

An eye-tracking approach to L2 processing of Chinese relative clauses

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Most of previous studies on Chinese RCs have focused on the processing by L1 speakers, and few have worked on L2 speakers' syntactic comprehension. The goal of this study is to expand our understanding of processing RCs in Chinese as a second language (CSL). Considering the two influential SLA processing models, the *Structural Distance Hypothesis* and the *Linear Distance Hypothesis*, we see that their predictions diverge in Chinese, which reveals a mixed pattern in that it is a head-initial language with a head-final structure in RCs. In this study, RC processing patterns were compared between L1 speakers of Chinese and two groups of L2 learners: Japanese speakers (a head-final language) and English speakers (a head-initial language). A total of 95 young adults participated in the experiment, including 38 Chinese speakers, 33 Japanese speakers, and 24 English speakers. The current study employed an eye-movement technique to investigate the participants' reading patterns involving gaze and regression. The data were analyzed in terms of first fixation duration, gaze duration, total viewing time, regression path duration, and regression rate on the critical region, head noun. The overall results showed a tendency of ORC preference for the Chinese and Japanese groups, which implied that the syntactic nature of the target language plays a crucial role, and no preference for the English group, which suggested the effect of L1 structure. The findings will be discussed from the perspectives of SLA processing models and cognitive aspects of CSL acquisition.