The boy who Mary loves him is called John: A study of the resumptive pronoun problem and its correction strategies

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Abstract

The resumptive pronoun problem is a very common problem encountered by many learners of English as a second or foreign language irrespective of their L1 backgrounds. This article discusses the nature and possible causes of the problem, outlines some pedagogical implications, and suggests ways which teachers can use to help students overcome the problem. It is argued that for Hong Kong learners whose native language is Cantonese, which is a dialect of Chinese, the source of the problem is both L1- and L2-related. The acceptability of resumptive pronouns in Chinese and the adoption of a processing strategy to retain the logical structure of a clause are arguably the main causes for the problem. A consciousness-raising approach to remedial instruction, which aims at arousing learners’ awareness of the nature of the problem and the target language norms, is suggested as a possible remedial measure.

Introduction

Students often make errors in the process of learning a second or foreign language. It is unrealistic to expect a learner learning a second or foreign language to be able to produce, at the early stages, only forms which are correct or non-deviant in native speakers’ terms. The errors that a learner makes give important evidence that s/he is in the process of acquiring the language and indicates his/her knowledge of the language (Corder, 1981: 8). Because errors cannot be self-corrected until relevant (to that error) input (implicit or explicit) has been provided and converted into intake by the learner (James, 1998: 83), teachers should be aware of the nature and causes of their students’ errors so as to be able to design appropriate and effective remedial instructional materials (input) suitable for helping students overcome their errors. In this article, I will discuss the nature and possible causes of a common error encountered by many ESL learners irrespective of their L1 backgrounds - the resumptive pronoun problem, with special reference to Hong Kong ESL learners whose mother tongue is Cantonese, and suggest ways which teachers can use to help students overcome it. A brief discussion
to compare and contrast the formation of relative clauses in English and Chinese\(^1\), as well as the pedagogical implications which arise from the relative markedness of different types of relative pronouns, will also be given.

**The resumptive pronoun problem**

The resumptive pronoun problem is a common problem encountered by many ESL learners at various proficiency levels in the formation of complex sentences with relative clauses irrespective of their L1 backgrounds. Examples of this error include\(^2\):

1. *There is one thing *that* I can remember it very clearly.
2. *I’ve met a teacher *that* she changes my life.
3. *“Go in for” is a phrasal verb *which* the meaning of *it* is very different from the literal meaning (Yip and Matthews, 1991: 117).
4. *I just tried to get something每人 thinks *they* are beautiful.

The core problem lies in the fact that in the formation of relative structures in complex sentences, the relative pronoun (the underlined constituents in the above sentences) is unnecessarily shadowed by a following pronoun (the bolded constituents in the above sentences) in a position which would have been occupied by the pronoun had the clause not been formed as a relative structure. In cases like examples (1 - 3), an overt relative pronoun is used in the formation of a relative clause, whereas in cases like example (4), no overt relative pronoun (i.e. ZERO ∅) is used. The functions of the relative pronouns (and the redundant pronouns) vary from sentence to sentence. The pronoun can be the object of the relative clause (as in example 1), the subject of the relative clause (as in examples 2 & 4), the prepositional object of the relative clause (as in example 3), or serve other functions.

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\(^1\) Because the mother tongue of most ESL learners in Hong Kong is Cantonese, which is a dialect of Chinese, the use of the word *Chinese* throughout this article refers to *Chinese-Cantonese* when reference is made to these learners.

\(^2\) Examples (1, 2 and 4) are adapted from authentic data that the author (and her collaborator) collected in a recent study which assessed the cross-linguistic influence of Chinese on the acquisition of English as a second language by Hong Kong learners at various proficiency levels (CityU Strategic Research Grant Project no. 7000975).
A cross-linguistic survey of relativization patterns by Keenan and Comrie (1977) suggests that the ease with which relative clauses may be formed follows an Accessibility Hierarchy (AH), as in the following:

SU (subject) > DO (direct object) > IO (indirect object) > OBL (oblique; in English, prepositional object) > GEN (genitive) > OCOMP (object of comparison)\(^3\)

