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Exploring the Role of Teaching English Relative Clauses in a Contrastive Way

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Abstract

Intralingual contrast and comparison is an effective teaching method, which introduces the learning from what students have mastered to what they are going to learn. This study applied intralingual contrast and comparison on the teaching of English relative clauses introduced by relative pronouns for Chinese Senior high school students. Quasi experimental research design was used with 90 students, where experimental group received the new teaching method of intralingual contrast and comparison while control group received traditional teaching method (presentation, practice and produce). For better investigating the effect of new teaching method and exploring students' challenges involved in learning ERCs, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilized in this study. The Data was collected via the experimental research (n=90) and semi-structured interviews (n=6). The findings revealed that the students of experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in the posttest, highlighting the effectiveness of the intralingual contrast and comparison teaching method on English relative clauses. Besides, the findings also revealed students' challenges in learning English relative clauses, namely difficulties in rules memorization, short vocabularies and to judge what relativize to utilize. The study has provided implications for instructors for teaching English relative clauses.

Keywords: *Intralingual contrast and comparison, teaching method, English relative clauses, Chinese senior high school students*

1. Introduction

In the context of language teaching, grammar is a crucial feature of language (Benitez-Correa et al., 2019). As an important part of language grammar, Relative Clauses (RCs) are universal and common phenomenon in syntactic structure of human languages. They are considered as an essential means of expression of language recurrence (De Vries, 2005). In addition, they could provide more information without adding another sentence to limit or narrow down the scope of what they modify than that conveyed by single-word adjectives (Colovic-Markovic, 2018; Croft, 2002; Hendery, 2012).

ERCs are one of the most difficult and important topics because of their unique syntactic characteristics and high frequencies in daily oral and written English (Colovic-Markovic, 2018; Izumi, 2003; Roland et al., 2007). ERCs have intricate grammar characteristics. They include the human or non-human head nouns, the position of prepositions in the clauses, the zero-

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relative pronouns (Colovic-Markovic, 2018; Izumi, 2003; Marefat & Rahmany, 2009).

Several scholars have done researches on the teaching ERCs as second or foreign language (Cheng, 2018; Nakamori, 2002; Yi, 2016). However, students still face a lot of problems in the productions of ERCs, including Chinese senior high school students (Erdogan, 2005; Phoocharoensil, 2009, 2014; Yue, 2018). Considering the important role played by ERCs, the current study intends to research the effects of intralingual contrast and comparison on the teaching of ERCs that are introduced by relative pronouns (ERPCs). This study is attempting to answer two research questions:

- (1) What are the effects of applying intralingual contrast and comparison on the teaching of ERPCs?
- (2) What are the students' challenges involved in learning ERPCs?

The next section will review the related literature, followed by the research methodology for current study. The findings and discussion will then be offered. Finally, the research will be concluded and directions for future research will be recommended.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English Relative Clauses

ERCs are subordinate clauses which modifies a head noun, phrase or sentence to ensure semantic clarity between clauses. They are known as adjective clauses because they perform almost the same function as of adjective or adjective phrases (Colovic-Markovic, 2018; Master, 1996; Zhengfeng, 2016). There are five relative pronouns in English, namely *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose* (Colovic-Markovic, 2018; Richards & Schmidt, 2013). For example,

- 1) The words that mean the same
- 2) The amber which was selected
- 3) The man who drove the car
- 4) The man whom Mary loved
- 5) The man whose brother travelled with

(Adapted from Phoocharoensil and Simargool (2010))

As showed in the examples 1)-5), the underlined sentences are the relative clauses to modify their head nouns. The relative pronouns *that*, *which*, *who* are the subjects of the clauses while *whom* is the object of the clause in the example 4) and *whose* is the dependent possessive relative pronoun in example 5).

2.2 Intralingual Analysis

Intralingual analysis refers to the analysis of similarities and differences within a single language. Unlike contrastive analysis, which focuses on comparing two or more languages, intralingual analysis examines variations within the same language. Intralingual analysis involves identifying and examining differences within a language system (Abdely, 2021; Jam, 2014). The intralingual analysis in this current study is the intralingual contrast and comparison between English personal pronouns and English relative pronouns.

