Teaching English Relative Clauses to Iraqi Secondary School EFL Students: Full Comprehension Through Translating Meanings of In-Text Relative Pronouns

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to shed light on why Iraqi EFL Secondary School students lack full mastery of the English relative clauses use. It is understandable that they are non-native speakers of English language, but still they are studying English language as of the fifth primary school. Besides, Iraqi secondary school students, as others across the world, live in a digital world, and every possible means of communication is available. Therefore, the mission of acquisition English language grammatical structures is reachable. To accomplish this study, two groups were selected. A number of (40) learners from Abi al-Khaseeb Secondary School for Boys, Experimental Group (EG), was selected to be the subjects of this study, randomly selected. The Control Group (CG), 40 learners, as well randomly selected, from the same school. The Experimental Group's respondents were under a two-minute interview session each, and then given a ten-question questionnaire (Appendix A). Results of the two study tools (an interview & questionnaire) made it clear that EFL English language students suffer a lot during the 45-minute class period as they are given short time focus on such important segments of language acquisition. Also, the study two groups took the Achievement Test, and results revealed a clear distinction between both groups' scores. The learners of the EG got high scores between (70-90), compared to learners of the CG, where the latter obtained scores between (40-75).

Besides, results disclosed reality of poor attention paid to communication among EFL English language learning inside classroom atmosphere. On that ground, it is recommended that teachers of English language shall teach English language structures (Relative Clauses) to Iraqi EFL students systematically and in a friendly communication atmosphere among EFL learners and between a teacher and EFL leaners.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, relative clauses, translation, language acquisition.

كيفية تدريس الجمل الموصولة باللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المدارس الثانوية العراقية:
الفهم الكامل من خلال ترجمة معاني الضمائر الموصولة في النص

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الملخص:
تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى مناقشة أسباب عدم معرفة طلاب المدارس الثانوية العراقيين (الذين يتعلمون الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية) في استخدام "الجمل الموصولة " في اللغة الإنجليزية. ورغم أنه من المفهوم أنهم ليسوا متحدثين أصليين للغة الإنجليزية، إلا أنهم يدرسون هذه اللغة منذ الصف الخامس الابتدائي. وعلاوة على ذلك، يتمتع طلاب المدارس الثانوية العراقيون – شأنهم شأن أقرانهم في جميع أنحاء العالم – في عالم رقمي تتوفر فيه كافة وسائل الاتصال الممكنة؛ مما يجعل مهمة اكتساب التراكيب النحوية للغة الإنجليزية أمراً قابلاً للتحقيق. ولإجراء هذه الدراسة، تم اختيار مجموعتين من الطلاب؛ حيث شملت "المجموعة التجريبية 40 " طالباً تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من مدرسة "أبي الخصيب" الثانوية للبنين، وضمت "المجموعة الضابطة " أيضاً ٤٠ طالباً تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من المدرسة نفسها. خضع طلاب المجموعة التجريبية لجلسة مقابلة استغرقت دقيقتين لكل طالب، تلاها تعبئة استبانة مكونة من عشرة أسئلة (انظر الملحق أ). وأظهرت نتائج أداتي الدراسة (المقابلة والاستبانة) أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات كبيرة خلال الحصة الدراسية التي تستغرق ٤٥ دقيقة، نظراً لضيق الوقت المتاح للتركيز على جوانب بالغة الأهمية في عملية اكتساب اللغة. كما خضعت مجموعتا الدراسة لاختبار تحصيلي، وكشفت النتائج عن تفاوت واضح في الدرجات بين المجموعتين؛ إذ حقق طلاب المجموعة التجريبية درجات مرتفعة تراوحت بين (٧٠ و٩٠) درجة، مقارنة بطلاب المجموعة الضابطة الذين تراوحت درجاتهم بين (٤٠ و٧٥) درجة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، بينت النتائج عن ضعف الاهتمام بالتواصل أثناء تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية داخل الفصل الدراسي. وبناءً على ذلك، تم التأكيد على ان يعمل معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية بتدريس التراكيب النحوية (الجمل الموصولة) للطلاب العراقيين بشكل منهجي، وفي ظل أجواء تواصلية ودية تسود بين القائم بعملية التعليم ومتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الجمل الموصولة، الترجمة، اكتساب اللغة.

INTRODUCTION

First of all, one of the objectives of EFL learners while studying English language is to obtain a full mastery of such a language. This is not a hard task, but is not easily approached unless systematically planned for. One of the obstacles facing EFL learners is how to use relative clauses accurately and adequately. The point here is learning English relative clauses. It is to some extent challenging to EFL learners due to the fact that relative clauses of sophisticated syntactic structures (Selinker, 2010). Hawkins and Chan (1997), the acquisition of relative clauses is a hindrance to EFL learners. Hence, there is an urgent demand to understand such obstacles facing acquiring such English language structures. It is a must to help EFL learners get rid of such obstacles in EFL classrooms and activities devoted for them outside English language learning atmosphere.

