The acquisition of relative clauses in L2 Mandarin Chinese: representation and processing

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Introduction

Over the last decades, relative clauses (RCs) have been of great interest to researchers working on language acquisition and processing. This is partly because of the unique syntactic properties of RC, partly its complexity and partly its universality.

Most existing studies in SLA research have focused on the acquisition of representation of RCs or the processing preference for subject RCs (SU) or direct object RCs (DO) in Indo-European languages. Not much L2 acquisition research that takes both representation and processing factors into consideration is available. In addition, very few studies have been conducted on other RC types such as indirect object RCs (IO) and oblique RCs (OBL), nor on typologically different languages such as Mandarin Chinese, especially Mandarin as L2.

Mandarin RCs-an interesting testbed

Rare combination: SVO and head final ⟶ predictions for the SU-DO preference ⟶ evaluation of various theories

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Conflicting results in experimental settings
but a consistent SU preference in corpus studies

A mixed approach (Aoun and Li, 2003): SU/DO (movement) vs IO/OBL (base-generation) ⟶ investigation on acquisition of different types of A' dependencies

Examples of Mandarin RC:

a. SU
[e bangzhu le laoshi]$_{RC}$ de xuesheng
help LE teacher DE student
"the student who helped the teacher"

b. DO
[laoshi bangzhu le e]$_{RC}$ de xuesheng
teacher help LE DE student
"the student who the teacher helped"

c. IO
[xuesheng song le ta yiben shu] de laoshi
student give LE him a book DE teacher
"the teacher who the student gave a book"

d. OBL
[xuesheng song le yiben shu gei ta] de laoshi
student give LE a book to him DE teacher
"the teacher who the student gave a book to"

Account for the Acquisition of RC-fRM

The theory to be tested in the present study is featural Relativised Minimality, hereafter fRM (Friedmann et al., 2009). According to fRM, adult learners experience greater processing difficulties with RCs when the relative head and the structurally intervening NP(s) match in feature. The details of fRM are given in the form below.

Summary of fRM

	fRM
Feature	Syntactic locality principle
Position	Structural
Source of learning difficulty	Intervention effects on representation (children) and processing (adults)
Intervener(s)	C-commanding NP(s) intervening between the relative head and the position where the head is interpretated;
Decreased difficulty	When the intervener(s) and the relative head mismatch in feature, e.g., person, number
Predictions ('>' means 'easier to acquire')	SU>DO>IO>OBL

Aim of the Study

This study aims to test fRM, to investigate the roles of and the relation between representation and processing in adult L2 acquisition.

Research Questions:

1. Does fRM successfully predict the sequence of acquisition of SU, DO, IO and OBL in L2 Mandarin? Which is the source of learning difficulties for adult L2 learners, grammar or processing?
2. Does dissimilarity in number between the relative head and the intervening NP reduce difficulties with certain types of RC, or it is genericity vs specificity that matters?

Methodology-subject to further consideration

Participants: Learner group: English-speaking adult learners of L2 Mandarin, further divided into intermediate and advanced groups; control group: Mandarin-English bilinguals

Stimuli

[nanhai xihuan]$_{RC}$ de nvhai hen keai.
boy like DE girl very cute
"Girl that boy like be cute."

Theoretically, nanhai 'boy' and nvhai 'gril' in the sentence can be either generic or specific, depending on the contexts. However, when the plural morpheme "men" is added to the nouns, the noun can only be definite. This unique feature of nominal expressions in Mandarin allows researchers to test whether it is number or the nature of nouns that affects learning difficulties.

Selected References:

Aoun, J. and Li, Y.-H.A. 2003. *Essays on the representational and derivational nature of grammar: the diversity of wh-constructions*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
Friedmann, N., Belletti, A. and Rizzi, L. 2009. Relativized relatives: Types of intervention in the acquisition of A-bar dependencies. *Lingua*. **119**(1), pp.67-88.