Relative Clauses in Hong Kong English: A Corpus-based Perspective

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Abstract

This study, with the help of the International Corpus of English, contrastively explores uses of relative clauses by students in Hong Kong, Singapore and British English within the framework of world Englishes (Kachru, 2005, 1989; Kachru & Nelson, 2006). First, in the Hong Kong data, there is probably a tendency to use restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH in places where non-restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH are normally expected. Second, there is another tendency in the employment of non-restricted relative clauses led by THAT in Hong Kong university students’ written work and it is interesting to note that this phenomenon seems to be more widespread in Hong Kong student writing than in Singapore student writing and no such cases were found out in the British subcorpus. Given that some distinctive patterns traditionally considered as developmental errors in the language learning process may also be seen as evidence of linguistic variations, second language teachers may need some tolerance towards this variation and compromise between “autonomy” and “grammaticality” in today’s society of world Englishes (McKay, 2008).

Key words: relative clauses; Corpus; Hong Kong English; world Englishes

1. Introduction

The present study contrastively explores the use of relative clauses, an important aspect of English grammar (Newbrook, 1998), in Hong Kong, Singapore and British English within the framework of world Englishes (Kachru, 2005, 1989; Kachru & Nelson, 2006). It is corpus-based in response to the call for further investigation of relative constructions in Hong Kong English through implementing the Hong Kong Component of the
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International Corpus of English (Gisborne, 2000).

The study has two purposes. First, through gathering corpus evidence of syntactic patterns in terms of relative clauses in Hong Kong English, it will extend the academic dialogue about Hong Kong English and the increasingly important issue of world Englishes (Bolton & Nelson, 2002) and implicate L2 language pedagogy as well. Second, it will deepen the understanding of a corpus-based methodology (see Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998; Hunston, 2002; Kennedy, 1998; McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006; Sampson & McCarthy, 2004; Sinclair, 1987), which appears to have generated critical debates (see Beaugrande, 2001; V. Cook, 2002; G. Cook, 2001; Sinclair, 1997; Stubbs, 2001; Widdowson, 2001, 2000), some of which have perhaps not yet been resolved (Chen, 2009).

2. Research background

2.1 World Englishes and Hong Kong English

With English as an international lingua franca and the process of globalization, there seems to be a “paradigm shift” in the sense that English is not considered as a monolithic entity (Bolton, 2003; Bolton & Nelson, 2002; Kachru, 1992). Regional varieties of English and the pluralistic nature of English across the world have attracted increasing attention of researchers (Kachru, 1989; Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Melchers & Shaw, 2003). For such studies of varieties of English in terms of various sociolinguistic realities, Kachru’s (1989, 2005) model of global English provides a very useful conceptual framework (Bolton, 2002). According to this model, there are three broad categories of regional varieties of the English language, namely, the inner circle of Englishes used originally by the local people or a large population of immigration, such as in the UK; the outer circle of Englishes as a result of colonization, such as in Singapore; and the expanding circle of Englishes used in a restricted way, such as in Hong Kong of the People’s Republic of China (Kachru, 2005).

