

## English Relativization and Learners' Problems

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The present study aims at investigating the learning strategies on which Thai EFL learners rely in learning English relative clauses (ERCs). Not only do these strategies facilitate their ERC acquisition, but they are also found to lead them to certain kinds of problems. Such problems related to the learning strategies are first language transfer, transfer of training, avoidance, and overgeneralization. Thai learners seem to transfer a lack of some relative clause types in their native language to learning L2 ERCs. They also avoid the RC constructions, e.g. the object-of-preposition relative and the genitive relative, as well as the relativizers *whose* and *whom*, which they probably consider too complex or unfamiliar. In addition, the previous ERC instruction apparently has a negative effect on their subsequent ERC learning, making the learners overproduce the relative marker *that*. Furthermore, they even extend the use of *that* to non-restrictive RCs, which is grammatically incorrect in English.

**Key Words:** English relative clauses, learning strategies, learners' problems, error analysis, second language acquisition

### 1 Introduction

Relative clause constructions in English have been considered to be complicated and problematic for most EFL and ESL learners, compared with some other structures in the language (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Research in second language acquisition has revealed that the problems with which English learners in general are confronted concern first language (L1) influence (e.g. Chang, 2004; Chen, 2004; Gass, 1979, 1984; Lado, 1957; Schachter, 1974), avoidance (e.g. Chiang, 1980; Gass, 1980; Li, 1996; Maniruzzaman, 2008; Schachter, 1974; Zhao, 1989), and overgeneralization (e.g. Erdogan, 2005; Selinker, 1992). Even though a great

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number of studies, some of which have been mentioned above, were devoted to English relative clause (ERC) acquisition by second language (L2) learners speaking different native languages, there existed only a few works examining ERCs used by Thai EFL learners (e.g. Lekawatana et al., 1969),

The present study was aimed at investigating Thai EFL learners' ERCs in a comprehensive fashion, presenting the discovered authentic problems based on the strategies applied in learning the RC system in English. In addition, the study also provides useful explanations for these problems. The next section will review the related literature, followed by the research methodology for the present study. The findings and discussion will then be offered. Finally, the conclusion will come as the last section.

### 2 Review of Literature

#### 2.1 Thai and English relative clauses

A Thai relative clause is introduced by one of the three possible markers: *thîi*, *sýŋ*, and *an*. The most common relative marker is *thîi*, which can be used in all contexts, whereas *sýŋ* usually occurs in more formal situations, e.g. formal speech or academic writing. As for *an*, it expresses a more formal tone than the other two, frequently used in highly formal writing, such as in religious texts (Sornhiran, 1978).

(1) dèk                    *thîi* / *sýŋ* / \**an*            chǎn            líaŋ            maa...  
child                    REL            I            bring up            come....  
'The child that I brought up ...'

(Sornhiran, 1978, p. 177)

(2) phét                    *thîi* / *sýŋ* / *an*            mii            khâa            mahāsāan  
diamond                    REL            have            value            tremendous  
'the diamond that has tremendous value...'

(Sornhiran, 1978, p. 177)

It seems that *an* is not normally used in an informal context, as in (1), while all the relative markers are allowed in a formal context, as in (2).

Like those in Thai, English RCs, are also right-branching, i.e. preceding their head nouns. There are eight relativizers in English, whereas only three are existent in Thai. Specifically, English relative markers are of two main types. *Who*, *whom*, *which*, *whose* and *that* are classified as relative pronouns, while *when*, *where*, and *why* are known as relative adverbs<sup>2</sup> (Master, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> The present study does not focus on the acquisition of RCs introduced by relative adverbs. Accordingly, the relative adverbs will not be further discussed.

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*Who* and *whom* are employed when the RC head noun refers to a person, as in (3). They differ in that *whom* can only occupy an object position, as in (4). When the head refers to a thing or an animal, *which* is selected. *That* can be used for things, animals, or persons (Azar, 2003), as in (3)-(6). Both *which* and *that* can occupy a subject or object position. As for *whose*, it is the possessive relative word for persons as well as things (Swan, 2005), as in (7) and (8). An omission of relativizer (*zero* or  $\emptyset$ ) is allowed when a relative marker serves as a RC object, as in (3) and (6).

- (3) A teacher *who/whom/that/*  $\emptyset$  every student respects is smiling now.
- (4) A teacher *who/that* likes syntax is keen on teaching grammar.
- (5) The dog *which/that* is sleeping near me is Alex's.
- (6) The car *which/that/*  $\emptyset$  she purchased is very expensive.
- (7) I know the boy *whose* bicycle was stolen.
- (8) The house *whose* kitchen had been repaired was sold.