There are some similarities and differences between English personal pronouns and English relative pronouns. English personal pronouns normally substitute a noun or a noun phrase, or

signal that reference is being made to something mentioned in recent linguistic or situational context (Crystal, 2003; Quirk et al., 1985) and they are influenced by person, gender, and number of use (Huddleston, 2002).

Same as personal pronouns, English relative pronouns could serve as a range of functions, such as subject, object, and genitive (Colovic-Markovic, 2018). Besides, they could also refer to a preceding noun phrase to which they are referred as antecedent or head noun. However, English relative pronouns and their head nouns are in the same matrix clauses, whereas personal pronouns are usually in a different sentence from where they are referred. In addition, English relative clauses have no singular or plural forms. Moreover, as direct object or object of comparative, relative pronouns could be deleted from clauses without any change in the meaning of the sentence (Colovic-Markovic, 2018).

2.3 Previous Studies on Teaching English Relative Clauses

Several scholars tested grammar teaching techniques on ERCs teaching. Haiying (2014) applied the effectiveness of the noticing function of output hypothesis on ERCs teaching in senior high school. Xiaorong and Li (2011) explored the task of output on ERCs teaching for college students, while Zhichao (2012) explored that the effect of written output tasks on ERCs teaching for students in senior high school.

Other scholars tested the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on ERCs teaching. Juan (2009) found that students with low levels of English proficiency could not easily master ERCs and it was better to use explicit instruction in teaching ERCs while Qimeng (2015) found that explicit instruction was better on restrictive relative clause and implicit instruction was better on the non-restrictive relative clauses.

Moreover, Jufang (2011) and Jianxiang (2007) applied context or situation-based grammar teaching on ERCs and found that the teaching method was more effective for students to master ERCs than traditional instruction. Yi (2016) applied the figure-ground theory with the application of scaffolding teaching on the ERCs teaching in Chinese senior high school.

Some scholars applied some teaching techniques on the ERCs teaching. Nakamori (2002) applied the hierarchical teaching technique on ERCs teaching found that the hierarchical teaching technique was better than linear teaching technique. Cheng (2018) applied the type frequency on ERCs teaching found that it helped students learning ERCs better.

All in all, there were several aspects of the studies on the teaching of ERCs. Compared with the traditional teaching approaches or techniques, what the teaching approaches the researchers applied were proved effectively and better because the approaches made students study actively and consciously. However, there were still some shortcomings. It was common teaching techniques for the previous ERCs teaching by explaining the functions of relative pronouns and what the relative pronouns refer to. Thus, the ways that the scholars lectured the structure of ERCs was not different from each other and their process of the previous teaching was still not clear for students. According to Hinkel (2012), Larsen-Freeman (2003) and Selinker and Rutherford (2013), teaching should be a process of the assimilation of former knowledge into new one, where both knowledge act on each other mutually in the teaching. Therefore, these teaching approaches or techniques are not enough in guiding students' learning ERCs. This study is to solve the problems by applying intralingual contrast and comparison between personal pronouns and relative

pronouns on the teaching of ERCs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Quasi experimental research design with purposive sampling technique was used to gather 90 students in control group (45 students) and experimental group (45 students) from Shiyan senior high school in Dianbai district of Guangdong province, China. The students were about 18 years old. There were 26 female and 19 male students in the control group and 25 female and 20 male students in the experimental group. All of them were from Dianbai district without prior experience in studying abroad. Besides, the students' homogeneity was almost the same in terms of English proficiency in the two classes by analyzing their test before pretest.