Such a world Englishes approach to English language studies has generated wide publications (Kachru & Nelson, 2006). Yet there seems to be little recognition of Hong Kong English as a variety of Englishes (Bolton, 2002). In Hong Kong, a meeting point of the East and the West, English plays a vital role and is used in formal domains of government, business and law as an official language (Lu, 2003), although Hong Kong people speak Cantonese as their mother tongue and still stick to their Cantonese-based Hong Kong identity in spite of the promotion of Mandarin Chinese (Simpson, 2007). While the status of Singapore English as a variety of English appears to have been established (Gisborne, 2000), people still have divided voices about this view of Hong Kong English as a variety of English (Bolton, 2003; 2002; Bolton, 2000a; Luke & Richards, 1982; Tay, 1991). For example, Luke and Richards (1982) seem to hold the view that there was no such thing as Hong Kong English, whereas Bolton (2003, 2000a) indicates an increasing recognition of Hong Kong English as an emerging variety from a sociolinguistic context perspective and calls for a space for the discourse about Hong Kong English. In this sense, the identification of distinctive linguistic features of Hong Kong English at various levels,
specifically its syntactic construction in terms of relative clauses, may continue the existing academic dialogue about Hong Kong English and meanwhile generate implications for English instruction, particularly in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Previous studies about Hong Kong English have been done from different standpoints (Benson, 2000; Bolton & Lim, 2000; Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Hung, 2002; also see Bolton, 2000b for more bibliographical resources). For instance, in term of phonological features of Hong Kong English, Hung (2002) examined recordings from Hong Kong undergraduates and concluded that Hong Kong English displayed its own systematic phonological features, echoing what Bolton and Kwok (1990) found out about a Hong Kong accent in Hong Kong English. A close examination of Hong Kong words has equally led Benson (2000) to the conclusion that some vocabulary of Hong Kong English has its local flavor. Yet studies examining uses of relative construction in Hong Kong English, particularly from a corpus-based perspective, seem inadequate, establishing a niche for the present study.

2.2 Uses of relative clauses in Hong Kong English

Relative clause, as an important structure in English grammar, functions as a dependent clausal modifier of nouns or pronouns named nominal heads or precedents and is typically introduced by a range of relative pronouns or relative markers, such as WHICH, THAT, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, etc.

There are different dimensions based on which relative clauses may be classified (Gisborne, 2000). In light of the grammatical function of the relative marker in relative clauses, relative clauses can be categorized into restrictive and non-restrictive. In traditional usage of English grammar, restrictive clauses are used as modifiers of the nominal heads which are made sufficiently identifiable in context by the modification and are introduced by THAT or WH-relative markers, whereas non-restrictive relative clauses are used to modify the nominal heads which are by themselves sufficiently identifiable and are introduced by WH-relative markers preceded with a comma. A non-restrictive relative clause introduced by THAT (or non-restrictive THAT) is traditionally considered as non-standard, as illustrated below.

1  I am studying in Singapore, which is the host country of The 2010 Youth Olympic Games.
2  I am studying in Singapore which is the host country of The 2010 Youth Olympic Games.
3  I am studying in Singapore that is the host country of The 2010 Youth Olympic Games.
4  I am studying in Singapore, that is the host country of The 2010 Youth Olympic Games.

The proper noun “Singapore” is sufficiently identifiable, hence a non-restrictive relative clause (introduced by WHICH preceded with a comma) is expected, as illustrated in Example 1, whereas restrictive relative clauses in Examples 2 and 3 seem to be less expected and may be seen as less standard. A non-restrictive THAT in Example 4 may be considered as least standard with regards to the traditional usage of relative clauses.

However, as literature has demonstrated, a relative clause, as “a variable in
international varieties of English” (Gisborne, 2000: 357), displays some variations in its formation in varieties of English such as Singapore English (Alsagoff & Ho, 1998). One type of variations is perhaps “formal contrasts between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses” (Newbrook, 1998). It has also been hypothesized that “with respect to ‘zero’ subject relatives and the restrictive/non-restrictive contrast, Hong Kong English has established its own norms” (Gisborne, 2000: 366).

Although previous research has perhaps yielded interesting findings, little corpus-based quantitative work has been reported in the literature (but see Lehmann, 2002 for a large-scale corpus study about zero-subject relative constructions in British and American English), despite the fact that some corpus data were used for exemplification in some studies (see Gisborne, 2000). In my view, those findings merit empirical verification, a viewpoint shared by Gilsborne (2000). Therefore, taking Gilsborne’s (2000) work as a starting point, I conducted a corpus exploration with the hope of finding corpus evidence for certain interesting patterns in the use of relative clauses in Hong Kong English.