Moreover, relative clauses, as Khalil disclosed in 2000, make up a troublesome issue for Arab EFL learners. It is so because learning such sophisticated structures imposes complexity on both semantic and syntactical spheres. Crown (2008) made it plain that the relative clauses are “dependent clauses that modify nouns., introduced by a set of relative pronouns: that, which, who, whom, and whose” (p. 420). As to Bao, he made public in 2015 that a relative pronoun is there to symbolize the person or thing in the main clause and each relative pronoun has its explicit purpose. As claimed by Azar (1999) “relative clause or also called adjective clause is a dependent clause that modifies noun. It describes, identifies or gives further information about a noun” (p. 267). Eastwood (2011) brought to light that relatives clause are clauses which tell the identity of or produce extra details about a person or thing already been referred to in the sentence. “It is introduced by a relative pronoun such as who, which, that, whose, where, or when" (p. 197).

Also, It is agreed upon that English language structure is quite complex, as declared by Lightbown (1997), who added that the English language learners’ first language with no doubt affects acquisition of English as a foreign language as well as nature of English language’s sophisticated structures. De Vries (2005) defined relative clauses as being a general occurrence in English grammatical structures. Such relative clauses are contemplated as a crucial method for language persistence articulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In line with Ellis (2016), using miscellaneous methods in teaching grammatical segments is a welcome tendency to grasp classroom’s learners such as translating L1 grammatical relative pronouns into the L2, which is considered as a means for communication in and out of classrooms. Cook (2010) made it quite clear that as an English language learner is being aware of variations

between the L1 and L2 via translating grammatical issues, such as relative pronouns, it would help them understand and acquire such grammatical relative pronouns. In a study carried out by Tadros in 1979 at Khartoum university, he came up with results disclosing that Arab speaking learners committed mistakes while composing English language relative clauses. As a result of analyzing mistakes made by learners in the written English through his study that includes 472 scripts picked up from 236 learners at Khartoum university. These mistakes are ascribed to misunderstanding and poor mastery of English relative clauses.

As referred to by Mahmoud and Mohammed (2022), in a study conducted on Sudanese Secondary School learners during the academic year 2022 - 2023 to check difficulty of relative clauses is linked to learners whether being motivated or not. If yes, then results would be promising and learning English language relative clauses is on the right track, if otherwise, it means that accomplishment and production of English language learners is no more than a failure as far as the English language acquisition is concerned. They also made known that other reasons behind incapability in using relative clauses correctly are traced to the fact that EFL learners were given short chances to get acquainted with relative clauses, hence they were lagging behind in uttering and writing adequate and correct segments of English language production as far as relative clauses are concerned. Mahmoud and Ahmed (2022) figured out that English language teachers have the ability to assist their EFL learners overcome English language structural pitfalls specifically relative clauses and expand their learning atmosphere recognition via adopting communication techniques. It is significant to shed light on the point that Gao in 2014 summarized grounds behind learners' poor achievements as far as relative clauses are concerned, including but not limited to limited recognition of English grammatical materials as well as inadequate volume of vocabulary to be used in daily classroom communication.

In a study implemented by Thyab (2022), she explicated the fact that EFL learners suffer a lot when the matter is pertaining to acquiring English as a foreign language. Besides, English language relative clauses' learners are not yet qualified in producing relative clauses, along with actual discrepancies between English and Arabic languages. She added that the Arab EFL learners' first language intervenes and brings about difficulty in learning relative clauses. Murphy, in his book (2012) brought to light the significance of relative clauses to students and teachers alike, when there is a determined understanding of their different types and uses in their attempt to construct relative clauses and sentences. If well captured, as Murphy referred to, the use and construction of relative clause on daily would be reliable and beneficiary.

As made clear by Purnamasari (2020), understanding relative clauses, construction, use and function, would deliver daily course instructions accurately and fruitfully, and classroom learners would make use of difficulties might occur

while learning such relative clauses in and out of classroom atmosphere. It is, at the beginning, a hard job for learners to make clear a person or thing we are referring to/taking about. Purnamasari disclosed a hint that might be disturbing for us as English language learners and teachers alike, which states that misunderstanding of relative clauses, types, uses and functions, would lead to a poor grammatical control, which in the end would unfortunately to unreliable communication. It is understood that English language learners receive instructions step by step as a dose to learn grammatical issues. Such instructions might be delivered using English as a means of instruction or the First Language (Arabic), translated grammatical relative pronouns, but with no focus on language usage would lead to negative production and zero English language grammatical issues' acquisition. LarsenFreeman, 2015).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does translating meanings of in-text relative pronouns assist leaners of English as a foreign language comprehending the use of English relative clauses?
2. Is there a correlation between in-text relative pronouns translation and relative pronouns acquisition?

