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## COMMON ERRORS IN ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSE COMMITTED BY SAUDI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

(A case study in the College of Science and Arts in Wadi Alddwaser)

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### ABSTRACT

A lot of empirical research has been conducted to study the learner's performance in the field of second / foreign language learning. The researchers analyze the systematic errors made by the learner in order to identify strategies which learners use in language learning. They also try to identify the causes of the learner's errors and obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or to the preparation of teaching materials.

As far as the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabia are concerned, there is no doubt that English relative clause constitutes a major problem for Saudi learners of English. This is due to the fact that there are some differences between the Arabic relative clause and the English relative clause. Moreover, English relative clause, as far as the Saudi learners of English are concerned, seems to have received only little attention in error analysis.

The broad aim of this study is to obtain a general view of the difficult areas in English relative clause for Saudi learners of English at the college level. The specific objectives, however, are to identify, calculate, analyze and explain the incidence of different types of errors in English relative clauses in the written English of these learners and to evolve a suitable and effective teaching - learning strategy and remedial measures necessary in these marked out areas of English syntax. For this purpose 150 free English essays were selected as data for this study and then analyzed. These essays were written by 50 third level college students studying English as a foreign language in the college of Science and Arts in Wadi Alddwaser, Al-Kharj University in Saudi Arabia. Finally, based on the findings some recommendations and implications for educators and policymakers have been highlighted.

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### Significance of the Study

The feedback of the study will provide an important help to the teachers of Arabic learners of English, so that they can identify the areas of difficulty, focus on them and determine teaching techniques

which may ease such difficulties. The feedback also will tell the teachers which errors need to be reconsidered when designing and developing any further remedial programmes and remedial work for their learners. Secondly, it is hoped that this study will

arouse the interest of those who are in charge of English teachers' training, and the findings of the study may be taken into consideration when planning for developing new materials and pedagogical procedures for in-service training programmes. Thirdly, the study is expected to be of immense benefit to those who are in charge of designing English language syllabuses, producing ELT materials and constructing English language tests, curriculum developers and teacher evaluators to develop the whole process of ELT.

The results of the study should provide useful information to researchers investigating the phenomenon of second language learning in general and the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in a formal context in particular.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

The study will be limited to the investigation of common errors in the use of relative clause in English.

The study will be confined to the third year Saudi learners of English in the department of English in Waddi Aldwasser in Saudi Arabia during the academic year 2010-2011.

#### **Literature Review**

##### **Error Analysis**

Ellis (1986) states that error analysis is not a new method to study the process of language acquisition. Traditionally, error analysis was informally undertaken by the classroom teacher for the purpose of feedback which can be used in designing pedagogical materials and teaching strategies.

The resurgence of interest in error analysis in the Late 1960s and 1970s led several researchers like Corder (1971b), Selinker (1974), George (1972), Jain (1974), Richards (1974), Abbott, (1980), Taylor (1986) and Lennon (1991) once again to conduct empirical research to study the learner's performance in the field of second language learning. They analyse the systematic errors made by learners. These analyses indicate that the majority of the learners' errors are attributable to different sources like intralanguage interference, faulty teaching learning materials and mother tongue interference. Thus error analysis as an

alternative to contrastive analysis takes into account the creative aspect of language learning and places the learner at the center in the process of second language learning. According to this view, a learner of a second language is seen as constructing for himself a grammar of the target language from the linguistic data in the target language and the help he gets from teaching.

The research to date suggests that the second language learners do form rules which they test and revise through successive processes. Dulay and Burt (1974) have called this process "the creative construction hypothesis". Thus error analysts use different terms to describe the developing system of the learner as he progresses from zero competence to native speaker competence in the target language. Corder (1971a) calls it an "idiosyncratic dialect". Namser (1974) names it an "approximative system", and Selinker (1974) calls it "an interlanguage".

##### **Methodology of Error Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, in the past, error analysis was made by the classroom teacher for the purposes of correction and remediation. But a systematic analysis of the learner's errors for other purposes is comparatively a later phenomenon which started in the late 1960s. The normal stages of error analysis are stated by Corder (1974) - the collection of a sample of the learner's language, identification or recognition of errors, description/ classification of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors. However, many investigators do not include the evaluation of errors, but instead they include suggestions for error remediation.