For the purpose of better understanding whether some patterns are unique to Hong Kong English, a comparison was made between Hong Kong English, Singapore English and British English. The selection of Singapore and British English is deliberate and was inspired by my belief that Singapore English represents an “outer circle” variety of English spoken in an island state sharing a similar colonial background with Hong Kong yet having linguistically ecological differences from Hong Kong and that British English is commonly considered as a standard variety of English in the “core circle” (Kachru, 2005).

Encouraged by Gisborne’s (2000) call for empirical research to check his hypothesis, this study thus focuses on the restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses introduced by WHICH and THAT and seeks answers to the following research questions: 1) Are there any distinctive patterns in the construction of restrictive/non-restrictive relative clauses in Hong Kong English? 2) If so, are they unique to Hong Kong English, in comparison with Singapore English and British English?

3. Method

Navigated by my research questions, this study adopted a corpus-based methodology, whose value to linguistic investigations seems to have been convincingly demonstrated in previous corpus studies in recent years (Biber et al., 1998; Hyland, 2000, 2004; Kennedy, 1998; Sinclair, 1997; Tse & Hyland, 2006). This approach also gains growing interest in academic discourse analysis and offers possibilities of enriched analysis for recent work seeking an integration of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics (Charles, Pecorari & Hunston, 2009). A corpus can possibly provide valuable information about linguistic use and reliable quantitative data for linguistic investigation (McEnery et al., 2006), as it can possibly provide “a repository of evidence about language” (Sealey & Thompson, 2007: 213).

Though this methodology afforded by modern technology appears to have gained increasingly wide application in linguistic description, some people hold a skeptical view
of it. There seem to be some unresolved issues about claims made for corpora. One critical
debate appears to be essentially about a theoretical issue of whether a corpus contains
real discourse or not (see McEnery et al., 2006). From a weak view of corpora, discourse
only happens in context which is larger than co-text that corpus concordance lines can
offer and corpus data is “decontextualized language” (Widdowson, 2000: 7) and can only
reflect partial reality and the application of corpus findings to classroom teaching would
be debatable (also see V. Cook, 2002); whereas from a strong view of corpora, corpus data
contain a great number of instances of language use and can help people make statements
of what is typical and frequent in the language usage (Beaugrande, 2001; Sinclair, 1997;
Stubbs, 2001), an academic dialogue which I hope that the present study can expand to
some extent.

This study built its investigation on the International Corpus of English (ICE),
specifically, its three corresponding components of the corpus, i.e., Hong Kong component
(ICE-HK), Singapore component (ICE-SIN) and British component (ICE-GB).

3.1 The International Corpus of English (ICE)
Comprising a variety of components, ICE was designed primarily for facilitating
comparative studies of national and regional varieties of English (Nelson, 2004; Nelson,
Wallis & Aarts, 2002; Greenbaum, 1991). Each component makes up of one subcorpus
which consists of data from one variety of English and contains a total of approximately
one million words from 500 texts (roughly 2000 words each) of spoken and written
discourse arranged hierarchically. Each subcorpus contains roughly 600,000-word spoken
texts and 400,000-word written texts and has stimulated extensive linguistic research
(Bolton et al., 2002; Nelson et al., 2002; Schneider, 2004; Wong, 2009, 2010). The choice
of ICE for the present study is justified by my belief that ICE can be a very useful research
tool for making comparative explorations of relative constructions in the three varieties of
English (see Bolton, Nelson & Hung, 2002; Nelson et al., 2002; Wong, 2009).