This hierarchy suggests that if a language can relativize an NP out of a given position, it can relativize an NP from all higher positions on the same hierarchy, but not necessarily all lower positions (Eckman, 1984: 87). While English allows relativization on all six of the above positions, some languages may allow relativization only on certain positions. Tagalog, for example, allows relativization only on the position highest up in the hierarchy, the subject position, but not others (Odlin 1989: 101). The acceptability of resumptive pronouns in relativized structures also varies from language to language: while Persian marks direct object, indirect object and other constituents (positions 2 - 6) with a resumptive pronoun instead of a relative pronoun (Keenan, 1985: 146; cited in Odlin, 1989: 100), English does not allow a resumptive pronoun in any relativized structure, regardless of the function of the pronoun in the clause. Research shows that ESL/EFL learners whose native language does allow resumptive pronouns in certain positions tend to accept English sentences with resumptive pronouns in the same positions (Singler, 1988), and speakers of any native language are likely to accept English resumptive pronouns in the lower positions such as the genitive and object of comparison positions, regardless of whether these resumptive pronouns are allowed or required in their native language (Gass, 1979, 1983; Hyltenstam, 1984). Such research findings are in line with the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) first put forward by Eckman (1977), which says that the acquisition of a language area which is more marked\(^4\) (positions

\(^3\) Examples of English relative structures in the different positions of the AH include:

- **SU**: The boy who loves Mary is called John.
- **DO**: The boy whom Mary loves is called John.
- **IO**: The boy to whom Mary gave the book is called John.
- **OBL**: The boy from whom Mary got the message is called John.
- **GEN**: The boy whose mother played at the concert is called John.
- **OCOMP**: The boy who Mary is taller than is called John.

\(^4\) According to Eckman (1981a, 1981b), a phenomenon A in some language is more marked than another phenomenon B, if, cross-linguistically, the presence of A necessarily implies the presence of B, but the presence of B does not necessarily implies the presence of A.
towards the lower end of the AH) implies the acquisition of a language area which is less marked (positions higher up in the AH), but not vice versa.

As far as ESL learners in Hong Kong are concerned, the resumptive pronoun problem is one of the major problems that they have with the use of English relative clauses (Newbrook, 1988). Though there has not been much research investigating the validity of the MDH for the acquisition of English relativization by Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong, resumptive pronouns are fairly widespread in the writing of these learners at various levels. Students at a more advanced proficiency level, such as university students, may tend to use resumptive pronouns at a position towards the lower end of the AH (the more marked, or ‘difficult’ ones), such as those involving genitive relatives (Yip and Matthews, 1991), whereas students at a lower proficiency level may use resumptive pronouns even at the subject position (the least marked position).

The formation of relative clauses in English and Chinese - a contrastive study

To understand the differences and similarities between English and Chinese relative clauses, we need to compare and contrast the formation of these clauses in the two languages. Chinese, the mother tongue of the vast majority of students in Hong Kong and the mother tongue of the largest group of ESL learners today (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Dzau, 1990), differs significantly from English in the formation of relative structures. In forming relative clauses, English employs a number of relative pronouns, namely, who, whom, which, that, whose, and also the ZERO relative pronoun. The choice of a relative pronoun depends on its function in the clause and the register: whether the head noun refers to human or non-human entities and whether the sentence in question is formal or informal. In Chinese, however, relative clauses are formed by the use of nominalizations with the nominalizer 的 (dik1), and there are no relative pronouns in Chinese. The following shows some examples of English relative clauses and their Chinese equivalents:

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5 In this article, all Chinese examples are given in Standard Written Chinese - the variety used in the written medium in Hong Kong, whereas the transliterations are given in Cantonese - the variety widely used in the spoken medium in Hong Kong. The Chinese characters are transliterated using the Jyutping system promoted by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (Fan et al., 1997). At the end of each romanized Cantonese syllable is a tone mark (represented as a number) indicating one of the six distinctive tones in Hong Kong Cantonese.
### Table 1: Examples of English constructions with restrictive relative clauses and their Chinese equivalents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English constructions with relative clauses</th>
<th>Chinese equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5a. a girl who is beautiful</td>
<td>5b. 一個美麗的女孩子</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jat1 go3 mei5 lai5 dik1 neoi5 haai4 zi2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>one CL(^6) beautiful NOM(^7) girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a. the girl who is sitting over there</td>
<td>6b. 坐在那邊的女孩子</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zo6 zoi6 naa5 bin1 dik1 neoi5 haai4 zi2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sit at there NOM girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a. the person whom she loves</td>
<td>7b. 她愛的人</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>taa1 oi3 dik1 jan4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>she love NOM person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the above examples, Chinese relative structures are very different from their English counterparts. Whereas a relative pronoun (such as *who, which, ZERO*) is used in an English restrictive relative clause, no relative pronoun is used in its Chinese equivalent. In terms of word order, there is also a very significant difference - in Chinese, the head noun comes at the end of the structure after the pre-modifying nominalizer, but in English the head noun comes at the beginning of the sentences before the post-modifying clause.

