



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSES BY L1 TAMIL
SPEAKERS FROM RURAL AREAS IN MALAYSIA***

VICNESUVARI MALAIAPPAN

FBMK 2014 4



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UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA
BERILMU BERBAKTI

**ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSES BY L1 TAMIL
SPEAKERS FROM RURAL AREAS IN MALAYSIA**

By

VICNESUVARI MALAIAPPAN

**Thesis Submitted To The School Of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, In Fulfilment Of The
Requirements For The Degree Of Doctor of Philosophy**

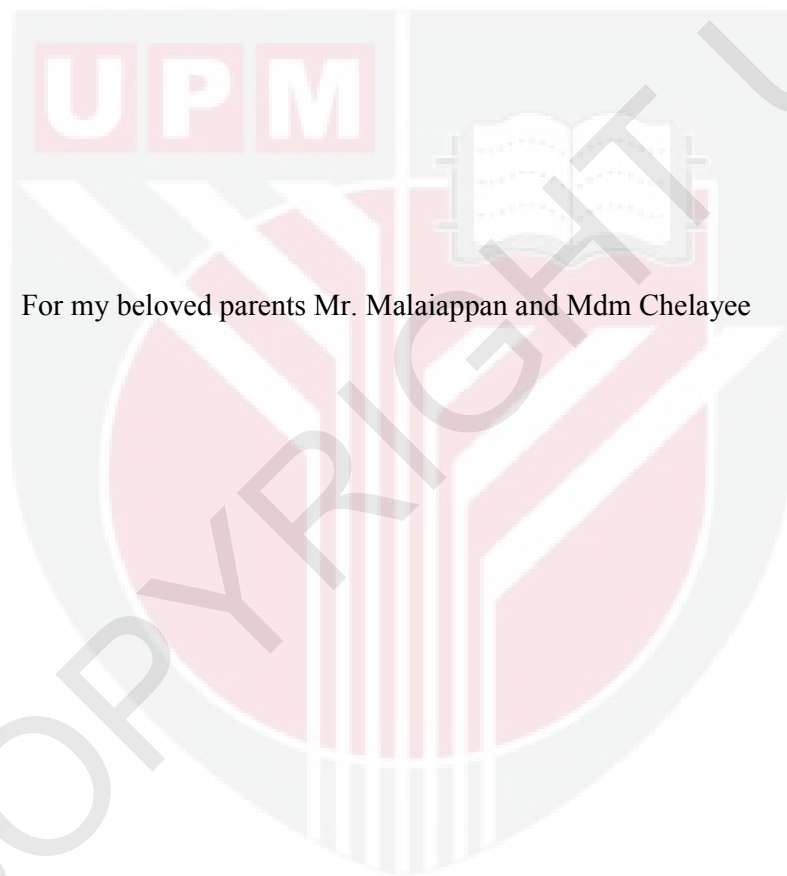
January 2014

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For my beloved parents Mr. Malaiappan and Mdm Chelayee

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSES
BY L1 TAMIL SPEAKERS FROM RURAL AREAS IN MALAYSIA**

By

VICNESUVARI A/P MALAIAPPAN

January 2014

Chairperson: Assoc. Prof. Wong Bee Eng, PhD
Faculty: Modern Language and Communication

This study examined L1 Tamil learners' acquisition of English Relative Clauses (RCs) from the perspective of the Universal Grammar (UG) theoretical framework. It studied the capability of the L1 Tamil speakers to reset the parameter of Tamil Relative Clause into the setting of English Relative Clause. Specifically the study investigated the development of English RC acquisition among three different proficiency levels of learners. The participants' knowledge of English RCs was measured through their performance in judging the grammaticality of English RCs in a Grammaticality Judgement Test (GJT). The participants' potential to produce grammatical English RCs was measured by using a Sentence Combination Test (SCT). The participants of this study were L1 Tamil learners selected from two secondary schools in Banting, Selangor. A total of 145 L1 Tamil speakers took part in this study. The participants were assigned to three different proficiency levels namely the Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced level based on their scores on the Oxford Placement Test 2 (Allan, 2004). The results of the GJT were analyzed using a one way ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc tests. Results were compared among the three proficiency levels. In the production task, the results were also analyzed based on the participants' age. The results showed that the acquisition of English RCs among the L1 Tamil speakers improved with prolonged exposure to and increased proficiency in English. The incremental trend suggested that with a higher level of English proficiency, the participants' ability to judge English RCs also improved, in particular the subject and direct object RCs. However, the mean scores of correct judgement of acceptability showed that the participants' ability to judge and accept grammatical items was better than their ability to reject ungrammatical items. This indicated that the participants' underlying knowledge of English RC was non-native like since native speakers would equally be able to correctly judge grammatical items as acceptable and ungrammatical items as unacceptable. Even the Advanced L1 Tamil speakers accepted ungrammatical sentences (up to 43.84%) which were constructed in line with the non *wh*-movement L1 (Tamil) RC syntactic