METHODOLOGY

Students were given a chance to express their attitudes to the impact of translating meanings of in-text relative clauses in understanding and comprehending their daily use correctly. Two groups were selected for this study. The study experiment group, (40) respondents, were randomly selected from the Abi al-Khaseeb Secondary School for Boys, Fifth Secondary School students, for the academic year 2025 – 2026. They were taught materials selected from the (English Grammar in Use – Fourth Edition), pages 184 – 195, for a period of one month, (4) hours a week. As to the second group, Control Group, (40) students were subject to materials of the classroom book assigned by the Basra Education Committee. They did not take part in the 10-question questionnaire or an interview.

At the end of the study period, they took an achievement test. The exam sheet is of four questions, (as referred to in Appendix B). The test period was from 9:00 am to 10:30 am, supervised and invigilated by the researcher himself. Following the end of the period of the achievement test, were given a period of (10) minutes to respond to a (10) closed-ended- question sheet (as stated in Appendix A, and were free to choose their answers in a free academic atmosphere.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Murphy (2019) shed light on definitions of relative (or adjective) clauses. They gives a new form to a noun or pronoun and are preceded by a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, which, or that) or periodically a relative adverb (when & where). Relative clauses operate as subordinate or dependent clauses and that is why cannot exist separately as full sentences. The relative pronoun (or adverb) is recruited to bring together the relative clause to an independent clause by making known the noun or pronoun being given a new form.

Below is full description to relative clauses, uses and functions:

1 **Relative pronoun: Who**

Specify a person or people تحديد شخص او اشخاص

People who live in Baghdad suffer devastating pollution.
يعاني السكان الذين يقطنون العاصمة بغداد تلوثا خطيرا.

My son who receives a monthly salary amounting to 2000 $ supports his mother.

The old lady who stands in the queue is a pianist.

2 Relative pronoun: Which

Specify a thing or concept تحديد شيء او مفهوم

My friend lent me his bike, which I made use during the whole day.
أعارني صديقي دراجته الهوائية والتي استخدمتها على مدار اليوم.

I don’t like TV series which have horror actions.

The automobile which broke down is operating once again.

3 Relative pronoun: That

Specify a thing or concept (informal writing) تحديد شيء او مفهوم

Did you find the door key that you misplaced?
هل عثرت على مفتاح الباب الذي فقدته؟

The sofa that I laid on was cozy.

Are these the shirts that you were looking for?

4 Relative pronoun: Whom

Specify the object of a verb or preposition
اللذين – اللواتي / الذي – التي

My sister has two lovely daughters, whom she adores a lot.
لدى اختي ابنتين جميلتين، حيث تحبهما كثيرا.

Susan is a person whom I respect greatly.

5 Relative pronoun: Whose
Specify possession تحديد الملكية

I phoned a school principal whose teaching staff know you.
اتصلت بمدير المدرسة الذي كادره التدريسي يعرفك.
I met a physician whose son is one of my Arabic language class.
I travelled with a friend whose wife says hi to you.

6 Relative pronoun: Where
Specify a place تحديد المكان

A school is a place where pupils learn sciences and languages.
المدرسة هي مكان حيث يتلقى فيه الطلبة العلوم واللغات.
The barber's where we had haircut was adjacent to the pharmacy.
The street where the accident has occurred was close to my house.

7 Relative pronoun: When
Specify a time تحديد الوقت

The 1980 was a time when my wife was born.
كان العام ١٩٨٠ الوقت الذي ولدت فيه زوجتي.
The year when I graduated from school was 1994.
The day when the exam started was Monday.

As to findings of this study, the qualitative analysis, it is promising to say that translating meanings of in-text relative pronouns assisted leaners of English as a foreign language comprehending the use of English relative clauses, as per the Achievement Test's results, where scores of Experimental Group's students were between (70-90), compared to the Control Group's students, where its scores were between (40-75). Besides, students of the Experimental Group showed a fruitful mastery of the relative pronouns, uses, functions and purposes as they answer the 10-question questionnaire. Moreover, as to the second research question, results of the interviews, 10-question questionnaire and achievement test brought to light that there is a notable correlation between in text relative pronouns' translation and relative pronouns' acquisition.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As to results of this study, in line with the qualitative description, and in line with responses collected from the two EFL acquisition elicitation means such as the interview, two minutes each, and the ten-question questionnaire, it has been made definitely clear that subjects of this study were not fully equipped with understanding and mastery of relative clauses use. It is due to a bunch of reasons including but not limited to lack of knowledge about relative clauses, their uses and functions, their teachers did not spend much time on teaching such English language topics. It means students got insufficient exposure to relative clauses in real situation examples.