Though each of these components comprises subtexts from a diversity of categories
from both spoken and written texts, the corpus data this study investigated are limited to
20 subtexts of student writing from each component, making up of an approximately total
of 40,000 words. In each component, these texts, which were assigned unique textcodes
(from WIA-001 to WIA-020As) corresponding to their positions in the hierarchical
structure of each component, include 10 unprinted student essays and 10 examination
scripts written by undergraduate students, as illustrated in Table 1.

| Table 1. Composition of the written data (see Nelson, 2006, 2002; Nelson et al., 2002) |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| WRITTEN                     | W                            |
| NON-PRINTED                 | W1                           |
| NON-PROFESSIONAL WRITING (20)| W1A                          |
| Student Essays (10)         | W1A-001 to W1A-010           |
| Examination Scripts (10)    | W1A-011 to W1A-020           |
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One reason for selecting such corpus data is that written discourse is relatively less dynamic than speech and thus may faithfully represent the syntactic feature of relative clauses of varieties of contemporary English. A second reason is my hope that the analysis of written work of undergraduate Hong Kong students may implicate EFL teaching in and beyond China. It is also in my belief that this design can make this small-scale study manageable and sufficient. Table 2 provides the summary statistics of the examined data respectively.

Table 2. Summary statistics of student written texts in each subcorpus (Also refer to Bolton et al., 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Total number of sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student writing in ICE-HK</td>
<td>2755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student writing in ICE-SIN</td>
<td>2278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student writing in ICE-GB</td>
<td>2471</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2 Procedures

I followed a four-step procedure in collecting and analyzing the data on WHICH/THAT relative clauses. I classified relative clauses into four subcategories:

- **RC_ WHICH**: Restrictive relative clauses introduced by WHICH
- **RC_ THAT**: Restrictive relative clauses introduced by THAT
- **NRC_ WHICH**: Non-restrictive relative clauses introduced by WHICH
- **NRC_ THAT**: Non-restrictive relative clauses introduced by THAT

To find the relative clauses in these corpora, I used relative pronouns (*that* and *which*) as prompts and ran the AntConc software, a free corpus analysis toolkit working effectively with small-sized corpora (Anthony, 2004). Then I imported collected concordance lines into Microsoft Office Excel software to sort through the clauses where the prompt word is not actually a relative pronoun. To increase the reliability of data coding, I coded the data at two different periods of time and consulted with a Chinese tertiary English teacher under teacher education in Singapore.

For the statistics, I counted raw frequencies of all identified relative clauses from student writing in each subcorpus. I normalized these raw counts through dividing them by the total number of sentences in student writing of each subcorpus. The percentage of each kind of relative clauses in the total relative clauses identified in each subcorpus was calculated respectively for later comparisons.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 The overall picture

As shown in Table 3, 306, 282, 354 occurrences of WHICH/THAT relative clauses were identified in the subcorpora. Among the three groups of writers (Table 4), Hong Kong
student writers used WHICH/THAT relative clauses least frequently (11.1%), and British student writers incorporated the highest percentage of WHICH/THAT relative clauses (14.3%) into their academic writing. The percentage of the Singapore case (12.3%) stands in between.

Table 3. Summary statistics of the use of relative clauses in student writing of each subcorpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student writing in ICE-HK</th>
<th>Student writing in ICE-SIN</th>
<th>Student writing in ICE-GB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC_WHICH</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC_THAT</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC_WHICH</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC_THAT</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Overall number and percentage of WHICH/THAT relative clauses in student writing in each subcorpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcorpus</th>
<th>Raw frequencies</th>
<th>Percentage of RC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICE-HK</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICE-SIN</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICE-GB</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of relative clauses in student writing in ICE-HK, Table 3 appears to demonstrate that among the four types of relative clauses, restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH (RC_WHICH) occupied more than 56% in the total identified relative clauses, followed by the restrictive relative clauses led by THAT (RC_THAT) (35%). Non-restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH or THAT are the fewest (8.1% and 0.7% respectively). This can be clearly shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Percentage of each of the four types of relative clauses in students writing in ICE-HK
Yet what is interesting to note is that there seem to be a few cases in which non-restrictive relative clauses are led by THAT (rather than by WHICH) preceded with a comma (0.7%). This is rather surprising, as a non-restrictive clause led by THAT is seldom seen in Standard English and is not in accordance with traditional English grammar. A question thus emerged at this stage: is it unique to Hong Kong English or is it common in other two subcorpora? I will come back to this point in the next section.