structure, i.e. they had resorted to the non *wh*-movement option. Another result that supported this explanation is that some of them produced sentences with resumptive pronouns, a construction considered ungrammatical in English although the use of resumptive pronoun/noun did decrease with increased proficiency. This further strengthened the claim that the participants' default representation of English RC is the one with no movement. Since such operations in syntax involve functional categories and associated features, whatever functional categories that have been instantiated in the learners' L1 during the critical period (Smith and Tsimpli, 1991, Tsimpli and Smith, 1995 as cited in Hawkins and Chan, 1997) and which are available in the L2 would be acquirable. Further, if two options of a parameter are available in the L1, then one of the settings would be the default, and this tends to be carried over to the L2 acquisition process and is evident in the initial stages. Thus, the findings showed that the learners' L2 grammar are UG constrained but what they lack are functional categories involved in English RC formation, which are not accessible once they have gone past the critical period. Thus, the results of this study support the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH).

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMEROLEHAN KLAUSA RELATIF BAHASA INGGERIS
DALAM KALANGAN PENUTUR BAHASA PERTAMA TAMIL
LUAR BANDAR DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini menyelidiki pemerolehan Klausa Relatif bahasa Inggeris (RCs) dalam kalangan pelajar bahasa pertama Tamil dari perspektif kerangka teori Tatabahasa Universal (UG). Kajian ini meneliti kebolehan penutur bahasa pertama Tamil untuk reset parameter Klausa Relatif bahasa Tamil ke dalam seting Klausa Relatif bahasa Inggeris. Secara khususnya, kajian ini menyelidiki perkembangan pemerolehan klausa relatif bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan tiga tahap kemahiran pelajar yang berbeza. Pengetahuan responden tentang RCs bahasa Inggeris diukur melalui prestasi mereka dalam menilai ketatabahasaan RCs bahasa Inggeris menggunakan Ujian Pengesanan Ketatabahasaan (GJT). Potensi responden untuk menghasilkan RCs bahasa Inggeris yang betul mengikut tatabahasa diukur menggunakan Ujian Kombinasi Ayat (SCT). Responden kajian ini merupakan pelajar bahasa pertama Tamil yang dipilih dari dua buah sekolah menengah di Banting, Selangor. Sebanyak 145 penutur bahasa pertama Tamil mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Responden dibahagikan kepada tiga tahap kemahiran yang berbeza, iaitu Asas, Pertengahan dan Lanjutan dengan berdasarkan skor mereka dalam Ujian Penempatan Oxford (Allan, 2004). Keputusan GJT dianalisis dengan menggunakan ANOVA sehala dan ujian post hoc Bonferroni. Keputusan kemudian dibandingkan di antara ketiga – tiga tahap kemahiran. Dari segi tugas penghasilan, keputusan dianalisis berdasarkan umur responden. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pemerolehan RCs bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan penutur bahasa pertama Tamil bertambah baik disebabkan pendedahan yang berpanjangan dan peningkatan kemahiran dalam bahasa Inggeris. Tren peningkatan ini menggambarkan bahawa apabila tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris meningkat, kebolehan responden untuk menilai RCs bahasa Inggeris juga bertambah baik, khususnya, subjek dan objek langsung RCs. Walau bagaimanapun, skor min kebolehterimaan penilaian tepat menunjukkan bahawa kebolehan responden untuk menilai dan menerima item yang gramatikal adalah lebih baik daripada kebolehan mereka untuk menolak item yang tidak gramatikal. Hal ini menunjukkan bahawa pengetahuan dasar RCs bahasa Inggeris responden adalah seperti bukan penutur natif memandangkan penutur natif juga sama-sama dapat menilai item yang gramatikal sebagai boleh diterima dan item yang tidak gramatikal sebagai

