Relative Clauses in Written Hong Kong English: A Corpus-Based Study

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Relative clause (RC) is a language structure that appears in the English language curriculum in second and foreign language contexts across the globe. For all the prominence of such a language structure in the curriculum, Cantonese-English learners in Hong Kong appear to possess substantial difficulty in their development of English RCs.

Following up Gisborne (2000)’s study on relative clauses in Hong Kong English, the present corpus-based study of relative clauses in written Hong Kong English possesses both developmental and sociolinguistic dimensions. On one hand, it aims at investigating to what extent three hypotheses explicating second language development of English relative clauses, videlicet the Keenan and Comrie (1977)’s Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy, Kuno (1974)’s Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis, and Hamilton (1994)’s Subject-Object Hierarchy Hypothesis, are supported by data of written Hong Kong English respectively as well as significance of the three hypotheses in English language education in Hong Kong. On the other hand, it is intended to examine quantitative and qualitative differences between relative clauses in written Hong Kong English as well as those in written British English as well as significance of such differences in English language education in Hong Kong.

Primary language data of relative clauses were collected from written components of the International Corpus of English – Hong Kong (ICE-HK) and the International Corpus of English – Great Britain (ICE-GB). Frequencies of occurrence and syntactic structures of distinct types of relative clauses were computed and analyzed respectively. Knowledge on Cantonese-English learners’ development of RCs and that on RCs in written HKE are expected to inform second language grammar instruction.

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