### 2.2 Learning strategies in L2 RC acquisition

It often appears that L2 learners depend on a variety of strategies in the process of learning L2 RCs, especially when they face some kinds of difficulty, in order that they can put the meaning across. These strategies, based on cognitive processes, play a key role in helping learners to surmount the obstacles in L2 communication (Cohen, 1990; Selinker, 1992). While some of these strategies prove useful, some lead to errors in the target language. There are some main strategies related to L2 acquisition of ERCs, which will be discussed below.

#### 2.1.1 Native language transfer

According to Lado (1957), learners are likely to rely on the knowledge of their mother tongue when faced with certain kinds of problems in second language learning or communication. That is, they transfer the forms and meanings from L1 to the production and comprehension in the target language. Such reliance upon learners' native language sometimes appear to make them successful in L2 acquisition, thus viewed as facilitation. Nevertheless, it is often shown that influence from L1 knowledge can also have a negative effect on L2 learning, where the distance between L1 and L2 is great.

With respect to L2 acquisition of ERCs, evidence of both positive and negative transfer is outstanding. As for the positive transfer, Thai learners of English are expected to benefit from the similarities between the RC systems in the two languages, as follows.

First of all, the RCs in Thai and English share the same head directions. That is to say, they are right-branching, i.e. following the modified

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head (Sornhiran, 1978; Suktrakul, 1975). The second similar aspect lies in the relativization strategy which the two languages apply. It is clear that Thai and English form RCs through the relative-pronoun strategy (Keenan & Comrie, 1977; Song, 2001). To put it another way, The RCs in the two languages begin with a relative marker. Another affinity between Thai and English RCs is that no resumptive pronouns are allowed in both languages. A resumptive pronoun or a pronominal reflex is a pronoun used after a noun to refer to that noun (Gass & Selinker, 2001). In (9), the resumptive pronoun *her*, considered ungrammatical in standard English, and the relative marker *that* are coreferential with the head *the woman*.

- (9) \*The woman<sub>i</sub> that<sub>i</sub> I gave a book to *her*<sub>i</sub> is my sister.  
(Ellis, 1994, p. 303)

All the similarities discussed above are expected to assist Thai learners in successfully acquiring RCs in English. However, negative transfer from Thai could come into play as well, since there exist some major differences between RCs in Thai and English. The first significant distinction lies in the fact that Thai, unlike English, does not have the object-of-preposition relative, as in (10) and (11).

- (10) He has a book *which I am interested in*.  
(11) He has a book *in which I am interested*.

The RC construction in (10), where the preposition *in* is stranded at the end of the RC, is known as preposition stranding. It is semantically equivalent to that in (11), defined as preposition pied-piping (Ross, 1967), although the latter sounds more formal (Swan, 2005). Still, such a structure does not exist in Thai, as in (12) (Keenan & Comrie, 1977; Gass, 1979). It is probable that Thai speakers learning ERCs may transfer a lack of the object-of-preposition RC from their native language to ERC learning, producing an ill-formed structure in L2.

- (12) He has a book which I am interested in.  
khau mii năŋsŷy REL chăŋ BE soncaj \*năj

Furthermore, Thai does not have a possessive relative marker like *whose*, which introduces a genitive RC in English (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom, 2005). A problem may arise when Thai learners depend on direct translation from L1 and produce an interlanguage construction which deviates from the target structure. In addition to the genitive RC construction, Thai learners may also commit an error by omitting a RC subject in English. This is probably because, in Thai, a noun, including the subject of a RC, can be left out on the condition that the particular noun is understood or identifiable

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within the context (Panthumetha, 1982). For example, the RC subject *chǎn* 'I' in (13) can be deleted.

- (13) chǎn    mii            nǎj̄sǎȳ                    lǎaj            lēm            thūi  
      I                    have    book                    many    classifier  
REL  
(chǎn )j̄aak            ʼaan  
(I)    want    read  
'I have many books that I want to read.'

Apart from first language transfer, Thai EFL learners may make use of avoidance as another L2 learning strategy to be discussed in the next subsection.

### 2.1.2 Avoidance

Avoidance, like L1 transfer, seems to play an important role in second language acquisition of RCs. According to Ellis (1994), learners avoid using linguistic structures which they consider difficult due to differences between their native language and the target language. While first language transfer causes them to produce errors in L2, avoidance behavior leads them to an omission of the L2 construction the use of which they are not completely certain about.