tidak boleh diterima. Malah, penutur bahasa pertama Tamil tahap lanjutan menerima ayat yang tidak gramatikal (sehingga 43.84%) yang dibina selaras dengan non pergerakan *wh* (*wh*-movement) L1 (Tamil) struktur sintaktik RC, iaitu mereka memilih opsi non pergerakan *wh*. Hasil dapatan lain yang menyokong penelitian ini ialah sebahagian mereka menghasilkan ayat yang menggunakan kata ganti nama resumptif, suatu binaan yang dalam bahasa Inggeris tidak gramatikal walaupun penggunaan kata ganti nama resumptif menurun apabila kemahiran meningkat. Hal ini juga memperkuat dakwaan bahawa representasi asal RC bahasa Inggeris responden sebenarnya adalah tanpa pergerakan. Disebabkan operasi sedemikian dalam sintaksis melibatkan kategori fungsional dan ciri berkaitan, apa-apa juga kategori fungsional yang ada pada pelajar L1 ketika masa kritikal (Smith dan Tsimpli, 1991, Tsimpli dan Smith, 1995, seperti yang dirujuk dalam Hawkins dan Chan, 1997) dan yang ada dalam L2 dapat diperoleh. Tambahan pula, sekiranya dua opsi bagi suatu parameter telah sedia ada dalam L1, salah satu seting akan menjadi asal, dan hal ini akan dibawa kepada proses pemerolehan L2 dan hal ini dapat dilihat pada peringkat awal. Oleh sebab itu, hasil dapatan menunjukkan bahawa tatabahasa pelajar L2 merupakan konstrain UG tetapi yang mereka kurang ialah kategori fungsional yang terlibat dalam pembinaan RC bahasa Inggeris, yang tidak dapat diakses selepas mereka melepasi peringkat kritikal. Oleh sebab itu, keputusan kajian ini menyokong Hipotesis Ciri Fungsional Gagal (FFFH).

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on **15 January 2014** to conduct the final examination of **Vicnesuvari a/p Malaiappan** on her thesis entitled "**Acquisition of English Relative Clauses by L1 Tamil Speakers from Rural Areas in Malaysia**" in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of PhD.

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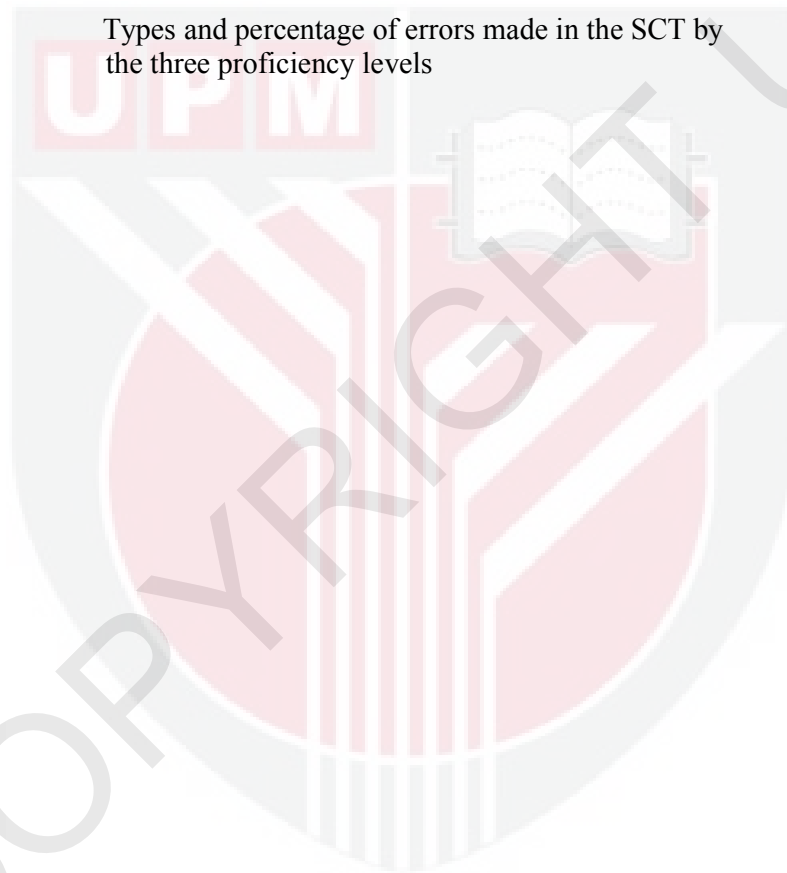
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1PS	1 st person singular
3PP	3 rd person plural
3PSFem	3 rd person singular feminine
3PSH	3 rd person singular honorific
3SMasc	3 rd person singular masculine
Acc	Accusative
Adv	Adverb
A	Advanced
Agr	Agreement
C	Complementizer
Cc	Clitic Complementizer
CA	Cronbach Alpha
CNP	Complex Noun Phrase
Comp	Complementizer
Con	Conditional
CP	Complementizer Phrase
CRC	Chinese Relative Clause
CS	Curriculum Specification
D	Determiner
Dat	Dative
DO	Direct Object
DP	Determiner Phrase
E	Elementary
ECP	Empty Category Principle
EFL	English as foreign language
Euph	Euphonical
FFFH	Failed Functional Feature Hypothesis
FT/FA	Full Transfer Full Access
Fut	Future tense
G1	Group 1