4.2 The use of each type of relative clauses across the subcorpora

For the purpose of gaining a better understanding of similarities and differences in use of relative clauses between Hong Kong English and the other two varieties of English, the use of each type of relative clauses in ICE-HK was thus compared respectively with those in ICE-SIN and ICE-GB. Figure 2 shows the comparison.

Generally speaking, Figure 2 seems to indicate that WHICH/THAT restrictive relative clauses outnumbered WHICH/THAT non-restrictive relative clauses in all datasets. For example, Hong Kong students employed more than 91% restrictive relative clauses and only 8.8% non-restrictive relative clauses in their academic writing work. The case is also quite similar for the Singaporean and British student writing (93.6%/6.40% and 83.3%/16.7% respectively).

In terms of WHICH/THAT restrictive relative clauses, there seems to be no significant difference in uses of relative clauses led by THAT between Hong Kong and British student writing, as both employed about 35% of the relative clauses in this type whereas there are some statistical differences between Hong Kong and Singaporean students’ use of WHICH/THAT restrictive relative clauses, with Singaporean students using 41.5% RC_THAT in their academic writing.

Some interesting differences in uses of restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH (RC_WHICH) were also found. The percentage of this type of relative clauses seems to be most frequently used in student writing in ICE-HK (56.2%), followed by 52.1% and 48.6% in Singaporean and British students’ writing respectively. Moreover, a close look at the corpus
data qualitatively has led me to find out that some cases in which a restrictive relative clause is used when a non-restrictive relative clause is traditionally expected, as also noted by Gilsborne (2000). The following data from ICE-HK are illustrations: (A list of corpus data of this type in each subcorpora was included in the Appendix).

Altogether 8 cases of this type of relative clauses were respectively found out in student writing in ICE-HK and ICE-SIN respectively, occupying 2.9% and 3.0% of all identified restrictive relative clauses in the corresponding component, whereas in student writing of ICE-GB, there seem to be only 1 occurrence, occupying 0.33% of the total WHICH/THAT restrictive relative clauses in the investigated British data, possibly suggesting that this kind of “deviation” is comparatively more commonly seen in Hong Kong and Singaporean student writing.

With respect to the use of non-restrictive relative clauses, the result seems to suggest some differences as well. Although only a few non-restrictive relative clauses are used across all datasets, Hong Kong and Singaporean students appear to use non-restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH least frequently (occupying only 8.1% and 6% respectively).

What may be more interesting is that there is corpus evidence that some non-restrictive relative clauses are led by THAT, occupying 0.7% in all WHICH/THAT relative clauses identified in the Hong Kong data. The following examples are illustrations:

Comparatively, as indicated in the figure, the percentage of such cases in the Singaporean data (0.40%) is slightly lower and no such cases were identified in the British data. This phenomenon is fairly surprising, as it appears to be against the normal usage of non-restrictive relative clauses in Standard English.
The above data analysis has shown that this small-scale study from a corpus-based standpoint seems to have yielded interesting findings. Some of them merit further discussion.

5. Findings and discussion

For the convenience of reading, I summarized my research findings by referring back to the two research questions.

1) Patterns in the construction of relative clauses in Hong Kong English

The data analysis seems to have suggested some patterns with regard to the use of relative clauses led by WHICH or THAT. First, in the Hong Kong data, there is probably a tendency to use restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH in places where non-restrictive relative clauses led by WHICH are normally expected. Second, there may also be a tendency in the employment of non-restricted relative clauses led by THAT in Hong Kong university students’ written work. This merits further exploration by examining a wider part of the ICE corpus data.

2) Hong Kong English in comparison with Singapore Kong subcorpus, it may not be safe to say that they can be generalized to Hong Kong English. That is because the first phenomenon is equally found in the Singapore and and British English. Though the two patterns seem to be distinctive in the student writing of the Hong British components of ICE, with an even slightly higher frequency in the Singaporean student writing. For the second phenomenon, it would be interesting to note that the phenomenon is more widespread in Hong Kong student writing than in Singapore student writing and no such cases were found in the British subcorpus. Yet, due to rather limited corpus data and the descriptive nature of data analysis, it is still hard to tell whether this is unique to Hong Kong English as a whole.

