

EFL ENGLISH-MAJORS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

Le Thi Van¹, Nguyen Thi Huong²
Tran Quynh Que Huong³, Phung Thi Viet Ha⁴

Van Hien University

¹ vanlt@vhu.edu.vn

Received: 26 April 2017; Accepted: 3 April 2018

ABSTRACT

Relative clauses play a crucial role in improving students' writing and speaking performances. In this study, a 20-question survey was delivered to 100 EFL seniors at a university in Vietnam to find out the extent to which they understood different types of relative clauses and different relative pronouns. Also, the frequency at which these relative clauses and pronouns were used in their written and spoken communication was investigated. The findings showed the participants' lack of understanding of these aspects. They also preferred using restrictive relative clause over non-restrictive clause, and certain relative pronouns were used significantly more frequently than the others. Recommendations for teachers to raise students' understanding of relative clauses and relative pronouns, as well as to improve students' performance were also made for teachers' conventional teaching practice.

Keywords: *relative clauses, relative pronouns, English language use*

TÓM TẮT

Hiểu biết của sinh viên chuyên Anh về mệnh đề quan hệ

Mệnh đề quan hệ là một chủ điểm quan trọng của ngữ pháp tiếng Anh. Tuy nhiên, khả năng sử dụng mệnh đề quan hệ một cách đúng đắn của sinh viên vẫn là một câu hỏi cần giải đáp. Trong nghiên cứu này, bảng khảo sát gồm 20 câu hỏi được thực hiện trên 100 sinh viên chuyên Anh năm cuối nhằm nghiên cứu hiểu biết của họ về mệnh đề quan hệ và đại từ quan hệ. Nghiên cứu cũng nhằm tìm ra mức độ sử dụng các chủ điểm ngôn ngữ này. Kết quả cho thấy một số lượng lớn đối tượng nghiên cứu còn thiếu hiểu biết về chủ điểm ngôn ngữ này. Kết quả cũng chỉ ra rằng những sinh viên này ưa chuộng mệnh đề quan hệ hạn định hơn mệnh đề quan hệ không hạn định, và dùng một số đại từ quan hệ nhiều hơn gấp nhiều lần so với các đại từ quan hệ khác. Do đó, một số phương thức nhằm phát huy khả năng của sinh viên để sử dụng mệnh đề quan hệ đúng và hiệu quả hơn cũng đã được đề cập đến trong bài viết này.

Từ khóa: *mệnh đề quan hệ, ngữ pháp tiếng Anh, sinh viên chuyên Anh.*

1. Introduction

Grammar, regardless of the country or the language, is the foundation for communication. When a message is relayed with the correct grammar, it is easier to understand the purpose and meaning of that message (Biber, 2002). In order to communicate, a learner should know the grammar of the language. It is important to be able to express yourself, but this should be done in a way that people find it easy to understand and syntax is significant (Thornbury, 1999).

English grammar is an important part of English grammar since they enable more effective written and oral communication (Biber,

2002). Students use relative clauses to give additional information about something without starting another sentence. By combining sentences using relative clauses, a text becomes more fluent and repeating words, phrases or sentences can also be avoided (Murphy, 1994). 'English relative clauses can often be a stumbling block for EFL learners, due to their complex nature' (Rattanasak and Phoocharoensil, 2014). Although relative clauses are important elements in syntax (Abdolmanafi and Rahmani, 2012; Ching and Shu, 2014; University of Sheffield, 2012, all cited in Sofia and Lubaba, 2017), Alotaibi (2016) concluded that learners made a lot of errors in using relative pronouns. The

significance of improving the situation has been approved by a significant number of researchers (Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2014; Alotaibi, 2016; Zibin and Altakhaineh, 2016).

Similar evidence from students' practice at a university in Vietnam has revealed their problems in using relative clauses. Hence, it is vital to reinforce the reality and work out solutions in case the problems do exist. This is the major rationale for this study. Generally, senior students are believed to have fuller understanding of all the subjects covered in their studying program. Therefore, they were chosen to be part of this study as representatives. Identifying the significance of relative clauses, and the demand to enhance students' performance, this paper explores about relative clauses in-depth to assist students have deeper understanding of this grammar point and to improve students' performance.