G2	Group 2
G3	Group 3
GEN	Genitive
GJT	Grammaticality Judgement Test
I	Intermediate
Incl	Inclusive
Inf	Infinitive
Infl	Inflection
Inst	Instrument
IO	Indirect Object
IP	Inflectional Phrase
IP2	Inflectional Phrase 2
ICT	Information Computer Technology
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
Loc	Locative
MCT	Multiple Choice Test
N	Noun
Neg	Negative
Nom	Nominative
NP	Noun Phrase
NPAH	Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy
NRRC	Non Restrictive Relative Clause
OBL	Oblique
OCOMP	Object of Comparison
Op	Operator
OPREP	Object of Preposition
OPT	Oxford Placement Test
PDH	Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis
PiP	Pied Piping
PP	Prepositional Phrase

Pres	Present Tense
PS	Preposition Stranding
Pst	Past Tense
RC	Relative Clause
RP	Relative Participial
RP	Resumptive Pronoun
RRC	Restrictive Relative Clause
RT	Reaction Time
S	Sentence
SCT	Sentence Combining Test
SFema	Singular Female
SN	Singular Neuter
Soc	Sociative Case
SOV	Subject Object Verb
SU	Subject
SVO	Subject Verb Object
Spec	Specifier
SU	Subject
SVO	Subject Verb Object
TOP	Topic
UG	Universal Grammar
Vbp	Verbal participle
VP	Verb Phrase

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Humans are versatile learners and have the natural aptitude to acquire a language or languages successfully under any circumstances. This universal feature is evident in Malaysia where bilingualism and trilingualism thrive. It is common for Malaysians to be proficient in more than one of the Malaysian languages such as Malay, one of the Chinese dialects, and Tamil, the dominant Indian language being used in Malaysia. English though considered as the second most important language after the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, has gained its position as an essential tool for communication, business transactions, international trade, tourism, diplomacy, education and the advancement of science and technology (Asmah Haji Omar, 2003, pp.73-74).

The acquisition of a second language (L2) after the first language (L1) is possible because human beings have a language faculty comprising a Universal Grammar consisting of a set of principles which are universal, together with a number of parameters of variation which allow for cross linguistic differences (Chomsky, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1993). A second language (L2) learner is someone who had already acquired a developed steady state grammar for a first language (L1). The L2 learner would have knowledge in his or her L1 with a set of syntactic structures which may be similar or different from the L2. Hence normal L2 learners are already successful communicators in one language because they already have a mental representation of language, with the parameters set to the values of their native language (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.55). According to Mitchell and Myles (2004, p.6), whether a learner learns an L2, L3 or L4, the “underlying learning processes are essentially the same despite differing learning purposes and circumstances”. It is this position that is adopted for this study. The L2 literature has shown that learners acquiring an L2 go through stages. In other words, as they get more input over time, they also become more proficient in the language. In the process, they work “through a number of development stages, from apparently primitive and deviant versions of the second language, to progressively more elaborate and target-like versions” (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.16). Further, L2 literature has documented that L2 learners often achieve different levels of competence in the L2 where some may acquire near native competence while others fossilize at some more or less deviant stage despite how actively they use the L2 for communication purposes (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.18). The notion of the critical period is often referred to in this respect. This notion refers to a period where some grammatical categories which have been acquired in the L1, cannot be altered after the process due to the said grammatical property’s principle being not operative in the learners’ L1 (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.88). These categories are the functional¹ categories. Hawkins and Chan (1997) claim that during this period, the

¹ Functional categories refer to classes of ‘function words’ that is words which essentially serve to mark grammatical properties (Radford, 2009, p.2)

said category or categories become mature and when the maturation process is complete, these functional categories and their features are fixed and cannot be reset

(Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.89). The parametric values associated with functional categories become inaccessible to L2 learners after the critical period. Due to this, the L2 learners might not be able to construct the features in the functional categories of the target language. At the same time L2 acquisition is UG-constrained but access to parametric options is unlike the learners' L1 acquisition process (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.90).