One of the classic studies as to avoidance in L2 RC production is Schachter (1974), which revealed some flaws of error analysis (EA) as this approach of L2 study failed to account for the occurrence of avoidance. To be specific, she focused her study on the use of ERCs by native speakers of four different languages, i.e. Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese, in comparison with the ERCs used by American English speakers. It is discovered that the Chinese and Japanese speakers produced fewer errors on ERCs than did the Persian and Arabic participants. Such a result could be misleading, making one believe that RCs in English were easier for the Chinese and Japanese learners of English, compared with those speaking L1 Persian and Arabic. However, Schachter pointed out that this was not the case. In fact, the head directions of RCs in Chinese and Japanese are different from those in Persian and Arabic in such a way that RCs in Chinese and Japanese precede the heads, whereas Persian and Arabic, similar to English, have RCs that follow the heads. It was the difference, as Schachter explained, in head directions that made Chinese and Japanese speakers avoid using ERCs, which are right-branching.

In contrast, those who speak L1 Persian and Arabic were more familiar with the head direction in ERCs, which are similar to those in their mother tongues, producing far more number of ERCs than the Chinese and Japanese counterparts. With the more use of ERCs, it followed that they

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seemed to produce more errors in the ERCs they used. As regards the Chinese and Japanese ones, since they produced fewer RCs in English, their number or errors in turn was lower. Schachter concluded that avoidance is associated with distance or difference between L1 and L2. When learners' L1 is considerably different from L2, they tend to avoid L2 structures that differ from those in L1 or cause them difficulty.

Chiang (1980) replicated Schachter (1974)' study, concentrating on oral instead of written production. In Chiang's view, to avoid using a structure implies that learners probably know the structure but intentionally choose not to use it. To make sure that the participants, 83 foreign students from the University of Southern California, really had a chance to choose whether to avoid or not, he presented them with question stimuli designed to elicit RCs. This means that if the participants did not use ERCs, they were said to avoid such a structure. The study indicates that the participants used fewer ERCs in response to the questions, compared with native speakers' answers. Chiang also found that the variable closely correlating with learners' avoidance was overall language proficiency. The lower the proficiency of the learners, the more avoidance.

Gass (1980), using a sentence-combining task and a written composition, found that avoidance of L2 RCs is related to the degree of markedness<sup>3</sup> in that more marked RC types have more likelihood to be avoided. Gass demonstrated that L2 English learners in the first task appeared to avoid RC structures which are more marked, such as the object-of-preposition relative, as in (10)-(11), repeated here for convenience, and the genitive relative, as in (14).

(10) He has a book *which I am interested in*.

(11) He has a book *in which I am interested*.

(14) The woman *whose mother I know* is now studying in England.

Likewise, in the composition task, the learners were also found to produce more unmarked RCs, i.e. the subject relative (76%), as in (15), than marked ones, such as the direct-object relative (15%), as in (16).

(15) That's the man *who ran away*.

(16) That's the man *whom I saw yesterday*.

(adapted from Keenan & Comrie, 1977)

Zhao (1989) used a translation to compare the frequency of RCs in English and Chinese, collecting data from the bilingual collection of English

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<sup>3</sup> A marked structure is a linguistic structure that is less basic, less natural, or infrequent, while unmarked structure is more common, natural, and frequent (Finegan, 2007).

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language impressions of China written by Chinese Canadians and Americans, accompanied by their Chinese translations. The study revealed that there are some ERC structures, e.g. non-restrictive RCs, which do not have equivalent counterparts in Chinese, so these structures cannot then be translated into Chinese. Avoiding these problematic ERC structures, the participants instead had to employ other constructions in Chinese to present such information. This was why the number of RCs in the Chinese translations was lower than that in the source texts.

Li (1996) lent support to Zhao (1989). Carrying out this research with Chinese ESL learners in Canada, Li found that RCs in English have certain special pragmatic functions that are too subtle or unfamiliar to the Chinese. As a result, they relied on other English structures which are closer to the corresponding structures in Chinese to serve such functions. In other words, the subtlety of these functions caused the learners to subconsciously underproduce ERCs.

Maniruzzaman (2008) investigated Bengali EFL learners' avoidance behavior. More than 90 % of the participants admitted in the questionnaire and the interviews that they adopted avoidance behavior on purpose in their learning and using English. Put differently, the learners avoided producing some complex English structures, e.g. relative clauses, in both speaking and writing. A great number of learners attributed their avoidance to the dissimilarities between L1 and L2, and to the difficulty of L2 structures.

2.1.3 concerns the effect of previous instruction or learning on subsequent L2 acquisition.

### 2.1.3 Transfer of training

Another strategy anticipated to be found in Thai EFL learners' use of ERCs deals with transfer of training. This occurs when L2 learners apply rules they have previously learned from their teachers or textbooks (Selinker, 1992). Unfortunately, if such instruction or textbooks place an emphasis on only some structures of a grammar point, at the expense of the others, learners may develop, in a limited manner, the knowledge of that grammar point in L2 and overproduce only what they have learned or are used to, not aware of the other constructions which are more advanced. To make it worse, in case the past training or textbooks contain wrong information on that L2 grammar point, learners are inclined to incorrectly use such structures having been taught (Ellis, 1985, 1994).