At this stage, it might be the case that Hong Kong and Singaporean university students seemed to employ relative clauses in some similar ways. By drawing on some literature and my own understanding, I think there are several possible explanations from different theoretic points of view.

From an ecological point of view that appears to recognize the embeddedness of literacy in an “ecosystem” and view a language as a “node’ in the whole linguistic eco-system (Barton, 2006; also see Gisborne, 2009), the relative clause construction in Hong Kong student writing is possibly opt to the influences of other languages in the multilingual Hong Kong society (Bolton, 2000a), mainly Cantonese, which is the mother tongue of Hong Kong people, and Mandarin Chinese, the national language under promotion (Gisborne, 2000). This might also be applicable to the Singaporean sociolinguistic context. As indicated in the literature, the Chinese language system lacks a distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses and “has a strong influence on the structure of relative clauses” in colloquial Singapore English (see Alsogoff & Ho, 1998). However, in the Hong Kong case, the relative construction system of the student writing may be under the stronger influence of Cantonese, a strong dialect in Hong Kong (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007), than that in Singapore where the use of dialects is
discouraged by the government and as a result is on dramatic decline (Teo, 2005).

The findings might also be explained from an interlanguage point of view. Such linguistic phenomena which seem to be rarely seen in Standard English like British English may be viewed as language “errors” in the developmental process of language learners (see Gisborne, 2000). However, this viewpoint may not be able to explain why the phenomenon of using restrictive relative clauses for non-restrictive relative clauses is even more widespread in the writings of students from Singapore, where unlike Hong Kong, in which English is generally acquired through formal schooling, English is used as a second language.

A third point of view perhaps relevant to the discussion is the view of English as a lingua franca (Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Prodromou, 2008). In alignment with this view, Hong Kong English might be considered as an emergent and increasingly autonomous variety of world Englishes (Bolton, 2003; Bolton & Lim, 2000) with some systematic localized features at phonological, lexical and probably syntactical levels (Benson, 2000; Gisborne, 2000; Hung, 2002). The somewhat surprising patterns in the use of relative clauses in Hong Kong student writing may be seen as linguistic “deviations” rather than simply linguistic “mistakes” (refer to McKay, 2008). In my understanding, the language development is likely to be influenced by two kinds of forces, “centripetal” and “centrifugal”, by borrowing Bakhtin’s (1981) two notions. To be specific, under the centripetal force, regional English would perhaps make changes in the conformity with the Standard English while under the centrifugal force, it may deviate from the Standard English norms.

6. Conclusions and implications

This study seems to have yielded some interesting findings about the use of relative clauses in Hong Kong students’ English writing. With the help of the corpus-based methodology, it may be reasonable to conclude that some distinctive patterns in the construction of restrictive/non-restrictive relative clauses possibly exist in Hong Kong students’ writing. Therefore, this study has helped to provide, to some extent, quantitative corpus data for previous hypothesis about uses of this syntactic feature. It may also have partially fulfilled the purpose of making a comparative study between Hong Kong, Singapore and British. However, admittedly, a sole investigation into student English writing is surely not possible to generalize the claims made about the findings to these regional and national varieties of English at large.

Possible explanations for these findings were then sought from three different perspectives, such as language contact, interlanguage errors and language variety. I think each point of view may contribute to complicating the use of relative clauses of the Hong Kong university students to some degree and have different impact on the English language pedagogy, especially in the Asian EFL contexts. While some distinctive patterns found in Hong Kong student writing may be traditionally considered as developmental errors in the language learning process, they could also be seen as evidence of linguistic
variations. In this sense, language teachers may need some tolerance towards this variation and compromise between “autonomy” and “grammaticality” in today’s society of world Englishes (McKay, 2008).