Studies have been conducted by many L2 researchers on whether L2 learners can reset parameters and their findings have shown the possibility of resetting the parameters in canonical word order. An example is the study conducted by Flynn (1983, 1984, and 1987) on resetting the head parameter in L2 Japanese learners acquiring English. Her study concluded that Japanese learners are able to acquire the English value of the head-direction parameter (Flynn, 1996, pp.134-48, as cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.85). In this regard, the present study has a similar objective but the target sample is different, that is the focus is to investigate whether the parameter resetting is possible in the acquisition of the English relative clause (RC) among rural secondary school and post high school L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia.

Murcia and Freeman (1999, p.571) describe the English RC as a type of complex post nominal adjectival modifier used in both written and spoken English. It is derived from a basic structure consisting of more than one clause through the embedding process. As such it is a difficult area to master for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, especially L1 speakers of other languages whose RC structure differs from the structure of the English. This group would include L1 Tamil speakers since there is a difference between the formations of RC between the two languages. In our case, we are referring to rural secondary school and post high school (adults) Malaysian L1 Tamil speakers.

1.1.1 Background of the L1 Tamil Speakers in Malaysia

Before we proceed further, we first need to understand the background of the L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia. This group of learners generally acquires the National Language Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) first before the English language. Malay and English are acquired after they had acquired Tamil, their L1. L1 Tamil speakers who are from the vernacular schools² in Malaysia are exposed to English language from year one (at primary level) beginning from 2002. Prior to this, English was only taught from year three onwards. The time allocated for the teaching of English in Tamil schools each week is 60 minutes for year one to year three (beginning

² Vernacular schools are also known as National Type Schools (primary schools) with the medium of instruction in the learners L1 (Tamil for L1 Tamil students or Mandarin for L1 Chinese students)

from 2002), 120 minutes for years 4 and 5 (from 2009 [initially it was only 90 minutes]) and 90 minutes for year 6. English is viewed as an important language because being proficient in it is seen as a boost to one's social status. In addition, English is also a prerequisite to prepare learners for future employment and for further studies. Thus a good command of a high level of proficiency in the language is seen as an asset in the Malaysian context.

However, in the rural areas (where most Tamil schools are located) the students have very few opportunities to be exposed to natural samples of the target language. On top of that, their home environment often prioritizes the L1 as the major language of communication. These students have limited exposure to English with the school being the only place for English language teaching and learning. Hence, the students are able to communicate in English but with simple vocabulary and sentences punctuated with grammar errors. In a preliminary investigation into the common problems these L1 Tamil students have with the English language, the researcher interviewed some Tamil school teachers (refer to Appendix A), who stated that a majority of the students have problems with the basic word order in English resulting in them producing linguistically inaccurate sentences.

The post mortem on the English language results of the Primary School Achievement Test (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*), a national level primary school summative test, among Malaysian primary Tamil schools (*Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil*, SJK (T)), has revealed that there are not many high achievers and their lack of competence seemed to have affected their performance, including their written work as most of the essays were poorly written and lacked varied sentence structures. Moreover students' answers seemed to reflect mother tongue interference (*Kupasan mutu jawapan*³ UPSR, 2007- Bahasa Inggeris SJK (T)). In addition they appear to lack a firm foundation in the grammar of the target language.

This situation is aggravated by the economic background of Indian households in Malaysia, in those in the rural areas. More often than not, these students are restricted to learning only in the school. After school, most students would be babysitting their younger siblings as both parents would be working to finance the family's needs. This is generally true with the male students who would be working part-time to obtain income to meet their daily needs (refer to Appendix A). Reports on the School Certificate Examination (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM)) show that in the SPM English Language Paper 2 (essay, summary-writing), students generally fail to produce a short paragraph of intelligent writing (*Kupasan mutu jawapan* SPM, 2005) despite having learned English for 11 years prior to the examination.

Generally, students in the secondary schools know that English is a compulsory subject to learn but it is not necessary to pass it in order to

³*Kupasan mutu jawapan* are reports on the achievement of the English Language Paper in major public examinations in Malaysia.

advance to a higher level of education. More emphasis is placed on the national language (Malay) as it is a compulsory subject to pass in order to attain the SPM certificate in the national examination. This policy has resulted in English being seen as not an important subject as there is no immediate need to pass the examination. In fact, students are not motivated and find it hard to sustain interest in English (Hussein, 2002 as cited in *Kupasan mutu jawapan SPM*, 2005). Lack of motivation and limited English usage among learners seemed to be the causes for the low English proficiency level among them (Pillay, 1995; Krashen, 1976; Che and Troudi, 2006, as cited in Samuel and Zaitun Bakar, 2008, p.114). In addition, teachers on their part are unable to sustain students' genuine interest in continuing to learn English and to use the language once the examination is over (Hussein, 2002, as cited in Samuel and Zaitun Bakar, 2008, p.110). Pillay (1995) also stated that English language competence level has dropped since its position has been relegated from it being the medium of instruction to merely a subject in the school curriculum. Her findings from case studies in five different schools revealed that the disparity of English competence among students is attributed to the socio-economic status of the learners.

