ are talking are friends.
   A. whom B. whose C. who
8. The girl ______ brother left is called Samira.
   A. who her B. whom C. whose
9. My friend who studies in New York visited me. This sentence means that _____.
   A. I have one friend only. B. I have more than one friend. C. Neither A nor B.
10. The pupil ______ I gave the book is called Ali.
    A. whom to B. to whom C. whom

Appendix 2 The Grammaticality Judgment Test

Please read the following sentences and place an “F” in front of any that you feel is not correct and try to correct it.
1. The man that the woman that the dog chased kissed died.
2. I am reading the book is very interesting.
3. The boy saw the girl who she hit him.
4. There are some students stand at the door.
5. The man laughed out loud to whom I gave a book.
6. Do you know the man that I gave a book to him?
7. I ate the food Ali cooked.
8. I left my book in a room who was locked.
9. The students whom studied for the test succeeded.
10. He gets a friend he speaks Spanish.
11. This is the cupboard which I put my clothes in it.
12. Who reads this poem feels pleased.
13. The boy whom I sent a letter was Ali.
14. The book which I gave it to John was exciting.
15. We found the boy who his mother went away.
16. The woman that Salma was taller than her entered the room.
17. He who studies for the examination succeeds.
18. His house which he built was large.
19. I saw a man was looking for you.