2. Literature review

"A relative clause is a dependent clause that functions as an adjective; that is, it modifies a noun or pronoun. For this reason, relative clauses are also called adjective clauses" (Alice and Ann, 1998). In the sentence "*The first American thanksgiving feast, which took place in 1621, lasted three days.*", the dependent clause *which took place in 1621* is a relative clause that modifies the noun phrase *The first American thanksgiving feast*. This noun phrase is the antecedent of the relative clause. "Place of relative clauses after its antecedent and as close to it as possible to avoid confusion" (Alice and Ann, 1998). In the sentence "*He left the gift in his friend's car that he had just bought.*", it is not clear whether the relative clause modifies car or gift. However, the relative clause in this sentence, *He left the gift that he had just bought in his friend's car*, clearly modifies gift (Alice and Ann, 1998).

A relative clause is one kind of dependent clause. It has a subject and verb(s), but cannot stand alone as a sentence. It is sometimes called an adjective clause because it functions like an adjective, giving more information about a noun. A relative clause always begins with a relative pronoun, which substitutes for a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun when sentences are combined (Alice and Ann, 1998). Relative clauses are non-essential parts of a sentence. It may add meaning, but if it is removed, the sentence will still function grammatically.

It is important to distinguish between different types of relative clauses because it affects the choice of pronoun used to introduce the clause (Alice and Ann, 1998). Relative clauses include two main types: restrictive relative clauses and non-restrictive relative clauses. Relative clauses are either restrictive (necessary) or nonrestrictive (unnecessary) (Alice and Ann, 1998).

A restrictive relative clause is used after an indefinite noun, so it is necessary to identify the preceding noun. A restrictive relative clause does not require a comma (Alice and Ann, 1998). "*We like the woman*". "*The woman*" is indefinite noun. "*We like the woman who is standing at the board*". Who (subject), whom (object) are used for people. which for thing, that for people and thing (Alice and Ann, 1998). "*The people come from Sweden. They are taking photos over there*". In this example, the people is the subject. Relative pronoun is the subject of a clause, and the subject is not repeated. Therefore, a sentence like "*The people who (that) are taking photos over there come from Sweden.*" is correct.

The relative pronoun whose is used to replace things that belongs to someone or something. For instance, "*We live in a small town whose inhabitants are friendly and helpful.*" (We live in a small town. Its inhabitants are friendly and helpful.). We have another example "*That is the mistake which (that/X) I am complaining about*". It combines two sentences "*That is the mistake. I am complaining about it*". When whom, which or whose are used, the preposition comes at the beginning of the clause. There is a relative pronoun whom, which can be used as the object of the relative clauses. For example: "*My science teacher is a person whom I like very much*". To many people, the word whom may probably sound old-fashioned, and it is rarely used in spoken English.

The relative pronouns where and when are used with place and time nouns. In the example "*The city where/ in which we spent our holiday last year is beautiful*", where is used with nouns of place. In this example, the city is the noun, the relative pronoun is where/ in which. An article can be used at the beginning of the clause; for example, "*The day when/ that we met each other is unforgettable*" or it can be written "*The day on which we met each other is unforgettable*" (Alice and Ann, 1998).

In the following example “*The reason why/ that I came late was that my car had broken down on the way*”, for which can be used to replace for reason “*The reason for which I came late was that my car had broken down on the way.*” (Alice and Ann, 1998). In this example, the noun is being identified as the reason. When the relative adverb why modifies reason, the word reason can be omitted to avoid tautology.

A non-restrictive relative clause is used after a definite noun, so it is not necessary to identify the preceding noun, but simply to give further information about the noun. It can be omitted without loss of meaning. A separation of it from the rest of the sentence with a comma is required. A non-restrictive relative clause requires a comma (Alice and Ann, 1998). “*We don’t like Mrs Thu*”. Mrs Thu is definite Noun. “*We don’t like Mrs Thu, who always gives us difficult tests*”. Who refers to people and sometimes to pet animals. It is used to introduce non-restrictive relative clauses. Whom is used in formal style or in writing to refer to people when the person is the object of the verb. It is more common in writing than in speaking. Which is used in relative clauses to refer to things, to introduce non-restrictive relative clauses. Which is also used to introduce a relative clause when it refers to a whole sentence or clause. Whose is used as relative pronoun to indicate possession by people and things, whose before nouns instead of possessive expressions (my, your, his, her, its, our, their and the others) (Alice and Ann, 1998).