Despite this, Schiffman (1980) had commented that the Malaysian Indians do quite well in English and often seek higher education in English, both in the country and abroad. A majority of the Indians in Malaysia are bilinguals. His findings reported that 69% of urban Tamils aged 10 and over know English while those in the rural areas is about 27%. There is a possibility that the well-educated Indians of Tamil origin are mainly (Malaysian) English speakers. The education quota⁴ and limited number of seats in the local universities make the Indians seek higher education abroad which logically means their English language proficiency is good. Whether the L1 Tamil students (from rural areas) with Tamil education background had succeeded in mastering English which is a prerequisite to further studies abroad has yet to be reported. However, this report by Schiffman (1980) was conducted about thirty years ago. The current level of achievement of the L1 Tamil speakers (both from the urban and rural areas) in the acquisition of English is yet to be reported.

It is anticipated that L1 Tamil learners with longer duration of exposure to the target language, will be able to acquire the more complex structures of the target language. Based on this, this study intends to investigate the acquisition of English RCs among three proficiency levels of L1 Tamil speakers namely the Elementary (E), Intermediate (I) and the Advanced (A) levels (on the basis of a standardized proficiency test) and their age groups (G1 aged between 12 to 14 years, G2 aged between 15 to 17 years and G3 between 19 years and above).

⁴ Education quota: Based on the Malaysian population's racial composition, each ethnic group is entitled to a certain number of places in public universities.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The objectives of the English language programmes in the Malaysian curricula for both primary and secondary schools are to enable students to listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations, speak effectively on a variety of topics, read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment and write effectively for different purposes (English Language Curriculum Specification, 2003). The teaching of English as a second language in Malaysian schools is via a communicative approach and the objective is to acquire the language for communication purposes. English is taught through social based situations (to enhance social integration) introduced in the text book (English Language Curriculum Specification, 2003). The Tamil school teachers whom the researcher interviewed expressed their views that this situation is conducive for the teaching of basic grammar but not for the teaching of the rules of grammar (refer to Appendix A).

In the Tamil primary schools, level one (years 1-3) students are taught basic and simple English grammar properties, while in level two (years 4-6) as they approach year 6, more complex grammar properties are being taught. However, RCs are not included explicitly in the curriculum specification of the English subject in Tamil schools. The 'wh' words are taught as in question formation (e.g. *Who beat Rachel Graham from Australia?*- English Language textbook for Year 5 SJKT, 2010, p.125). According to a few Tamil primary school teachers (refer to Appendix A), basic RCs are taught by using workbooks (any appropriate English language workbook available commercially). The students are introduced to relative pronouns and their usage in very simple situations. However, RCs are taught in secondary schools. Hence whether these primary Tamil school students who proceed to secondary schools are able to comprehend and acquire the formation of a complex grammar property like RC is of interest.

Past studies by SLA researchers (Lakshmanan, 2000; Wong, 1999; Bai, 1989; Nirmala, 1980; Sheldon, 1974; Flynn and Lust, 1980; Goodluck and Tavakolian, 1982; Hamburger and Crain, 1982; Lebeaux, 1990; Labelle, 1990, 1996) have revealed the possibility of L1 speakers constructing grammatical RCs in the target language. However, very few studies have been conducted on the acquisition of relative clauses by subjects with Dravidian languages such as Tamil as L1 (Lakshmanan, 2000, p.588). Previous published studies on the acquisition of Tamil relative clauses among L1 Tamil speakers were carried out by Lakshmanan (2000), Bai (1989) and Nirmala (1980). However, no studies have been reported on the acquisition of English RCs by the L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia. The present study will fill this gap in the literature by investigating the capability of Malaysian L1 Tamil speakers in constructing English RCs.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to investigate the comparative performance of L1 Tamil speakers at different proficient levels in their acquisition of the English RCs. The three levels are Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced as measured based on their scores in the Oxford Placement Test 2 (2004). The study attempts to find out whether the L1 Tamil speakers from different proficiency levels and age groups can acquire the full range of RCs involving both short movement (SM) and long movement (LM). RCs involving short movement are formed through *wh*-movement within one clause while those RCs which involve long movement proceed in a successive cyclical fashion (i.e. in a succession of short steps, one clause at a time) with each individual step involving local operation in which a *wh*-expression is attracted to become the specifier of the closest C constituent above it (Radford, 2009, p. 210).

