

Teaching Relative Clause in Secondary School English Classroom

Dan Yi

School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
Nanchong, Sichuan, China, 637000

Abstract

Relative clause is one of the major grammatical constructions in English learning. It provides more information to the noun phrase and sentence-level modifiers. Although many language teachers know the importance of relative clause, many of them lack thorough understanding of it. This paper clarifies the definition of it, points out main difficulty for students to master it, and propose some teaching suggestions for English teachers, which can help teachers to improve teaching efficiency and quality of teaching.

Key words: relative clause, difficulty of mastery, teaching suggestions

Almost every EFL/ESL learner has experienced difficulty in acquiring the relative clauses in both reading comprehension as well as writing. Just because of its importance and difficulty, it is being tested in a broad scope of tests, like the well-known TOFEL, in which relative clauses are used as an assessment tool to test whether or not a test taker comprehends some important information in an article, and incorporates various sentence constructions in their writing. Learners who are capable of understanding and using relative clauses can develop a good perception of different sentence structures. Thus, facilitating the structure and use of relative clauses could definitely aid students in achieving better in both reading comprehension and writing skills.

1. The basic knowledge of relative clause:

1.1. The definition of relative clauses.

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, relative clause is “a type of complex post-nominal adjective modifier used in both written and spoken English” (p. 571), so it is also called a restrictive or adjective clause. For example, “China is a developing country which has the largest population of the world.” In this sentence,

“a developing country” functions as the head and “which has the largest population of the world” is the relative clause modifying the head noun phrase. Relative clause is of great value because it can “give us a means to encode complex adjective modifiers that are easier to process than complex attribute structures and that are less wordy than two independent clauses” (p. 571).

1.2. The form of relative clauses.

With regard to the form of relative clause, how is a relative clause formed? There are two elements, namely, the head noun, also called the antecedent, and the relative clause. The process of the latter is called embedding, which means the relative clause is embedded in the main clause and becomes part of it. There are at least 40 different kinds of relative clause structures in English. Relative pronouns can relativize nouns or noun phrases functioning as a subject, direct subject, indirect subject, object of a preposition, genitive and object noun phrases of a comparison. However, relativizing the object of a comparison is rare in English.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman(1999) elaborate on the four basic types of relative clauses in English: the relativization of the subject, the object, the object of the preposition and the possessive determiner in the embedded sentence. With respect to the relativization of the subject in the embedded sentence, there are 2 sub-types: subject-subject relative clauses and object-subject relative clauses. In regard to the relativization of the object in the embedded sentence, subject-object relative clauses and object-object relative clauses are included.

1.3. The use of relative clause.

Although there are some strict rules related to relative clauses, there are some cases where people use it according to their preference or different occasions (in speaking or writing). Fox and Thompson find that there are some preferred patterns of use in American English conversation: inanimate subject head nouns prefer relativized objects; inanimate object head nouns prefer relativized subjects; existential human head nouns following their subjects prefer relativized subjects. What’s more, in conversation, relative clauses can function as grounding, characterizing, giving new information and ordering.

On the other hand, when people incorporate relative clauses in their writing, they would prefer to keep the relative pronoun when it replaces relativized objects. Whereas when prepositional objects are relativized, either deleting or fronting the relative pronoun is legitimate. In writing, people tend to front the relative pronoun and use the relative pronoun “which” instead of “that”, while in speech the preposition is left behind (Stauble, as cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 583).

2. Difficulties in acquiring relative clauses

2.1. No equivalent in different languages

Some challenges in grammar that arise are due to no equivalent in other languages, like the challenges appearing with the logical connectors. The difficulty of acquiring relative clauses arise because of peculiarities in English, such as the English language can relativize subject, direct object, indirect object, oblique object, and genitive, whereas some languages like Malay and Indonesian can only relativize subject, which will create obstacles for the learners from those countries. In other words, different languages may vary in relative clause formation. According to Keenan and Comrie, three main dimensions have been identified along which relative

clauses can differ (as cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 573). The first one is the position of the relative clauses can differ. For example, the head noun is followed by relative clauses in English, while some languages like Chinese, requires the relative clauses precede the head noun. The second dimension deals with how relative clauses are marked. English uses a relative pronoun like “who, that, which...” to signal the following entity is a relative clause, whereas Chinese employs another marker, “de(的)” to signal the presence of a relative clause. The last dimension involves the presence or absence of a pronominal reflex. In English, the relative noun substitutes for the identical noun phrase, like the following sentence:

This is the flower that I like.

However, some languages like Chinese allow pronominal reflexes to occur as objects of prepositions, so Chinese learners may make the following error:

*This is the flower I like it.

It is imperative for ESL or EFL teachers to be aware of these differences in order to help learners avoid the negative language transfer in relative clauses from their mother tongue.

2.2. Most common errors in using relative clauses

Gass (1980) summarizes four categories of errors in subjects' receptive and productive knowledge: “relative clause marker omission, pronoun retention, relative clauses marker selection and adjacency” (p. 133). For example, “The man ran into the house is my sister”, it is obvious that there is no marker of a relative clause, so the relative pronoun “who” should be added after “the man” to indicate what follows is a relative clause. As to the second error, it has been examined in the previous part with the example of “This is the flower that I like it”. For many ESL/EFL learners, it is not easy to select the correct relative pronoun. For example, “I met Mary in New York who is my favorite city”. It is easy to spot that the pronoun should be “which” as New York is an inanimate noun. The last error is about adjacency, for example, “The woman went to China who I met in New York”. The relative clause “who I met in New York” should be placed after its head noun “the woman”.