The relative pronoun that can never be used in Non-restrictive relative clauses. Moreover, an article can be put in front of a relative pronoun when it does not change the meaning of the verb before it (Alice and Ann, 1998). In formal language, where and when are often used to introduce defining relative clauses instead of at which, in which, on which or for which. In the example “*He loves London, where/ which/ in which he was born in*”, the relative pronouns where and when are used with place and time nouns. The sentence “*September 11, 2001, when the US was attacked, is a historic day*” is combined from two sentences “*September 11, 2001 is a historic day.*” and “*The US was attacked on that day*”. The only position in which the relative pronoun is not obligatory is when the constituent to be relativized is in the object position

(Rokni and Rahmani, cited in Sofia and Lubana, 2017).

There are common mistakes and errors found about relative clauses. For instance, students may use that instead of who, whom, or which in non-defining incorrectly. For example, it can be written as “*Dr. White, whom you met in my office, is an ecologist*”; however, “*Dr. White, that you met in my office, is an ecologist*” is unacceptable. In addition, what is not used as a relative pronoun. The sentence “*So, he can make himself easily understood in the two languages, which helps a lot*” is correct. However, the sentence “*So, he can make himself easily understood in the two languages, what help a lot*” is incorrect. Who is not used for things. It can not be written as “*She is written some great cookery book who have got pictures of delicious-looking recipes*”. Instead, it has to be “*She is written some great cookery book which has got pictures of delicious-looking recipes*”.

Senior students have to be aware of these mistakes to avoid shortcomings (Alice and Ann, 1998). From that, they are able to use relative clauses to improve their writing performance. Writing that contains subordinate structure is more sophisticated than writing that contains mostly simple and compound sentences. Relative clauses are one of the ways to subordinate.

3. Research Methods

This paper aimed to investigate the understanding of relative clauses by EFL seniors at a Vietnamese university. In addition, their misuses of relative clauses were classified into different types. In this chapter, the first part gives a description of the process of participant selection. Next, the instruments used in the study are presented. Then, the procedure of data collection and the implementation of the study are described. A discussion on the findings comes at the end. A sample size of a pilot group of 92 students and a creditably surveyed group of 78 students were chosen for the purpose of the study, ensuring a relative balance between genders. The participants share similar background knowledge about grammar. The distribution of participants into two groups was done randomly.

In this study, a 20-question survey was conducted. Questions 1 to 5 asked about students’ understanding of relative clauses. Questions 6 to 15 asked about common mistakes that these sen-

iors often make. Questions 16 to 20 asked about the participants' viewpoints on the importance of relative clauses. First, the participants were chosen. Next, the survey was designed. Then, it is piloted on the pilot group. After being edited and modified, it is applied for the accredited participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

Results showed that the participants had dif

ferent levels of understanding of the use of restrictive clause and non-restrictive clause, as well as of the relative pronouns. Also, they used restrictive and non-restrictive clauses at different frequency levels, with preference towards some relative pronouns over the others. Purposes in using relative clauses by students, as well as a lack of full understanding about relative clauses were also identified.

Table 1. Participants' understanding of the correct uses of different relative clauses

No.	Types of relative clauses	Rate of understanding
1	Restrictive relative clauses	51
2	Non-restrictive relative clauses	33
3	Both of them	16

In the survey, the participants were asked to answer questions to figure out to which extent they understood relative clauses. Table 1 shows that the participants understood restrictive relative clauses more clearly than non-restrictive

relative clauses, with 51% of students had fuller understanding of restrictive relative clauses and 33% had fuller understanding of non-restrictive clauses. A percentage of 16% understood both types clearly.

Table 2. Frequency to which different relative clauses were used

No.	Types of relative clauses	Rate of use
1	Restrictive relative clauses	55%
2	Non-restrictive relative clauses	
3	Both of them	10

In the survey, the participants were also asked to answer how often they used restrictive and non-restrictive clauses in their written and spoken communications. Table 2 presents a number of

55% of students usually used restrictive relative clauses, and 35% usually used non-restrictive clauses. Only 10% used both of them in their writing and speaking.