The formation of RCs in both English and Tamil involves movement and the operation in each case is sensitive to island constraints. The Tamil language makes use of a relative participle to form RCs while the English language uses a relative pronoun or the complementizer *that* to form RCs. In addition, an interesting grammatical property available in both Tamil and English is the canonical word order. English word order is Subject Verb Object (SVO) while Tamil is Subject Object Verb (SOV). Tamil is a head last language compared to English which is head first. This property is evident in the formation of RC in each of the respective languages. As such this study is expected to reveal whether the students are able to acquire the English RCs despite these differences (refer to Chapter 3 for the linguistic assumptions for this property in both languages that are adopted for the study).

Specifically, this study aims to identify the similarities and differences in RC formation of both English and Tamil and to find out whether L1 Tamil speakers of L2 English do become more competent in English RC formation with increased proficiency in the language. In addition, the study is also interested to find out if they are capable of resetting the parameter for RC formation from the Tamil setting into that of the English setting. The data collected from the study can inform us whether the L1 principles facilitate the learners' L2 production as L2 researchers who believe in the possibility of parameter resetting are of the view that L2 learners transfer all the parameter settings from their L1 and subsequently revise their hypotheses when the L2 language fails to conform to these L1 settings. Learners then develop new hypotheses that are constrained by UG. Hence UG is accessed via the L1 in an initial stage, and directly thereafter when the L2 input cannot be accommodated within the L1 settings (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.86). The data would also tell us whether the different duration of exposure to and experience in the English language influence learners' acquisition of the L2 and this in turn would help us to ascertain the possibility of resetting the parameter from L1 Tamil (Tamil RC) into L2 English (English RC).

The three groups of learners selected for this study possess different levels of English language proficiency. It is anticipated that the English language proficiency level of the Intermediate learners is better compared to the Elementary learners, while the advanced learners should be more proficient than the Elementary and Intermediate learners. This is presumably related to the duration of time (number of years) that the learners were exposed to the target language in the ESL classroom as it is well documented in the literature that L2 learners do improve with exposure to the L2 (see e.g. Escobar, 2001). The probability that the learners acquire English RCs in incremental stages with increased exposure to and proficiency in the L2 will be tested in this study.

1.4 Research Questions

The objectives stated in the section above relate to the issues of staged development and access to UG in English RC acquisition among L1 Tamil speakers. To address the specific objectives of the study proposed above, the following research questions are formulated for the study:

1. Do the L1 Tamil speakers acquire English relative clauses in stages based on their proficiency in the L2 as reflected in the mean scores of the participants in the three proficiency levels?
2. To what extent are the L1 Tamil speakers at the three different proficiency levels in the L2 able to correctly judge English relative clauses in the Grammaticality Judgement Test that involve:
 - a) short movement?
 - b) long movement?
3. To what extent are the L1 Tamil speakers at the three different proficiency levels in the L2 able to produce English relative clauses in the Sentence Combining Test that involve:
 - a) short movement?
 - b) long movement?
4. Based on the results obtained in (2) and (3), are the L1 Tamil speakers able to reset the parameter of their L1 Tamil relative clause into the L2 English relative clause setting?

1.5 Theoretical Perspectives

This study will be carried out based on the insights of Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar Theory (UG). The principles and parameters approach to UG sees language as having no (language) specific rules for forming grammatical construction (Chomsky, 1995, pp.5-6, as cited in Wong, 1999, p.4). Instead there are universal principles and a finite number of options or choices in a language and these are called parameters. To master a language which one is exposed to is to fix the values of these parameterized principles of the said language. Therefore the principles of UG are innate. The parameter values have to be fixed on the basis of direct and positive experience or primary linguistic data (Chomsky, 1995, p.169, as cited in Wong, 1999, p.4) which will result in a particular system known as I(nternal) language, that is a set of principles with associated parametric values. Thus the end state reached in any natural language is a system with an infinite number of syntactic structures but one which is generated by a finite computational capacity.

UG has paved the way for the revelation of other linguistic theories and hypotheses and it meets the requirements of a good theory in that it "aims at not description, but explanation as well" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.7) As such, a study anchored on UG is therefore anchored on a 'good theory'. This study is carried out based on UG and attempts to identify whether the different parameter settings of RC formation in both languages contribute towards the difficulties (if any) faced in constructing grammatical English RCs and to discover the possibility of resetting the parameter by Malaysian L1 Tamil speakers.