##### **The Notion of Error**

Hendrickson (1978:169) defines an error as, "an utterance, form or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in real-life discourse". However, the notion of error has been differently approached by different researchers in the field of second or foreign language learning. Different terms such as slips, lapses, mistakes, goofs and errors, are used to describe the deviant language items produced by a

second or foreign language learner, Corder (1973) refers to them as 'Breaches of Code', as apposed to George (1972), who refers to them as "unwanted forms". 'Breaches of Code' as used by Corder are used to refer to learners' errors which they cannot correct.

Corder (1974), however, proposes a useful distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors and also explains the differences among lapses, mistakes and errors. Lapses refer to those errors of performance, which are produced in certain situations, such as memory failure, fatigue or emotional strain etc. They do not reflect the learner's knowledge of the target language but they are considered as slips of the tongue or slips of the pen. The learner is normally immediately aware of them and can correct them. Mistakes are failures in matching the language to the situation and result in inappropriate utterances. For example, someone may use the word "boat" to refer to a ship. Both lapses and mistakes are breaches in the use of the linguistic code, and not in the code itself. They are unsystematic and can be observed in the use of a language by native speakers as well as second language learners. But errors are considered as breaches of the code itself and refer to systematic errors of the learner, from which we can reconstruct his knowledge of the target language to date. The second language learner cannot correct such errors even if his attention has been drawn to them.

#### **The Learner's Language**

The term 'learner's language' has been used by different linguists to refer to the stage(s) in which the learners are committing errors while learning the second or foreign language. As the second or foreign language learners are looked on as creative individuals, they progress rapidly through logical and systematic stages of language learning. Through this learning process, these learners are seen working creatively upon their linguistic environment, which they have been exposed to, as they face its forms and functions in meaningful contexts. This process is called the 'creative construction hypothesis', by Brown (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1982). The second or

foreign language learners, by forming hypotheses and testing them gradually succeed in establishing a system which gets closer and closer to the system used by native speakers of the target language.

Many terms have been used to describe the system employed by the second or foreign language learner while learning the target language. Among the best known of these terms are, Lado's (1957) 'Language transfer', Corder's (1967,1971) 'transitional competence', and 'idiosyncratic dialects', Nemser's (1974) 'approximative systems' and Selinker's (1974) "interlanguage". Here is a brief discussion of each of these terms.

#### **Language Transfer**

Brown (1987:81) defines transfer as "a general term describing the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning". However, the term 'transfer' has been used by psycholinguists to explain that present learning is affected by past learning. When a learner is faced with a new learning task, naturally he makes use of that knowledge and skills which he or she possesses in order to ease the process of learning. The language learner in this case already has the knowledge of his mother tongue, which he attempts to transfer to the new language. Lado (1957) goes further and introduces the term "language transfer" to refer to the effect of one language and culture on the learning of another language and culture. Then he concludes that there are two types of transfer : Positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the production of the correct forms because of the similarity of the structures and forms in the new and old languages, and it occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learner in the new learning task. Negative transfer, on the other hand, refers to the production of erroneous forms as a result of differences in the structures and forms in the new and old languages. It occurs when the previous performance disrupts the current performance and this usually is referred to as 'interference'.

#### **Transitional Competence and Idiosyncratic Dialect**

Corder (1974) uses the term "transitional competence", which refers to the target language

system that the learner is using at a particular point of time in his learning process. It is transitional because it is unstable in nature. "A learner's sentences may be deviant, ill-formed, incorrect or erroneous only in the sense that they are not fully describable in the terms of the grammar of his mother tongue or the target language. They are, however, presumably, well-formed in terms of the grammar of his own transitional idiolect at the point in time" (Corder, 1974, p. 122).

Corder (1971a:147) also refers to the "Learner's language" as an "idiosyncratic dialect", which means that the learner's language is unique to a particular learner. It is called a dialect because it is describable in terms of a set of rules. In other words, it has a grammar of its own. Corder (1981: p. 17) summarizes the term "idiosyncratic dialect" as being "... regular, systematic, meaningful, i.e. it has a grammar, and is, in principle, describable in terms of a set of rules, some sub-set of which is a sub-set of the rules of the target social dialect. His dialect is unstable ... its conventions are not shared by a social group ... many of its sentences present problems of interpretation to any native speaker of the target dialect".

Corder also compares the learner's "idiosyncratic dialect" with dialects used by poets (Poetic language), aphasics and the infants learning their mother tongue. Corder concludes that it is unfair to call the learner's language erroneous since the other dialects are considered to be non-erroneous. The second language learner uses his own rules while learning the target language and comes out with an idiosyncratic dialect.