3.2 Instruments

Two standardized tests were used to gather the data from the participants of pretest and posttest groups that included multiple choice, sentences combination from previous studies (Chi, 2011; Na, 2019; Xiaoyan, 2019). And there were semi-structured interviews after posttest. The score of each test was 100 and required to be completed in 120 minutes. There were 16 questions to test to what extent students master the relative pronouns in the two groups. Lastly, sentence combination consisted of ten questions in total. They were to test to what extent students could use relative pronouns to combine two simple sentences into a matrix one under the new and traditional teaching method. The pretest mainly aimed to gather information related to what extent students have previous knowledge about ERCs. However, the posttest was conducted to find out whether the new teaching method was better than the traditional teaching method.

The semi-structured interview was to get detailed information in understanding students' challenges in the process of learning ERCs (Majid et al., 2017). There were four questions in the interview. The questions were to investigate students' feeling of ERCs, whether the students could understand ERCs, how students learned ERCs and whether the students had any problems in the learning of ERCs. The interview questions were viewed by three experts to ensure their validity and reliability. In addition, the researcher selected voluntary interviewees randomly through their average score $\geq 80\%$, $\geq 60\% < 80\%$ and $< 60\%$ of the posttest.

3.3 Procedure

The teaching of ERCs was conducted by an expert teacher in English language for nine years in the Chinese senior high school. Before the study, the author have met the teacher five times and made sure that she could fully understand the author's conception of the teaching of ERCs. The expert teacher lectured both the control group and experimental group in this study. The teaching lasted eight week and there were two English lessons for the teaching every week during the period. The order of the process in the current study is pretest, intervention, posttest and interviews. The process of the traditional teaching ERCs was stated as follows.

Firstly, the teacher showed students the rules of relative pronouns and what the ERCs were like. Secondly, the teacher showed students the rules of the relative pronouns *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*. Thirdly, the teacher showed how to choose a relative pronoun in a matrix sentence. Fourthly, the teacher asked students to do the exercises of ERCs.

The process of new teaching ERCs was stated as follows.

Firstly, the teacher showed students what the ERCs were like. Secondly, the teacher compared and contrasted the two simple sentences with the complex sentence with ERCs. For example, 1) This is Mary. She likes to play basketball. 2) This is Mary that likes to play basketball. Thirdly, the teacher asked students discuss the differences and similarities between the relative pronouns and personal pronouns, and then the teacher summarized the rules and the differences and similarities between the relative pronouns and personal pronouns for students. Fourthly, the teacher played the slides and showed how to transfer the simple sentences into complex sentences with ERCs by replacing the personal pronouns with relative pronouns, and then to ask students to do the exercises of ERCs.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Findings of Research Question One

Research question one (1) *What are the effects of applying intralingual contrast and comparison on the teaching of ERPCs?* aimed to investigate the effects of personal pronouns and relative pronouns in the learning of ERPCs.

To determine the answer to research question one (1), the study compared students' performance in the learning of ERPCs in the Multiple choices, and Sentences combination during the post-test between CG and EG, as follows:

Table 4.1 Test of Normality in Scores of Relative Pronoun Clauses in Multiple Choice and Sentences Combination of the Posttest.

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Scores of ERPCs in EG	0.160	45	0.005	0.912	45	0.002
Scores of ERPCs in CG	0.149	45	0.013	0.918	45	0.004

Table 4.1 showed that the significance value in data of scores of ERPCs in posttest in EG and CG were 0.002 and 0.004 respectively, which were smaller than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). They indicated that they were non-normal distribution. Thus, the researcher applied descriptive statistics to examine the data in the two groups first, and then applied Wilcoxon rank-sum test to examine whether the two data between two groups were significant or not, as follows.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Scores of Relative Pronoun Clauses in Multiple Choice and Sentences Combination of Posttest of Experimental Group.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (Median)	75th
RPCs in EG	45	34.44	12.135	14	72	26.00	32.00	42.00
RPCs in CG	45	23.42	12.155	6	72	15.00	22.00	29.00

Table 4.3 Test Statistics of Scores of Relative Pronoun Clauses in Multiple Choice and Sentences Combination of Posttest in the Experimental Study.