Table 3. Participants' understanding of the correct uses of relative pronouns

No.	Level of correct understanding	Number of students
1	10	
2	80%-90%	9
3	60%-80%	55
4	40%-60%	30
5	10%-40%	6

In the survey, the participants were also examined to which extent they understood how to use the earlier mentioned relative pronouns correctly. Table 3 shows that over half of participants had a level of correct understanding of the uses of these relative pronouns, which was proved by the percentages between 60%

to 80%. A humble number of 9 students had a fuller understanding, and 30 students had lower understanding. Although there was no report on participants who did not know how to use relative pronouns, no participants had 100% full understanding of this.

Table 4. Frequency to which different relative pronouns were used

No.	Relative pronouns	Rate of use
1	Who	59%
2	Whom	7%
3	Whose	4%
4	Which	15%
5	That	11%
6	When	2
7	Where	2%

When the students were asked to tick to which extent they used different relative pronouns in their writing and speaking, it was revealed that some were used with as many times more frequent while some were at rare use. Table 4 indicates that the most popular relative pronoun used by students was who, with 59%, followed by which, 15%. A percentage of 7% went for the relative pronoun whom and 4% chose the relative pronoun whose. The humble 2% indicate a rare use for when and where.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, more than half of the students said that they did not have enough knowledge about relative clauses. Most students could not identify between a restrictive clause and a non-restrictive clause. Most of them used restrictive relative clauses more than non-restrictive clauses; however, they were not certain about whether they used relative clauses correctly or not. The same percentage of participants had correct understanding of the way relative pronouns are used in written and spoken communication. Also, the pronoun who and which were reported to be the most common used ones. Blur understanding on how to use the other relative pronouns still existed, so did the discrepancy of level to which different relative clauses and rela-

tive pronouns were used.

As can be seen, almost half of the participants lack appropriate understanding of relative clauses and relative pronouns. The findings suggest that teachers should put more effort in strengthening the students' knowledge of relative clauses. Teachers should also help students to strengthen the learning of syntax and pay more attention to consolidate the grammar point after the lesson. As for the usages of relative clauses that are easily confusing, teachers should give clearer explanation and point out the differences between these usages, support further practice and encourage using them more in their real communication. Teachers should also encourage students to use the language and improve their ability of using the language. The aim of language learning is language use. Hence, teachers should try every way to have students use relative clauses either not only in written but oral form (Thornbury, 1999). Practicing using relative clauses can not only activate students' knowledge, train them to think in English, but also can give students opportunity for self-evaluating to realize their weaknesses and find ways to overcome them. A significant discrepancy of level to which different relative clauses and relative pronouns were used and better methods to

apply this kind of language use more effectively might probably need further research.

Conflicts of Interest:

The author declare no conflict of interest

References

- Alice, O. and Ann, H. (1998). *Writing Academic English* Third Edition, HCMC: Youth Publisher.
- Abdolmanafi, S. J. and Rahmani, Z. (2012). An investigation of the learnability of relative clauses by EFL learners. *World*, 2 (3), pp. 29-37. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v2n3p29>.
- Altakhaineh, A. R. M. and Zibin, A. (2014). Perception of culturally loaded words by Arab EFL learners. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 6 (3), pp. 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v6i3.4922>.
- Alotaibi, A. M. (2016). Examining the learnability of English relative clauses: Evidence from Kuwaiti EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 9 (2), pp. 57-65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n2p57>.
- Biber, D. (2002). *Longman Student Grammar Of Spoken And Written English*. England: Longman.
- Murphy, R. (1994). *English Grammar in Use*. Da Nang City: Da Nang Publisher).
- Rattanasak, S. and Phoocharoensil, S. (2014). Avoidance in processing English non-restrictive relative clauses in Thai EFL learners' interlanguage. *Asian Social Science*, 10 (17), 265-277. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n17p265>.
- Sofia, S., K. and Lubaba, A., A. (2017). The Comprehension of English relative clauses by Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners. *International Journal of Education*, 9, 193-194. Retrieved from <http://www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/ije/article/viewFile/11025/8814>.
- Thornbury, S. (1999). *How To Teach Grammar*. England: Pearson Longman.
- Zibin, A. and Altakhaineh, A. R. M. (2016). Acquiring the English causative alternation: Evidence from the University of Jordan. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5 (3), pp. 7-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v5n3p.7>.