#### **Approximative System**

Nemser (1974) calls the language the learner creates for himself an "approximative system". The term refers to "... the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language. Such approximative systems vary in character in accordance with proficiency level; variation is also introduced by learning experience (including exposure to a target language script system), communication function, personal learning

characteristics, etc. "(Nemser, 1974; 55). Such a system indicates the successful approximation to the target language and emphasizes the transitional and dynamic nature of the system. This system develops from its rudimentary stage to the stage which is very close to the target language. Obtaining the perfect proficiency in the target language is rare among the adults, according to Nemser (1974). The learner's language throughout these stages is never free from the phonological and grammatical deviance.

#### **Interlanguage**

Selinker (1974; p. 35) introduces the term interlanguage to describe the learner's language, which refers to "... the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a TL norm". This definition emphasizes the structurally intermediate status of the learner's language system between the mother tongue and the target language while the "approximative system" emphasizes the transitional and dynamic nature of the system. Interlanguage gives a new dimension for viewing the learner's language independently of the native language and the target language. Selinker suggests five central processes of second language learning. These are language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization. Furthermore, he suggests a few minor processes such as hypercorrection, spelling pronunciation, cognate pronunciation and holophrase learning.

In conclusion, even if different linguists use different nomenclatures, they seem to agree that the second or foreign language learners doing their best to form their own self-contained linguistic system. The system they form is neither the system of the native language nor the system of the target language. In fact, it is a system which falls between the two - native and target languages. It is the system in which they do their best to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them.

## Methodology

### Sampling and data collection procedures

The data for this study consisted of 150 free English essays written by 50 third level college students studying English as a foreign language in the college of Science and Arts in Wadi Alddwasser, Al-Kharj University in Saudi Arabia. . The subjects of this study have a homogenous pre-university and university background. They had almost the same type of education before joining the college of science & Arts in Wadi Addawaser , where they study 6 English courses as a foreign language; one course a year. Each course consists of two text books.

The collected data then analyzed following Error Analysis steps specified by Corder (1974) which are collection of a sample language of learner, identification of errors and description of errors.

### Results and Discussion

Saudi learners of English face difficulties in using the English relative clause so they committed many errors in this area. This could be due to many factors among the them is the fact that in Arabic, the relative pronoun itself functions as the modifier of the antecedent and not the whole relative clause. Additionally the subject or object of the Arabic relative clause is always present, either explicitly or implicitly. Another important issue is that since English relative clauses constitute difficulties for Saudi learners, they have the tendency to avoid using them in their production whenever they can.

Table (1) shows the total usage and errors found in Relative clauses

Total usages	Correct usages	No. of errors
833	448	385

Table 1 shows that the overall number usages in relative clauses which are 833. The correct usage is 488 and the incorrect usage is 385.

Table 2 shows that there are six types of errors were committed by the subjects in the use of relative clauses. The most frequent was the repetition of the object and subject of the relative clause (35.06% and 9.61% respectively). The substitution of relative

pronouns one by another comes second (25.46 %). The omission of relative pronouns ranks third (21.82%).

Table 2: Frequency and distribution of errors in Relative clauses

Type of errors	No. of errors	Percent
Repetition of object	135	35.06
<b>Substitution of Relative pronouns</b>	98	25.46
Omission of Relative pronouns	84	21.82
Repetition of subjects	37	9.61
Miscellaneous	39	7.08
Total	385	100.0%

Here is a brief explanation of these errors and the causes that were probably behind their occurrences.

*Repetition of Relative Pronoun* : There are two areas in English relative clauses in which Saudi learners usually tend to repeat the relative pronoun.

The subjects made lots of errors in the context of the repetition of the object in the form of a pronoun in the English object clause. In fact, the occurrence of this type of error is the highest in the interlanguage of the subjects in the relative clauses 35 06%. From the researcher's experience, there seems to be a strong tendency that this type of errors may get fossilized because many Saudi learners of English continue to commit it even after their attention has been drawn to it. Similar errors were found in the interlanguage of the Yemeni learners of English, Alkadasi(1999). The following examples which occurred in the data are self-evidence :

- The teacher who I went to see him was absent.
- Wadi Aldwasser is the place which I like it very much.
- The car which my father bought it is very strong.
- The boy you speak to him is my friend.

- I gave the book to the man who you knew him.