Also, the first language interference was another reason behind being unqualified in using relative clauses. Most of Arab/Iraqi learners suffer such phenomenon while acquiring English as a foreign language. Beside, students were not motivated enough to understand and get much knowledge about such segments of English language relative clauses. It was a barrier to EFL acquisition. It is logical to claim here that ESL teachers do not use appropriate learning materials throughout the learning process, which indicates that students do not have enough dose of instructions on the function and uses of relative clauses.

Moreover, it is understandable that Arab students, namely Iraqi ones, are not well taught on how to use English language structures, how to become systematically manageable in using language syntactic structures as far as relative clauses are concerned. It is evident from results elicited from interviews and questionnaires that students lack self-confidence and not yet ready to hold talks or write in English language. It could be resulted from a fact that such students were not given appropriate attention on how and when to use relative clauses in different situations.

It is significant now to set some recommendation as a response to the findings of the questionnaires and interviews, as follows:

- It is a good chance for our students to share common views whether in issues relate to their studies or public ones. Hence, it is highly recommended to upgrade the level of being exposed to the EFL relative clauses among students even when there halts appears therein.
- There shall be re-evaluation to learning materials exposed to students pertaining to the use of EFL relative clause in class.
- Motivation is a crucial scope that teachers shall pay attention to during the period of a class. It is understandable that some students are lagging behind during lesson periods, and it is your time as a teacher to jump in and activate those are behind in learning EFL relative clauses and other materials.
- In a study conducted by Lado in 1999, she made it obvious that learners when in a hard situation while learning a segment of EFL grammatical materials, they

resort to their First Language knowledge, which in turn would spoil the process of learning EFL grammatical materials including relative clauses. Hence, it is EFL teachers' burden to assist EFL leaners being on the right track pertaining to language acquisition. It is in line with Ortega's study results. Therefore, it is recommended to let EFL students get rid of this phenomenon.

- It is teachers' responsibility to enhance students recognition about the significance of relative clauses for communication in classes and out of classes.
- Practice is a crucial part of the teaching and learning processes, if well maintained, results would be optimistic, and teaching outcomes would be promising. In a study conducted by Murtisari in 2020, results and feedback elicited from students showed that using translation while learning grammatical issues, such as relative pronouns, assisted them in understating meanings of such relative pronouns and made it to some extent accessible to communicate among them using the Fist Language, English.

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APPENDIX A: THE TEN-QUESTION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How many relative pronouns are there in English language?
2. Could you Count them?
3. What a relative pronoun do you use if referring to a place?
4. If you are talking about possession (for people), what a relative pronoun do you use?
5. If you are talking about possession (for things), what a relative pronoun do you use?
6. Does the relative pronoun (when) refer to a place or time?
7. Does a relative pronoun function as a modifier to a noun or a pronoun, or both?
8. Do you feel that you need much more practice on relative clauses? If not, tell why?
9. Do you practice EFL relative clauses in and out of class?

10. Do you recommend that teachers shall practice EFL relative clauses on daily basis in class periods?

APPENDIX B: AN ACHIEVEMENT TEST (QUESTION SHEET)

English Relative Clauses' Achievement Test

Student Name: ……

Date: ……. Score: ……..

Q1. Circle the letter of the correct answer:

1. Are you the neighbor …… sent me the marriage invitation card?

A. WHICH B. WHOSE C. WHO D. WHOM

2. This is the museum …… we had our first visit in 2020.

A. WHERE B. WHOSE C. WHO D. WHOM

3. I love Paris …….. has vivid sites.

A. WHERE B. THAT C. WHO D. WHICH

4. Last month I bought a new smart phone, ……. Was full of video games.

5. My family house, which I grew up in, is old now.

Q2. Match A's sentences with B's:

A:	B:
We use WHO, as a relative clause for	Things
We use THAT, as a relative clause for	Places
We use WHICH, as a relative clause for	People
We use WHEN, as a relative clause for	People & Things
We use WHERE, as a relative clause for	Possession
We use WHOSE, as a relative clause for	Times

Q3. Correct the following sentences:

1. **This is the countryside whose I was born.**
2. **I remember the day which I broke my leg.**
3. **This is the professor where helped me a lot in my study.**
4. **The boy which is singling over there is my close friend.**
5. **The car who hit my last week is in yellow.**

Q4. Fill in the blanks with correct Arabic Translation:

1. This is a degree which I attained from Asian University – Thailand.	**..... شهادة حصلت عليها من الجامعة الاسيوية في تايلند.**
2. Did the teacher mention who was absent from class?	**هل ذكر المعلم ..... غاب عن المحاضرة؟**
3. This is the book which I read when I was in school.	**..... كتاب قرأته عندما كنت في المدرسة.**
4. I do not know whom we will me in London next week.	**لا أعرف ..... سنلتقي بهم في لندن الاسبوع القادم.**
5. The book which was on the table is mine.	**الكتاب ..... على الطاولة خاصتي.**