Regarding L2 acquisition of ERCs, Thai undergraduate students may have problems with an overproduction of the subject relative, as in (15), and an underproduction of more marked ERC constructions, such as the direct-object relative, as in (16), the object-of-preposition relative, as in (10) and (11), and the genitive relative, as in (14). According to a survey of commercial English textbooks with the approval from Ministry of Education

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to be used in secondary school (grades 9-12) in Thailand, the contents of relativization on the object-of-preposition relative and the genitive one are relatively low in frequency. Even the information on the direct-object RC, which is just one-step more marked than the subject RC, the least marked type, can be found in more advanced textbooks (Phoocharoensil, 2010).

Accordingly, Thai EFL learners are expected to use the subject relative the most frequently as a consequence of their exposure to the contents in the textbooks they have been taught through. It is also anticipated that Thai learners may use other more marked ERC types with far less frequency. Moreover, the survey discovers a number of examples of the relative marker *who* used in different grammatical positions, i.e. subjects and objects, while its objective counterpart *whom* appears in a very small number of instances. Therefore, Thai learners may use *whom* substantially less frequently than *who*.

### 2.1.4 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization is a common process or strategy used by those acquiring their native language as well as learners of L2 (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Selinker, 1992). As regards L2 acquisition, according to Richards et al. (2002), overgeneralization is a process in which a learner extends the use of a grammatical rule of linguistic item beyond its acceptable uses in the target language. This phenomenon occurs when learners try to formulate a linguistic rule, based on the language data they have been exposed to or instructed, without being aware of exceptions. For instance, many learners of English are found to use a verb such as *goed* in place of *went* as the past-tense form of the verb *go* (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). This was because they may have seen past-tense forms of regular verbs ending with {-ed} and assumed that this rule can be applied across the board, i.e. to irregular verbs, coming up with erroneous verb forms like *goed*.

As far as L2 RC acquisition is concerned, English learners may not be aware of the differences between a restrictive relative clause (RRC), as in (17), and a non-restrictive relative clause (NRC), as in (18).

(17) My sister who lives in Chicago has two children.

(18) My sister, who lives in Chicago, has two children.

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 608)

A RRC is used to describe, identify, or define an indefinite head, while a NRC only provides extra information concerning the modified head. In (17), the writer may have more than one sister and the writer is referring to the one living in Chicago. By contrast, (18) implies that the writer has only one sister who happens to live in Chicago. One of the striking differences between these two types of RCs is that only *wh*-relativizers, as opposed to the relative word *that*, are permitted in NRCs. It is probable that English learners,



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particularly those who have low English proficiency, may not realize such a prohibition of *that* in NRCs and overgeneralize its use to NRCs (Cowan, 2008). Erdogan (2005) supported such a view when Turkish learners of English extended the use of *that* as a relativizer to NRCs. Erdogan suggested that such an overgeneralization could be influenced by Turkish, in which there is no differentiation between RRCs and NRCs.

As for Thai, even though there is such a distinction between the two RC types, there appears no restriction on any relative marker use in NRCs. In other words, all the three relative markers in Thai, i.e. *thîi*, *sýŋ*, and *an*, can be employed in NRCs as well as RRCs (Sornhiran, 1978; Suktrakul, 1975). It is, hence, difficult for Thai speakers to discern the limitation of *that* in English NRCs. It follows that they may finally use *that* in NRCs, which is ungrammatical.

The learning strategies mentioned above are likely to be applied in the ERC acquisition by Thai learners. Such strategies are expected to cause them to produce errors in L2.

### 3 Research question and Hypothesis

The present study was aimed at answering the question below:

1. What are the problems underlying the use of ERCs for Thai EFL learners?

In accordance with the above research question, the hypothesis below was therefore formulated.

#### *Hypothesis*

The problems with which Thai EFL learners are confronted in ERC acquisition are attributed to L2 learning strategies, namely native language transfer, avoidance, transfer of training, and overgeneralization.

### 4 Research Methodology

#### 4.1 Data collection

The present study recruited 90 Thai EFL learners who were first-year undergraduate students at a Thai university in Bangkok. The participants of the present study were from various faculties and took an English foundation course in the second semester in Academic Year 2008. As this study focused on the learners speaking L1 Thai, those who were bilinguals, had studied in an international school, or had experience using English abroad for more than three consecutive months were excluded because their English use may not truly reflect the interlanguage of Thai learners in general. To conduct an

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interlanguage cross-sectional study, the researcher divided the participants into two groups of forty five according to proficiency: high and low, based on the scores of the National University Entrance Exam. Those whose scores were between 69-80 were assigned to the high group, whereas those who got the scores between 32-56 were classified as low learners. The students whose scores were lower than 32 were excluded since their proficiency was probably too low to produce ERCs. In contrast, those whose scores were higher than 80 were also excluded because their English proficiency may be too advanced and would not actually represent the interlanguage of Thai EFL learners in general. Such learner classification enabled the researcher to observe the development of Thai EFL learners from beginner to intermediate levels.