In many dialects of Chinese including Cantonese, a resumptive pronoun is needed in a relative clause where the head noun is not the subject or direct object of the predicate, where the head noun is an indirect object, or where the head noun follows the word *baa2* (Li and Thompson, 1981: 584; Matthews and Yip, 1994: 110). The following example demonstrates the use of resumptive pronouns in Chinese relative clauses:

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\(^6\) CL is the abbreviation for Chinese Classifiers such as 個 go3, 張 zoeng1.

\(^7\) NOM is the abbreviation for the Chinese Nominalizer 的 dik1.
8. ngo5 sung3 lai5 mat6 kap1 taa1 dik1 naa5 go3 jan4
   I give gift to him NOM that CL person
   (the person who I gave a gift to)
   cf. *the person who I gave a gift to him

Such a phenomenon, however, does not exist in English, as no resumptive pronouns are allowed regardless of the functions of the head nouns.

Possible causes of the resumptive pronoun problem

A number of factors may contribute to Chinese learners’ use of resumptive pronouns in English relative clauses. Although it was argued earlier that ‘knowledge of the Chinese structure cannot readily be transferred in constructing an English RC’ (Yip and Matthews, 1991: 112-113) because of the fundamental differences in the formation of English and Chinese relative clauses, the acceptability of a resumptive pronoun in some Chinese relative clauses (such as sentence 8) may be a reason for the problem. Cantonese learners of English may transfer their habit of using Chinese resumptive pronouns to English relative clauses and produce the erroneous sentences discussed above.

However, the use of resumptive pronouns by Cantonese learners of English even in the subject position argues against “a straightforward transfer account” (Gisborne 2002: 151). Despite the fact that the use of a Chinese resumptive pronoun is not allowed in the subject and direct object positions, there is evidence from our examples that resumptive pronouns are also found in these positions. Since native speakers of English may also use resumptive pronouns when they try to acquire other languages (e.g. Chinese), it may be argued that resumptive pronouns are actually “universal features of interlanguage” (Yip and Matthews, 1991: 117; cited in Gisborne, 2002: 151).

From the perspective of information processing, the learner’s lax monitoring of his/her own language output may be another cause for the resumptive pronoun problem. It has been argued in the literature that when the relative pronoun is immediately adjacent to the original position of the pronoun, as in the case of subject relatives, the formation of relative clauses is less difficult than when the relative pronoun is separated by the verb and some other constituents, as in the cases of direct object, indirect object and prepositional object (Hawkins, 1989). In the formation of a relative clause, especially a long one, students may have forgotten the presence of the relative
pronoun by the time the original position of the pronoun is reached, so they will tend to add a resumptive pronoun. Because the use of a resumptive pronoun allows the logical structure of a full clause to be retained, it may also be a processing strategy to facilitate language information processing on the part of the writer/speaker (Yip and Matthews, 1991: 117). Example (3) above exemplifies this. With the addition of the resumptive pronoun it, the logical structure of the clause the meaning of it is very different ... is retained, and students’ processing of the information contained in the clause may then be facilitated.

Implications for teaching

The relative markedness of the different types of relative pronouns along the AH have two important implications for teaching. The first is the prediction that “the natural order of acquisition follows the degree of markedness of the structures in question” (Eckman, 1985: 296). This suggests that relative structures involving subject relative pronouns should be easier to learn than structures involving direct objects, which in turn should be easier to learn than those involving indirect objects, and so on along the hierarchy. Based on this prediction, if teachers are to help students overcome the resumptive pronoun problem, they should follow the order of natural acquisition and present remedial materials which cater for the relatively less marked positions (e.g. subject, direct object) before those which cater for the relatively more marked ones (e.g. object of comparison, genitive).

The second prediction, however, is that ‘the direction of generalization of learning is from more marked structures to less marked structures’ (Eckman, 1985: 296). Based on this prediction, only the most marked member of a set of structures is taught, while none of the less marked structures is taught. It is believed that once the most marked member of the set is learned, the learner will be able to generalize to the less marked structures automatically (Eckman, 1985: 296).

In the author’s view, both predictions are helpful signposts illuminating the design of remedial teaching materials for resumptive pronouns in the Hong Kong context: For elementary or intermediate ESL learners in Hong Kong, remedial instructional materials focusing on the relatively less marked positions in the AH (e.g. the subject or direct object positions) should be more useful and needed than materials targeted at the more marked positions such as the genitive or object of comparison positions, because complex sentences
such as examples (9 & 10) below are probably beyond the linguistic repertoire of such students. Remedial instructional materials focusing on these structures, thus, may be difficult to master and should perhaps not be put on the teaching priority list.

