



The Acquisition of English Relative Clauses

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Abstract

English relative clauses (RCs) present a major obstacle for Iranian learners trying to improve their communicative skills in English. Not only is the English RC structurally different from its Iranian counterpart, there is also a large number of RC types the Iranian learner must deal with. In order to prepare effective lesson plans that help Iranian learners overcome the difficulties involved in acquiring English RCs, teachers need to be aware of what the structural differences are, what tendencies Iranian learners have in acquiring the RC grammatical feature, and what options are available for teaching. This first paper of a two-part series examines specific structural differences between English and Iranian RCs, summarizes research that has been done on Iranian learners' acquisition and production of English RCs, and proposes that consciousness-raising (CR) and "noticing" activities provide the most effective classroom instruction for Iranian learners at the university level. An explanation of the rationale behind the use of CR activities and why they are suitable for Iranian learners is also included.

Key words: relative clauses, acquisition, production, structural differences

Introduction

Sources of Difficulty

The chief source of difficulty for the Iranian learner's acquisition of English RCs may lie in the differences in the way RCs are formed. The most basic of these differences is that the RC in English is usually placed after the noun it describes, while the Iranian equivalent must be put before it.

This feature is referred to as "branching direction." English is primarily "right-branching," that is, objects are placed to the right of verbs, noun-phrases to the right of their prepositional heads, and RCs to the right of their head nouns. Iranian is a "left-branching" language and has an object-verb word order. Iranian noun phrases are put to the left of their postpositional heads, and RCs to the left of their head nouns (Rutherford, 1987: 133). In their initial exposure to English RCs, Iranian learners of English should be expected to face difficulties in having to "think backwards" in trying to understand or produce an unfamiliar grammatical construction. Another feature involves the relative pronoun itself. The English relative pronoun has a variety of forms ("who," "which," "that," etc.), the choice of which may be constrained by gender and/or case, whereas there is no relative pronoun in Iranian. In addition, the English relative pronoun is deletable in many cases when it is clause