With regard to the context of the study, the participants learned English in a classroom setting where the researcher also served as a teacher so that it was convenient to collect the data. The research instrument used was an essay. The participants were asked to write four 200-word descriptive essays on given topics. It should be noted here that the essay topics (e.g. *my best friend, a nice pet, my parents, etc.*) were the same for both learner groups and were controlled in such a way that they were about daily life and not too difficult or far-fetched to write about. They were allowed to write them at home and submit each work every two weeks. They were also informed that their essays would not be graded according to grammatical accuracy in order for the learners to feel relaxed enough to produce their writing which really represents their authentic linguistic competence.

### 4.2 Data analysis

The learners' errors found in the essays were collected and then qualitatively analyzed. That is, these errors were classified according to the learning strategies they used in writing. Examples of such errors were also presented for the purpose of illustration. Afterwards, possible reasons and explanations were provided for each type of errors.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

With regard to the research question in 3, the current research study reveals that the problems facing Thai EFL learners were related to the learning strategies on which they relied in learning RCs in English. Though these strategies occasionally helped them to succeed in learning how to use ERCs, it was also found that the learners, based on such L2 learning strategies, frequently produced grammatically incorrect L2 structures. The strategies which led the learners to L2 problems were L1 transfer, transfer of training, and overgeneralization, all of which will be discussed in full detail below.

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### 5.1 Native language transfer

The differences between the learners' native language and the target language seemed to play a crucial part in causing them to come up with deviations in L2 ERC production. The results of the present study are indicative of negative transfer that impacted on ERC learning by Thai speakers. That is, they, in learning ERCs, apparently depended upon the knowledge of RCs in Thai, as can be seen in the following aspects.

First of all, an absence of the object-of-preposition relative in Thai appeared to pose some problems for Thai EFL learners. They were seen to omit a preposition where necessary in forming an ERC, as in (19) and (20).

(19) \*She gave me the best advice that I never thought \_\_.

(20) \*My favorite hobby that I tell you \_\_ first is playing internet in my free time.

The error in (19) is caused by a lack of the preposition *of* or *about*, and the source of problem for (20) is the deletion of the preposition *about*. Because a preposition is not regarded as an essential part of Thai RCs as mentioned in 2.1.1, Thai learners may not be aware of its significance in constituting the object-of-preposition relative and then leave it out, resulting in a grammatical error in L2 English. The findings as such found support for Chang (2004). Chang analyzed and described the difficulties that Chinese learners of English encountered in their ERC learning. The study demonstrated that, upon evaluating the learners' receptive knowledge of ERCs, they were mostly found to lack the knowledge of the need for a preposition in the object-of-preposition relative. This was partly, as Chang suggested, due to the influence from Chinese, the learners' mother tongue, in which no RC type involves a use of preposition. Xiao-rong, Yip, and Li-xia (2008) also presented research findings corresponding to the present study in that Chinese EFL learners omitted prepositions, in a sentence-combination task, when forming an object-of-preposition RC in English, as in (21).

(21) \* The bed which the baby slept \_\_ is expensive.

(Xiao-rong, Yip, and Li-xia, 2008, p. 4)

In (21), the preposition *in* is missing, which results in an ungrammatical construction. Additionally, Erdogan (2005) gave support to the current research as well since Turkish learners of English evidently dropped an obligatory preposition in the English object-of-preposition RC, as Thai EFL learners did in the present study, since Turkish does not have this type of RC. In other words, a preposition is not a requirement for RC formation in Turkish. Thus, Turkish speakers in acquiring RCs in English

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probably transferred such a lack of preposition to their ERC production, which ultimately brought about a grammatically incorrect structure in English. This was borne out by Odlin (2003), who suggested that, for several times, the absence of obligatory prepositions in learners' interlanguage is connected with some influence from their native language.

In addition to L1 transfer in the relativization on objects of preposition, there was also evidence of native language interference in learning how to use the genitive relative in English. With respect to this RC type, Thai learners seemed to have difficulty using the possessive relative marker *whose* in English. In comparison with other relative markers, *whose* appears to be relatively more difficult for L2 learners to master (Gass, 1979). According to Master (1996), *whose*, differing from other relativizers, always has to be followed by a noun, such as *whose leg* in (22).