9. The boy *whose mother* played at the concert is called John.
10. The boy *who Mary is taller than* is called John.

However, with regard to the actual design and delivery of remedial instruction, Eckman’s (1985) second prediction is enlightening. Having established the priority that sophisticated relative structures should be dealt with only when students have reached a certain acquisitional stage, teachers may still be faced with the problem of how to maximize the effects of teaching. In the author’s view, materials which focus on a more marked item (e.g. the direct object position) should be more useful and cost-effective, as they allow students an opportunity to generalize about the use of a less marked item (e.g. the subject position) upon successful mastery of the more marked one. It is with these predictions in mind that the author has designed some remedial instructional materials which target the use of direct object relative pronouns (the second position along the AH)\(^8\).

**Correcting the problem**

The remedial instructional materials designed adopts a Consciousness-Raising (CR) approach (Sharwood Smith, 1981; Rutherford, 1987, 1988; Schmidt, 1990), which aims at arousing students’ awareness of the nature of the problem and the norms of the target language. There are procedurized steps supported by instructive examples and explicit rules to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure and guide them to approximate the target language norms. Remedial input is structured in such a way that the cognitive effort required of students to proceed from one procedurized step to the next is minimal.

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\(^8\) It should be noted that the materials were not designed for students who have demonstrated mastery of relatives in subject position. Instead, they were designed to help those students who were deficient in the formation of both subject and direct object relatives, in the hope that students can generalize about the use of relatives in subject position once they have mastered relatives in direct object position.
As sentences with resumptive pronouns may or may not have explicit relative pronouns, different correction strategies will be given to help students tackle the different cases. To correct erroneous sentences like examples (1) to (3) with explicit relative pronouns, teachers (T) can go through the following procedure with students (Ss) (see Appendix for a complete handout designed for students’ use in the classroom):

i. Ss underline the relative pronoun and circle the pronoun that appears in the rest of the sentence.
   e.g. *There is one thing that I can remember [it] clearly.*

ii. Ss identify what the two pronouns refer to.

iii. When Ss become aware that the two pronouns are co-referential referring to the same thing/person (e.g. ‘one thing’ in the above sentence), T tells Ss that the second pronoun is unnecessary/redundant.

iv. Ss correct the erroneous sentence by crossing out the second pronoun.
   i.e. *There is one thing that I can remember clearly.*

To correct erroneous sentences like example (4) without an explicit relative pronoun, teachers (T) can go through the following procedure with students (Ss):

i. Ss underline the pronoun in the post-modifying clause.
   e.g. *There is one thing I can remember [it] clearly.*

ii. Ss identify what the pronoun refers to.

iii. Ss replace the pronoun with the noun phrase it refers to.
   e.g. *There is one thing I can remember one thing clearly.*

iv. Ss rewrite the complex sentence into two simple ones by separating the post-modifying clause from the head noun.
   e.g. *There is one thing. I can remember one thing clearly.*

v. T introduces the use of relative pronouns in a complex sentence.

vi. Ss combine the pair of sentences using a suitable relative pronoun and cross out the redundant element in the sentence (i.e. the repeated noun phrase)
   e.g. *There is one thing which I can remember one thing clearly.*
   ✓*There is one thing which I can remember clearly.*

As can be seen from the above demonstration, the teaching procedure adopted in the remedial instructional materials is *algorithmic* in nature, in the sense
that there is a set of rules or procedures for students to follow, and students have to make intermediate decisions in the process of working out the correct form or structure (For more details about the algorithmic approach, see Chan, Kwan and Li, 2002; Li and Chan, 2000: 336). It is believed that through carefully-designed instructional steps, learners will be guided to ‘see’ the anomaly and approximate the target language structure effectively.

This set of remedial instructional materials on resumptive pronouns, together with the materials designed for twelve other error types, such as faulty parallelism, pseudo-tough movement, and the incorrect use of the connective on the contrary, was tried out in a research project, which involved six secondary and tertiary teachers who actually used the materials in class with their students (over 200 in total), as well as a number of tertiary students (21 in total) who used the materials in a self-learning mode. Feedback on the materials was collected through three different channels (a) focus-group meetings with the participating teachers, (b) post-teaching protocols filled out by the teachers, and (c) self-access evaluation forms filled out by the students. Pre-, post- and delayed post-tests before and after remedial instruction were also conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the materials on helping the students improve on the error types in question.