Scores of Relative Pronoun Clauses of Posttest	
Mann-Whitney U	455.000
Wilcoxon W	1490.000
Z	-4.508

Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
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Table 4.2 showed that after intervention, students in EG performed better at ERPCs under intralingual contrast and comparison since both their Mean scores (EG: 34.44 VS CG: 23.42) and Percentiles 50th (Median) in EG (32.00) was higher than VS CG (22.00). And Table 4.3 showed that Asymptotic significance (2-tailed) was $0.000 < 0.05$ in relative pronoun clauses of posttest between EG and CG, which indicated that there was significance difference in performance between the two groups. This finding also indicated that the effects of intralingual contrast and comparison between personal pronouns and relative pronouns were significant in the learning of ERPCs.

4.2 Findings of Research Question two

Research question two What are students' challenges involved in learning ERCs? aimed to investigate students' difficulties and challenges involved in learning ERCs under intralingual and interlingual contrast and comparison.

The respondents' responses to the questions were analyzed using open coding to identify emerging themes with core category selected in order to explain their perceptions and opinion toward challenges involved in ERCs learning.

From the interview data, the researcher listed the emerging themes and keywords mentioned by the respondents then reported the findings based on these responses. The emerging themes are presented on Table 4.4. There were three (3) main themes emerged: 1) Challenges of Memorization on rules of ERCs; 2) Challenges with relativizers; 3) Challenges of Short vocabularies in learning ERCs. The main themes mentioned by respondents to interview questions were elaborated in details in next sections.

Table 4.4 Emerging Themes from Students' Responses for Challenges.

Main Theme	Sub-themes
Challenges in Memorization on rules of ERCs	1) Need to memorize lots of information 2) Word order of ERCs; Translation
Challenges to judge which relativizer to use	-
Challenges in Short vocabularies in learning ERCs	-

4.2. 1 Challenge in Memorization of Rules of ERCs (Theme 1)

Challenge in Memorization of rules of information was the first (1) main theme that emerged from interview data. There were two (2) sub-themes in the main theme. The first sub-theme was that students needed to memorize lots of information. As mentioned above, there are five relative pronouns. And nearly all of them in English have different functions and usages in special conditions while in CRC, there is only one relative marker *De*. In addition, there are two kinds of ERCs (restrictive RCs and non-restrictive RCs), while in Chinese mandarin, there is no non-restrictive RCs. Thus, students had to memorize the usages of lot of information. Most of the respondents had similar answer on the sub-theme of Theme 1, which was that they needed to memorize lots of information. The respondents' views about the sub-theme (1) were quoted in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Respondents' Views about Memorization of Lots of Information.

Respondents	Interview Excerpts Quote
1	Many types. Many types (Chen Haiyi).
2	There is lots of information (Liang Jiaying).

4	The difficulty of ERCs is medium. Then, there are many things to memorize. In fact, oh, it's not medium difficulty. Remember those associations and those usages. In fact, it is all (Li Yongrou).
6	Mainly because of the large amount of information. It has a lot to remember (Zhang Jianhu).

As for second sub-theme of Theme 1, the challenges for students were word order of ERCs and Translation. The word order of ERCs is different from CRCs. ERCs appear to the right of their head nouns whereas CRCs are the kind of pre-nominal RCs which appear to the left of head noun phrases, while the word order is SVO (Diessel, 2007; Dryer, 1992; Lili, 2017; Shenai et al., 2016; Yiming & Jinping, 2016; Yuncai et al., 2010; Zhengda, 2006). Besides, the RCs always come after relativizers in English while in Chinese mandarin, RCs always come first before head nouns. Thus, students also considered it as a challenge involved in learning ERCs, including the translation of RCs in English and Chinese. The respondents' views about the sub-theme (2) were quoted in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6 Respondents' Views about Word Order and Translation.

Respondents	Interview Excerpts Quote
2	Word order and translations are problems. English relative clauses are harder than Chinese relative clauses. I feel that sometimes I can't translate it. I can't adjust the word order. It's still a word order problem (Liang Jiaying).
3	Yes, word order problem (Wang Siyi).