(22) The boy *whose leg is broken* is in Room 37.

(Master, 1996, p. 249)

However, instead of producing a well-formed RC with *whose*, Thai EFL learners were found to create an interim structure in L2, as in (23) and (24).

(23) \* This organization manages people *who their age* between fourteen to seventeen years old to be the exchange students.

(24) \* The first work is Thai's drama *that drama name* is Full Hut.

The deviant constructions *who their age* and *that drama name* may stem from the learners' direct translation from Thai. Perhaps, they were in the process of internalizing the use of *whose* in the target language, dependent on the structure in L1 to produce L2 constructions of *whose*.

Apart from the problems with the RCs on objects of preposition and genitives, Thai learners were also influenced by L1 in their omission of RC subjects. As proposed in Panthumetha (1982), a noun in Thai can be deleted when its identification is possible within the context. Thus, learners acquiring ERCs may transfer such deletability of a noun in L1 to a RC omission in English, which is unacceptable, as in (25) and (26).

(25) \* I not like other hobby such as tennis which \_\_ cannot play without tennis ball.

(26) \* People think, wealth, fame, honour is thing that \_\_ need.

Both (25) and (26) are considered ungrammatical as a result of RC subject deletion. In (25), the subject pronoun *I* is required, while in (26) *they* is missing. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that such errors in (25) and (26) may be caused by the learners' attempt to use English

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passive constructions. Since their L2 proficiency might not be high enough to use a correct form of passive in English, they presumably missed *be* and the past participle morpheme {-ed}, both of which are essential elements of the passive structure in English. If this is the case, (25) and (26) could be changed to the well-formed passive constructions, as in (27) and (28).

(27) I don't like other hobbies such as tennis *which cannot be played without tennis ball*.

(28) People think wealth, fame, and honour are things *that are needed*.

### 5.2 Avoidance

Avoidance behavior, in addition to first language transfer, appeared to be another major strategy that Thai learners relied on when facing difficulty learning ERCs. From the findings of the present study, the learners in writing essays apparently avoided using marked types of ERCs<sup>4</sup>, e.g. the object-of-preposition RC and the genitive RC, and produced the least marked type, i.e. the subject RC, with the highest frequency.

Table 1. Frequency of ERC Types in the Learners' Writing (%)

ERC type	Proficiency groups	
	High (tokens)	Low (tokens)
subject RC	56.24 (290)	51.48 (209)
direct-object RC	34.86 (183)	43.60 (177)
object-of-preposition RC	9.33 (49)	4.73 (19)
genitive RC	0.57 (3)	0.25 (1)

Table 1 clearly illustrates that the subject RC was the type of ERC which the learners of both proficiency levels used the most frequently. This was probably due to the fact that the subject RC is the most unmarked ERC type. On the other hand, the high group produced only 9.33% of the object-of-preposition RC, and the low group used 4.73% of this RC type. Merely 0.57% and 0.25%, furthermore, of the genitive RC was used by the Thai learners of high and low proficiency respectively. I claim that these two marked ERC types were avoided in the learners' writing, with supportive evidence from the translation task (See Appendix A).

<sup>4</sup> According to Keenan and Comrie (1977), the order of RC type acquisition, which is also viewed as the order of difficulty, is:

subject RC > direct-object RC > indirect-object RC > object-of-preposition RC > genitive RC > object-of-comparison RC

> means *acquired earlier than or easier than*

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Table 2. Percentage of Accuracy in the Translation Task

ERC type	Proficiency groups	
	High (tokens)	Low (tokens)
subject RC	83.06	70.18
direct-object RC	71.15	61.09
object-of-preposition RC	66.23	57.70
genitive RC	58.72	52.85

Table 2 indicates that, in completing the translation task, the learners of both proficiency groups were capable of using the object-of-preposition RC to a certain degree, although the accuracy percentage for them was lower than that for the subject RC. Nonetheless, they came up with very low production of these two marked types in the essays, where they had a choice of using the RC types to which they were more accustomed and avoided those advanced marked types, the use of which they were not certain about (Ellis, 1994).

It is also interesting to find that the low-proficiency learners used fewer object-of-preposition and genitive RCs than those with a high level of proficiency. This was probably because the former group had lower degree of English proficiency. If they have developed more L2 proficiency through time, they are expected to gain competence to use more marked ERC types with more frequency and accuracy (Corder, 1981; Ellis, 1985).