Apart from its implications for language teaching, the present study has some implications for a corpus-based methodology. As discussed earlier, some issues related to it still seem unresolved (Chen, 2009). In my opinion, the notions like “context”, “authenticity” or “real” are highly value-laden for the reason that people will have different mental interpretations of these words. Corpus data may not be completely out of context (Flowerdew, 2009), as in my case, the contextual environment provided by the Antconc software has also offered me helpful contextual information about a potential relative clause. I also believe that language used in the classroom is probably real as long as it is real in that context. Corpus data may inform classroom instruction as a valuable source of language input (McEnery et al., 2006), perhaps particularly helpful in Asian EFL contexts where language-input is rather poor (Hu, 1999).

Therefore, I think this study has also given me a small taste of what a corpus-based methodology may be like. For instance, it seems to help me fulfill the first research purpose of doing a contrastive study through investigating a large quantity of empirical data, which would have been impossible without the help of corpora. This may have proved what Sinclair (1991: 100) says, “The language looks rather different when you look at a lot of it at once.”

However, taking a critical literacy point of view, I feel that this methodology is not a fit-for-all methodology. One point may be that it can only help explore what is already in a corpus. Also, it seems reasonable to say that the collection of the corpus data themselves may be ideological. In terms of my study, I feel that the student written discourse in three ICE subcorpora may fail to faithfully represent the actual language use of the student writers for the reason that some collected texts were just constructed under examination circumstances.

Overall, I think the methodology has enabled me to make a fairly objective analysis because of the empirical nature of quantitative data, which is “emotion free” and is “dissociated from the researcher’s viewpoint or feelings” (Robertson, 2002: 3), and enabled me to find out some patterns of the use of relative clauses between varieties of English. Though it cannot provide explanations for the observable patterns of differences, this is not necessarily its weakness, as I am in total agreement with the argument:

Stubbs (1999) points out that, just as it is ridiculous to criticize a telescope for not being a microscope, it is pointless to criticize corpora for not allowing some methods of investigation. They are invaluable for doing what they do, and what they do not must be done in another way. (Hunston, 2002: 20)

7. Recommendations for future research

Although this study seems to have generated some findings which might have extended the discourse of Hong Kong English and the corpus-based methodology, it still has some
downsides, which I feel imperative to acknowledge. First, though I coded the data twice at different times, I did not follow the inter-coder procedure (see Goh, 2002). This may to some degree affect the reliability of data coding. Reminded that “the apparently simple matter of running the same data through the computer again does not inevitably produce the same results” (Doyle, 2005: 16), I think a replicated study need to be conducted to address such a potential weakness.

Second, although the small portion of texts is believed to be adequate for this small-scale study, I fully understand that the data size will be too small if a wider generalization of findings is to be sought. If the data size had been larger, I would probably have been in a better position to obtain a more representative picture of the use of relative clauses in Hong Kong English and accordingly have more confidence in making some claims based on the research findings. Also, the data analysis is largely descriptive, making it hard to infer whether aforementioned differences have any statistical significance. Therefore, the exploration of the whole corpus data which cover a wide range of text types of English used by Hong Kong people is highly recommendable. In this sense, my study may serve as a springboard for future work in this direction.

Moreover, I am suggesting that the investigation of other related linguistic phenomena indicated in the literature (Newbrook, 1998), for instance, the use of relative clauses introduced by other relative markers like WHERE, could be done with the help of a corpus-based research tool so as to gain a better understanding of the overall uses of the relative construction system in Hong Kong English. I think this is an equally worthwhile research topic and would make contributions to a “comprehensive discussion of the morphosyntactic feature system of Hong Kong English” (Gisborne, 2000: 370; also see Gisborne, 2009).

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Note

1. For example, in Singapore, English is used as a national language whereas in Hong Kong, it is used as a foreign language, and Hong Kong people speak Cantonese, a strong dialect of Mandarin Chinese, as their mother tongue.
References


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