4.2.2 Challenge in Relativizers (Theme 2)

Challenges to judge which relativizer to use were the second main themes that emerged from interview data. The challenges for students were difficulties to judge which relativizer to use in ERCs. Since there are five relativizers in ERCs and these relativizers have different usage and functions in ERCs, it would make students feel difficult to judge which relativizer they should use in ERCs. Actually, students faced their difficulties in the Sentences combination and Translation of Pre and posttest. Thus, students had difficulties at choosing relativizers. The respondents' views about the theme were quoted in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7 Respondents' Views about Difficulties to Choose Relativizers.

Respondents	Interview Excerpts Quote
2	For example, in these questions, I think if there are 2 sentences and have many nouns. Sometimes I can't tell which noun it should refer to (Liang Jiaying).
4	Sometimes it is impossible to judge whether I should use an who or conjunction whom, whose or the ordinary conjunction like 'which' (Zhang Jianhu).

4.2.3 Challenge in Short vocabularies in learning ERCs (Theme 3)

Challenge in short vocabularies in learning ERCs was the third (3) theme that emerged from interview data. Vocabulary is a crucial aspect of language learning, as emphasized by Harmon et al. (2009), Alqahtani (2015), and Brooks et al. (2021). According to the survey of Jianbin, Yuedong, and Ying (2007), the average of vocabulary size of 217 new students in senior school was only 306 words in 1100 words. Thus, students faced challenges of short vocabularies in learning English, including learning ERCs. The respondents' views about the theme were quoted in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8 Respondents' Views about Challenges in Short Vocabularies in Learning ERCs.

Respondents	Interview Excerpts Quote
3	I don't understand some words (Wang Siyi).

5 Personally, I think multiple choices are more difficult to understand than these translation questions. Yes, and then there are some new word. Multiple choices have many words and long sentence, and then there are some unknown phrases (Yang Zhidong).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

From the findings, it could be concluded that the students of experimental group performed better than students of control group. The new teaching method under intralingual contrast and comparison was found helpful for the students as they were able to achieve higher performance, hence, improved their understanding of ERCs, compared to the traditional method of learning. Intralingual contrast and comparison had made students learn from what they had mastered to what they were going to learn. It correlated with the Cognitive code approach, which claims that the process of learning should be a process of the assimilation of former knowledge into new one, where both knowledge act on each other mutually (Hu, 2010; Kalsoom, 2013; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Selinker & Rutherford, 2013; Tian, 2018).

Besides, according to Long (1991), the instruction the primary focus of attention should be on the form that is being targeted. Thus, learners need to focus on form in the learning language grammar activities (DeKeyser, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Since the experimental students under intralingual contrast and comparison performed better when they were doing the tests and reveals better understanding ERCs than students in control group. Hence, it can be concluded that the new teaching method was effective for ERCs teaching.

However, students still faced several challenges in learning ERCs under intralingual and interlingual contrast and comparison. The students still needed to memorized lots of information, rules of ERCs, short vocabularies and to judge what relativize to use.

Taken overall, this study revealed that the new teaching method for English relative clauses was more effective than the traditional teaching method, regardless of the exercises of Multiple Choice or Sentences combinations. The students of experimental group had a better understanding of ERCs in doing these excises. Thus, the new teaching method was more effective than the traditional teaching method since it provided a more in-depth comprehension of ERCs for students.

This study has gained some significant findings by carrying out the experiment and analyzing the data. It could give the English teacher some inspirations on teaching ERCs from a new angle. However, there are also some deficiencies. Firstly, the study was limited to Dianbai district, Maoming city, Guangdong province. Dianbai district is a remote district and located in the southernmost part of Guangdong province. Students' English levels in Dianbai district are not as good as other places. Thus, there would be a possibility of different findings if a big city or small town was selected for the current research.

Secondly, the researcher conducted restricted research for short period of time. It lasted only 8 weeks. If the students were learning ERCs for prolonged period of time with less constrains of time and duration, the results might be much better in enhancing their learning of ERCs.

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