

Incomplete acquisition of relativisers in L2 English

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We account for aspects of L2 English Relative Clauses (Rcs) by six groups, Brazilians, Mexicans and Italians (“Romance”) and Russians, Chinese and Germans (RCGs).

8,760 sentences containing an RC were drawn from a parsed subcorpus of EFCAMDAT (Geertzen et.al 2013) of intermediate learners (CEFR B1). The following were observed.

(I) “that”-Rcs: RCGs rely on the wh-strategy; only 30% of their Rcs were introduced by “that”, contrasting with 70% by Romance learners. (No L1 effect on overall rate of RC production, unlike Schachter 1974)

(ii) animacy: unlike Romance learners, RCGs avoid animate heads in “that”-RCs (“women that work in this office”), a statistically significant difference between groups.

(iii) multiple Rcs: productive use by Brazilians (15% of all RCs—e.g. “a girl with his father that played with an instrument to take money that people that listend to pay in Paris”); absent from Chinese.

(iv) Non-head modifying Rcs: produced by Chinese learners: “it is a love story that four girl lived together in Shanghai”; absent from Brazilian data.

(v) Headless wh-Rcs: All groups produce headless wh-Rcs like “who gets the most points is the winner”. (Chinese: 56% of wh-RCs, Germans and Brazilians: 50%, Russians 30%).

We propose that the apparent “that” Rcs of RCGs involve the declarative subordinator, rather than a relativiser. Specifically, the featural specification is: Romance: [that: Comp, +pred] vs RGC: [that: Comp, -pred] (Hsieh 2015). Romance learners transfer the predicative feature of the complementiser from their L1 which yields productive “that”-Rcs, multiple Rcs, no animacy avoidance. RCGs resort to the wh-strategy for relativisation, choosing “who” for animate heads. With inanimates they use “what” (non-target) and “which” but also resort to “that”. Failure to acquire the relativiser property of “that” yields overuse of who-Rcs, animacy avoidance with “that”, absence of multiple Rcs and non-head-modifying RCs. These effects persist until advanced levels.

Keywords: animacy, corpus, L1 effect, L2 English, relative clauses.