As far as quantitative data is concerned, it was found that the students performed much better and made significant improvements in the post-tests and delayed post-tests when compared to the pre-tests (For details, see Chan and Li, 2002, Chan forthcoming). For most of the error types under investigation, no significant loss was found in the delayed post-tests despite a time lag of over 4 weeks. As far as qualitative data is concerned, it was reported by the participating teachers (in the post-teaching protocols and focus-group meetings) that the approach was effective, versatile and flexible. The students became better aware of the problems in the erroneous structures, their use of the taught items improved, and the materials helped them gain concrete grammar knowledge. The students who used the materials in a self-learning mode also commented on the user-friendliness of the materials (For more details, see Chan, Kwan and Li, 2002).

Conclusion

The resumptive pronoun problem is a common problem encountered by many ESL/EFL learners irrespective of their L1 backgrounds. For speakers whose mother tongue is Chinese, L1-interference may be one of the reasons
for the problem. A lack of awareness of the functions and correct usage of English relative pronouns and the use of a resumptive pronoun to facilitate information processing may be possible causes. To help students overcome the problem of using resumptive pronouns in relative structures, teachers should design remedial materials relevant to their needs. I believe that the consciousness-raising approach to error correction suggested in this article, which aims at arousing students’ awareness of the nature of the problem and the norms of the target languages, should be an effective remedial measure.

Although the teaching procedures and materials suggested here were designed specifically for elementary/intermediate Chinese students in Hong Kong for helping them overcome resumptive pronouns in relatively ‘easier’ positions towards the upper end of the AH, the same approach may well be applied in the design of remedial instructional materials for learners of other L1 backgrounds to overcome resumptive pronouns used in relatively ‘more difficult’ positions towards the lower end of the hierarchy. It is worth investigating, in future studies, how the approach could be adapted for the use of learners of different L1 backgrounds learning different types of relative clauses.

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References


Singler, J. (1988). ‘The homogeneity of the substrate as a factor in 

Appendix

A handout designed to help students tackle the resumptive pronoun problem using the consciousness-raising approach to remedial instruction

1. What is wrong with the following sentence?
   (i) × Mary found the dress that her aunt wore it last week.

2. Divide the sentence into 2 parts by rewriting them in the space provided below
   (ii) ____________________  ____________________
       A                             B

3. Identify all the pronouns in B (e.g. he, she, it, I, you, we, etc.)?
   ____________________

4. Circle the pronoun it in B.

5. What does the pronoun it refer to? ____________________

6. Underline the relative pronoun that in B.

7. What does the relative pronoun that refer to? ____________________

8. Compare your answer to item 5 with your answer to item 7. What can you find?
   ____________________  =  ____________________  =  ____________________

   A               B
   Mary found the dress that her aunt wore it last week.
   ↑________↑________↑
   =    =
9. Since the pronoun *it* = the relative pronoun *that* in B, the pronoun *it* is NOT needed.

Rule of Thumb

In a relative clause, only the relative pronoun is needed. The pronoun which refers to the same thing/person as the relative pronoun is redundant.

i.e. if relative pronoun x = pronoun y
     then delete pronoun y

e.g. Mary found the dress that her aunt wore it last week.

10. Rewrite B with the pronoun *it* deleted.

11. Rewrite the whole sentence.

12. Now look at sentence (iii).
(iii) I lost the pen I bought it yesterday.

13. Divide the sentence into 2 parts by rewriting them in the space provided below

A

B

14. Identify all the pronouns in B? ______________________

15. Circle the pronoun *it* in B.

16. What does the pronoun *it* refer to? ______________________

17. Rewrite B by deleting the pronoun *it* and inserting a relative pronoun at the beginning.________________________

18. Rewrite the whole sentence by joining A and B.

19. The relative pronoun is OPTIONAL if it is the OBJECT of the verb. Rewrite the whole sentence without the relative pronoun.

20. Compare your sentence with the original (sentence iii). Are there any redundant pronouns?____________
21. Follow-up Exercise. Determine whether the following sentences are correct or wrong, and rewrite the wrong ones.

a. He is the man who he was on duty yesterday.
b. She is the teacher that she changes my life.
c. There is one thing I can remember clearly.
d. I cannot find the book I read yesterday.
e. John lost the wallet which he put it in his bag yesterday.
f. They want to build a tower which it is the tallest in the world.