Based on this theoretical framework, several views and their associated hypotheses have been proposed by SLA researchers for the acquisition of the L2 based on the findings of their studies. These views include the Full Access view (e.g. Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996; Flynn and Espinal, 1996; Yuhko, 2005; Cook, 2003; Escobar, 2001; Perpiñán, 2008; Jin and Qiao, 2010), the Partial Access view (e.g. Vainikka and Scholten, 1996; Wong and Chan, 2005; Hawkins and Chan, 1997) and No Access view (e.g. Clahsen and Hong, 1995; Felix and Weigl, 1991; Lardier, 1998, Schachter, 1990). These views and their associated hypotheses are reviewed in more detail in chapter 2.

The theoretical perspectives discussed thus far are summarized in table 1 below:

Table 1. L2 Acquisition and UG

	Full Access	Partial Access	No Access
Initial State	L1 Grammar	L1 Grammar	L1 Grammar
Development	Parameter resetting	Parameter resetting is possible when the L2 grammar properties are instantiated in the L1. Parameter resetting is impossible when the L2 grammar properties are not instantiated in the L1.	No parameter resetting
Final Outcome	L2 like grammar (e.g. FT/FA hypothesis)	L2 like grammar is possible if the L2 grammar which is instantiated in the L1 facilitates the L2 grammar acquisition. (e.g. FFF hypothesis)	L1 like grammar L2 grammar not attainable

(Adapted from Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.90)

1.6. Research Design

This study adopts the quantitative descriptive analysis approach. The data collected from this study were analyzed using the SPSS version 16.0. Analysis was done on the data collected from the proficiency levels in order to determine if there is significant difference(s) in the overall GJT scores and individual items. A one way ANOVA was used to identify the significant difference(s) among the three proficiency levels and to identify whether there is any significant difference(s) between proficiency levels a Bonferroni post hoc test was used. The results are described both quantitatively and descriptively. Data collected from the main instrument of this study, a Grammaticality Judgement Test (GJT- refer to Appendix B), were analyzed for significant difference(s) among the proficiency levels and proficiency levels in each age group. Another instrument, a Sentence Combining Test (SCT-refer to Appendix B), was also be used to collect data. The analysis of the data from the SCT was done for the three proficiency levels and the age groups. The data from the SCT was used to complement the data from the GJT.

1.7 Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This research limits its investigation to the production of English RCs by three different proficiency levels namely the Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced L1 Tamil speakers of L2 English, whose exposure to English during their developmental years was mainly in the formal school setting. Participants aged 12 to 19 years were selected from two secondary schools from Banting, Selangor, Malaysia while those aged 20 years and above were selected from various working sectors. Only participants who had received their primary education in Tamil primary schools and were free from any additional exposure to the target language apart from formal teaching and learning in the classrooms were selected for this study. The selection of participants was rigidly done to

mitigate any external factors that would post a threat to the validity of this study. All the participants selected for this study received their primary education in Tamil vernacular schools in rural areas and their L1 is undoubtedly Tamil.

The adult L1Tamil participants (aged 19 years and above) were from similar contexts (that is they received primary education in vernacular primary Tamil schools). However, the adult L1Tamil speakers are all exposed to the English language at their workplace and may have a good command of English. Several of them have careers where the English is the main medium of communication and business transactions. The findings of this study are generalizable only to L1 Tamil speakers in similar contexts and may not fit the Tamil speakers from any other contexts.

1.8 Significance of the Study

Since not many studies have been carried out on L1 Tamil speakers of L2 English, the findings of this study could add to the existing body of L2 literature. Further, the findings may have a pedagogic significance to teachers involved in the teaching of English particularly in the Malaysian context. The anticipated staged development of the acquisition of English RC among the participants will provide a practical justification for letting the younger or lower proficiency learners to be taught the less complex RCs (those involving short movement) before they are exposed to and taught the more complex RCs (those involving long movement). Further, the findings of the study will enrich one's understanding of the reasons for the difficulties faced by the L1 Tamil speakers of L2 English in constructing RCs and will provide insights into ways to overcome the problem.

1.9 Summary

In this chapter the background to the study, including the background on L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia and the statement of the problem were discussed. Further, the objective and research questions were outlined. In addition, the theoretical perspectives, the research design, the limitations and delimitations as well as the significance of the study were described. The next chapter will discuss the relevant literature related to the study. Chapter 3 will discuss the linguistic assumptions of the two languages, English and Tamil, that are adopted for the study. Chapter 4 will describe the methodology of the study while Chapter 5 will present the results. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the study.

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