Table 3. Use of Overt Relative Markers as a RC Object with a Human Head in Writing (High Group)

ERC type	Overt relative markers		
	<i>who</i>	<i>whom</i>	<i>that</i>
direct-object RC	8	9	20
object-of-preposition RC	4	2	4
total	12	11	24
%	25.53	23.40	51.03

Table 4. Use of overt relative markers as a RC object with a human head in writing (low group)

ERC type	Overt relative markers		
	<i>who</i>	<i>whom</i>	<i>that</i>
direct-object RC	5	2	14
object-of-preposition RC	3	1	4
total	8	3	18
%	27.59	10.34	62.07

The avoidance of the genitive RC resulted in the learners' avoidance of *whose* as it is the most common possessive relative marker (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Another relativizer that underwent avoidance was *whom*.

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From Table 3 and Table 4, it is discovered that *whom* was produced with the least frequency, compared with the other overt relative markers in the same context of use. Because *whom* has limited use, i.e. occurring only in an object position within a RC referring to a human antecedent. However, *who* and *that* are also allowed in such a position, so it means the learners had more than one way to use a relative marker in this context. The results of the present research show that Thai learners with low proficiency, as illustrated in Table 4, obviously preferred *that* (62.07%) and *who* (27.59%) in this position to *whom* (10.34%) probably because *whom* has limited occurrence in a particular grammatical position mentioned earlier and this made the learners have less exposure to its use. Further, the survey of English textbooks stated in 2.1.3 revealed infrequent examples of *whom*, as opposed to an abundance of *who* and *that* in the same position. This confirms the fact that the learners were expected to produce very low frequency of *whom* in ERC learning. As the learners were more familiar with *who* and *that*, which can be employed in the same particular environment, they may feel more comfortable to use them rather than *whom*, the usage of which is less accessible for them. In this way, *whom* is said to be avoided in the low-proficiency learners' written production.

In summary, the written data from the two groups of learners exhibit the avoidance of relative markers, i.e. *whose* and *whom*, and marked RC types. It seemed that those whose L2 proficiency was lower had more tendency to use avoidance, which is consistent with Chiang (1980), who reported that proficiency in the target language is a determining factor of an avoidance strategy. That is, the low level of learners' proficiency is claimed to increase more chance to avoid. Additionally, the findings of the current research are evidently in line with Gass (1980) in that avoidance of RCs in second language is closely associated with the high degree of markedness. In a nutshell, more marked RC constructions, e.g. the object-of-preposition relative and the genitive relative, were avoided rather than less marked ones, e.g. the subject relative.

Aside from avoidance, another learning strategy that caused Thai learners difficulty was transfer of training, to be discussed in the following subsection

### 5.3 Transfer of training

The way Thai learners were taught about ERCs could affect their subsequent learning (Doughty, 1991; Selinker, 1992). Even though past instruction of ERCs seemed to be helpful in enhancing learners' development of ERC knowledge, it is also found that quite often transfer of previous instruction can have a negative impact on their following ERC acquisition. According to the survey of the commercial English textbooks used in secondary schools in Thailand, lots of explanations, examples, and exercises are devoted to the

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subject RC, at the expense of the other ERC types, e.g. with far less information on the direct-object RC (Phoocharoensil, 2010). Furthermore, the contents regarding relativization on the object-of-preposition relative and the genitive relative are comparatively low in frequency. This may account for the fact that the learners in the present research study seemed to avoid those RC types to which they were not familiar due to their infrequent appearance in the textbooks. Concerning the direct-object relative, most of the textbooks studied contain some information on this RC type after introducing the subject RC. Probably because of its less frequency in the textbooks as well as the higher degree of markedness, the direct-object RC, in this study, was produced with lower frequency than the subject one. However, as the direct-object RC occurs more frequently in these textbooks than the object-of-preposition and genitive RC types, the learners used more direct-object RCs than the other two.

One more obvious flaw of transfer of training can be noticed in the use of relativizers. Most of the textbooks examined show several examples of *who* occurring in different grammatical positions, i.e. subjects and objects, while its object counterpart *whom* is presented in a very low number of sentence examples. This could explain why Thai EFL learners, who have been more exposed to more instances of *who* than *whom*, produced more *who* than *whom* in the same grammatical environment.

Table 5. Frequency of relative markers in the learners' writing (%)

Relative markers	Proficiency groups	
	High (tokens)	Low (tokens)
<i>that</i>	50.67 (266)	53.94 (219)
<i>who</i>	26.67 (140)	29.80 (121)
<i>which</i>	14.29 (75)	10.10 (41)
<i>zero</i>	5.52 (29)	5.42 (22)
<i>whom</i>	2.29 (12)	0.74 (3)
<i>whose</i>	0.57 (3)	0.25 (1)

The preponderance of *that* over the other relative markers may be due to the fact that most of the textbooks provide such information that *who*, *whom*, and *which* can be replaced by *that* in restrictive RCs, with slightly lower formality, followed by examples of *that* adjacent to these relativizers in the same sentence, as in (27) and (28).

