Report

Tackling the "Independent Clause as Subject" Problem

Alice Y.W. CHAN, Becky S.C. KWAN, & David C.S. LI
City University of Hong Kong

This article discusses the nature and causes of a common problem encountered by intermediate ESL learners in Hong Kong — the problem of using an independent clause as a subject in sentences such as "Snoopy is leaving makes us all very happy" and suggests an algorithmic approach to error correction to help students overcome the problem. It is suggested that both L1- and L2-related factors may contribute to students' making of the error. The algorithmic approach suggested, which aims at arousing students' consciousness of the nature of the anomaly and providing some effective ways of correcting it, is characterized by four main features: (1) pedagogically sound input requiring minimal cognitive effort; (2) proceduralized steps supported by instructive examples; (3) explicit rules to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure; and (4) reinforcement exercises. Remedial instruction materials designed for correcting the anomaly and for alerting students to the differences between an independent clause and a dependent clause — a linguistic concept essential for the effective correction of the structure — are included for exemplification. It is argued that with the help of carefully-designed algorithmic steps which take the form of instructional language or questions, students can be guided to progressively approximate the target language norm.