The author has been a high school English teacher in China for 7 years and is very familiar with the errors my students have made in the use of relative clauses. The most common types of errors made by Chinese learners are: “pronoun retention, wrong position of relative clauses, be-verb omission, lack of relative pronoun, wrong use of pronoun and subject omission”. The author's observations are consistent with the findings in the study done by other Chinese researchers like Zhu (2014).

2.3. Two hypotheses of acquisition of relative clause

When it comes to hypotheses aiming to account for the difficulty of acquisition of relative clauses in second language acquisition, two hypotheses stand out: Keenan and Comrie's (1977) Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH), Kuno's (1974) and Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis(PDH). They are based on different rationales and thus make different predictions on the difficulty order of different relative clause sentence types (Izumi, 2003). Many studies in both L1 and L2 support the NPAH as well as the PDH. The hierarchy proposed in the NPAH is

“Subject>direct object>indirect object>Oblique object >genitive>object of comparison”, from the most accessible for relativization to least accessible. If in a language a low position can be relativized, then all the higher positions (left) in the hierarchy can be relativized as well. Thus, the NPAH hypothesis functions as a

very legitimate explanation of why object-subject relative clause and object-object relative clause are easier to acquire than others. It is suggested that ESL/EFL teachers should start from the higher position and gradually move to lower positions, following the order from an easier type to a difficult one.

According to the PDH hypothesis, Kuno (1974) reasoned that it would be more difficult to process the sentence structure when the relative clause interrupted the main sentence by coming directly after the subject of the main clause. He also argues from the universal language perspective that certain syntactic patterns such as center-embedding cause perceptual difficulties and the rise of these constructions is determined by the interaction of major constituent word orders. This theory has implication for language teachers.

3. How to teach relative clauses

Grammar instruction can be boring and ineffective if it is taught as an end in itself. The following provides various teaching suggestions that help students master the form, meaning and use of relative clauses, hopefully they will be fun as well.

3.1. Teaching the form

One activity provided in the Williams' *The Teacher's Grammar Book* involves identification of the difference between subject and object relative pronouns. Students will be asked to take sentences and break them into two separate clauses, like "I met a girl" and "The girl studies at Harvard". Teachers will help students walk through the process of relativization step by step in order to help students understand how a relative clause is formed. For instance, students are given this sentence: "The book lacks one page. Mike borrowed the book". First students have to recognize the object noun phrase in the main clause, which is "the book"; then have students change the noun phrase to a relative pronoun based on the features of the noun phrase. And then emphasize the need to link the two clauses (Williams, 2005, p. 144). Meanwhile, ESL/EFL teachers better compare the relative clauses in English with students' mother tongue to avoid errors caused by negative language transfer. Teachers can ask students to make relative clauses in their native language so as to identify the differences. After some practices, students can be given reading assignments by having them work in teams to find relative clauses in their reading materials and then analyze the structure on the board.

3.2. Teaching the meaning of relative clauses

To teach the meaning of relative clauses, more conversational activity by using student information is suggested by Sandra Elbaum (as cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 586). Students work in groups and each one shares something unique or interesting about themselves or their activities. Then each one describes a fellow student based on the sharing by using a relative clause, for example,

Callie is the person who visited the Great Wall last week

Rory is the one who has been to Hong Kong many times.

For beginners, they can write down the sentence first to make sure the correctness of the relative clause. For advanced learners, this activity can be changed into a guessing game. Use relative clauses to describe a fellow student and have other classmates to guess who that person is.

3.3. Teaching the use of relative clauses

After students master the form and meaning of relative clauses, it is time to get them to use it, namely, to incorporate it in their writing. Since there are differences in formal writing and in informal speech, it is important to practice composition of this sort, especially for more advanced students (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, 587). Have students write about some topics that would be likely to incorporate relative clauses. For example, “The most interesting person that I have ever met”. A topic like this would prompt them to use some relative clauses (p. 587). Both peers and teachers should be involved in the editing and assessing the essay they have written. Teachers can correct the errors in their writings in class or have an individual discussion with students. Through this practice, students get positive and correct feedback so that they would prefer to employ relative clauses in the future.

3.4. Teaching visual learners

Some students are visual learners, so showing a YouTube video about relative clauses might help them learn better. Since it is 21st century, students are fond of technology, it would be helpful for teachers to introduce some good online language games about relative clauses or any grammatical features. In this way, students learn while they have some fun.

4. Conclusion

Mastery of relative clauses is of vital importance to learners who expect to achieve advanced language proficiency. However, it is not easy. Both the teachers and learners should make efforts. Generally, based on previous discussion, EFL/ESL teachers are supposed to have a rich knowledge of relative clauses and should be aware of differences among languages and understand the background information of the languages of their students, which will allow teachers to be better prepared in presenting and practicing relative clause formation in English and avoid some typical error as mentioned above. Moreover, knowing the NPAH and PDF hypothesis, and the OS and OO types are much more frequent among the four types of relative clauses, ESL/EFL teachers may put priority to them from a pedagogical perspective. Being familiar with the difficulties in relative clauses, the reasons behind it and many activities suggested above will definitely help teachers in assisting students recognize, use appropriately, and avoid errors in their future study.

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