(27) Billie wants the toys *that/which* are on the counter.

(Amin, Eravelly, & Ibrahim, 2004, p. 183)

(28) She knows a girl *who/that* can dance very well.

(Frodesen & Eyring, 2007, p. 150)

To play safe with selecting a proper relative word in forming an ERC, the learners could take advantage of the interchangeability and convenient



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use offered by *that*, ending up with overuse of *that* in their written task. For this reason, the information on *that* they have learned from the foregoing instruction based on these textbooks appeared to influence Thai learners' use of ERCs. Although such overuse of *that* is not considered a grammatical error, this phenomenon may in turn be a cause of the learners' underproduction of other relative words (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Using only *that* in lieu of others, the learners' interlanguage of ERCs in relation to relativizer acquisition may not be developed greatly. It may be possible that when they are accustomed to the use of *that* as the main relative marker rather than other relative words, they are likely to extend such use of *that* to non-restrictive RCs, which would lead to ungrammaticality in L2 English. This will be further considered in the next subsection.

### 5.4 Overgeneralization

As predicted in 5.3, Thai EFL learners were found to overgeneralize the use of *that*. That is, they extended its use to non-restrictive RCs. Doing so is ungrammatical in standard English (Azar, 2003; Swan, 2005). Precisely, the present study indicates that the high-proficiency learners used 28.95% of *that* in NRCs, whereas those with low proficiency produced 31.43% of this relative marker in NRCs. Possibly this was because the low-proficiency learners had less exposure to L2 ERCs and did not realize the limitation of *that* in NRCs. Those who gained more experience and proficiency in English tended to use lower number of *that* in this ERC type.

The findings as such corroborate Erdogan (2005), who found that Turkish learners of English used the relativizer *that* in NRCs because the learners' L1 does not have NRCs. For Thai learners, despite the fact that Thai has NRCs, there is no restriction on some relative words in NRCs; all the three relative markers in Thai *thîi*, *sýŋ*, and *an* can be employed in Thai NRCs. This may account for why Thai speakers whose English proficiency is somewhat low were not aware of such a prohibition of *that* in English NRCs.

## 6 Conclusion

The present study focused on the problems of Thai EFL learners in English RC acquisition. Such problems resulted from the learning strategies which they applied in learning of ERCs. Thai learners seemed to be troubled with some negative transfer from L1 and produced deviant interlanguage structures reflecting their reliance on the knowledge of Thai. They were also found to employ an avoidance strategy when they were faced with complex marked structures in English. Those who had low proficiency, moreover, were seen to apply more avoidance. In addition to L1 transfer and avoidance, Thai learners also had problems resulting from their previous ERC learning. The limited contents in the textbooks from which they had studied apparently

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made them overuse some RC types and some relative markers. Finally, the learners overgeneralized the application of *that* to NRCs, resulting in ungrammatical structure in English. It is hoped that the results of the current research should benefit English teachers to a great extent in their preparation of appropriate teaching materials that best serve to solve Thai learners' real problems discussed earlier. Such materials are supposed to prevent the learners from producing those common errors so that they will be able to use ERCs as effectively as possible.

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### Appendix A. Translation task

**Directions:** Translate the following sentences into English, writing your translation on the space provided.

1. เพลงที่เราฟังเมื่อคืนนี้ไพเราะมาก

Translation: The song to which we listened last night was very beautiful.

2. ฉันชอบเรียงความที่คุณเขียน

Translation: I like the essay which you wrote.

3. เด็กผู้หญิงคนที่ชนะการแข่งขันหัวเราะเสียงดัง

Translation: The girl who won the competition laughed loud.

4. ผู้หญิงคนที่ฉันให้พจนานุกรมขยันเรียนมาก

Translation: The woman to whom I gave a dictionary is very studious.

5. ฉันรู้จักผู้ชายคนที่จักรยานถูกขโมย

Translation: I know the man whose bicycle was stolen.

6. หนังสือสองเล่มที่เขาซื้อเมื่อวานมีราคาแพง

Translation: The two books which he bought yesterday were expensive.

7. เด็กผู้ชายคนที่ฉันซื้อกระเป๋าตังค์ให้ยิ้มกว้าง

Translation: The boy for whom I bought a wallet smiled broadly.

8. ฟุตบอลเป็นกีฬาเพียงอย่างเดียวที่ฉันสนใจ

Translation: Football is the only kind of sports in which I am interested.

9. นักเรียนคนที่นั่งข้างฉันกำลังนอนหลับ

Translation: The student who is sitting next to me is sleeping.

10. น้องสาวของฉันมีลูกชายซึ่งผมสีน้ำตาล

Translation: My sister has a son whose hair is brown.