It is very tempting to say this type of error under discussion could probably be ascribed to Arabic interference. The Arabic relative sentence that contains a relative clause, the object in the object clause is usually mentioned two times; as a relative connector and as an object of the verb of the object relative clause. One can also say the omission or the retention of the relativized noun in the object clause in Arabic is considered to be a matter of stylistic variants in the modern standard Arabic.

The following two examples would be considered acceptable in Arabic : The man who I want to meet went on a holiday.

- The man who I want to meet him went on a holiday.

In fact, the first example where the relativized noun is omitted, is very highly stylistic and may be restricted to formal writing and speech and is not commonly used in the students' daily activities. The second example where the relative pronoun is retained is always used by Arab students' writing in Arabic. Furthermore, similar errors were found in the interlanguage of learners whose language backgrounds are different (Chinese ,Persian , Hebrew), Ceke-Marcia & Larsen Freeman(1999).

The second context in which the subjects made errors was the repetition of the subject of the English relative clause in the form of a pronoun 9.61%. They, consequently committed errors, like the following sentences, which are quite common in their production :

- The man who he teaches us is an Indian.
- The party which it took place yesterday was interesting.
- The girl who she finishes the college goes teaching.

This type of error could be an intralanguag error because the Arabic and English structures of this type of relative clause are the same.

**Relative Pronoun Omission** : The omission of the subject in the English relative clause was another type of errors which was among the most frequent errors that were committed by the Saudi learners of English.

In fact, there were two areas in which the subjects tend to omit a relative pronoun. The first context in which they tend to omit the relative pronoun was when a relative clause modifies an indefinite noun which functions as a direct object. The relative pronoun acts as a subject in the relative clause and this not acceptable in English language. The following examples occurred in the data.

- There are many Egyptians - work in many things in Wadi Alddwaser..
  - We go to Abbha – is about 400 km from Wadi Alddwaser .
- Second, the subjects omitted a relative pronoun where the relative clause modifies a head-noun in the subject complement position. These are some of the examples occurred in the data :
- I like my father – gives me whatever I need .
  - I have a car- runs on gas.

These two types of errors turn to be attributable to Arabic interference. In Arabic relative clause, when a relative clause modifies an indefinite noun, there is no relative pronoun in the sentence. Consequently, the subjects transferred the Arabic structure to the English relative clause. In English, omission of a relative pronoun is related to adjective clause whether identifying or non identifying. In identifying clause, we can omit an adjective relative pronoun.

e.g.: This is the man who I met yesterday.

This is the man I met yesterday.

In these two sentences , the omission of a relative pronoun is optional. In Arabic, the omission of the objective relative pronoun is not acceptable

e.g.: This is the book which I bought yesterday.

If we omit "which" in the above sentence in context of Arabic, the sentence seems to be not acceptable. So it is necessary for retaining objective relative pronoun in this case. Due to this fact, Arabic learners tend not to omit the objective relative pronoun. This is called positive transfer according to ( Brown 1987).

**Relative Pronoun Replacement** : Another area in English relative clause in which the subjects committed errors was the relative pronoun



replacement. This involves the use of the relative pronoun 'which' instead of 'who' and vice versa e.g.,

- This is the boy which has a nice car.
- The teacher which I saw is very friendly.
- The car who my father bought was very fast.

These are obvious clear cases of Arabic interference where in the choice of relative pronoun depends on the;

- 1- number of antecedents (singular, dual , plural)
- 2- gender type ( masculine or feminine)

the table below illustrate this

Number	Personal or non personal	
	Masculine	Feminine
Singular	Alathy	Alaty
Dual	Alathan	Alatan
Plural	Alatheena	Alatee

From the table above, it is clear that the Arabic relative pronouns are six in number which are , Alathy, Alaty, Alathan, Alatan, Alatheena, and Alatee). They are also divided into three groups according to the number of antecedents ( singular, dual and plural). They are further divided into two groups according to their gender types (masculine or feminine) irrespective personal or non personal. This is the reason why Arab learners of English tend to substitute who by which and vice versa.

The subject also substituted 'who' by 'whom' in many contexts in this area e.g.

- We can not see the boy whom has a new car today.
- We like our teacher whom is from Yemen.

As mentioned above there is a gender, masculine and feminine distinction in Arabic relative pronouns but there is not subject-object distinction. So this type of error may be attributable to ignorance in the rules restriction in the use of English pronouns.

In English ,whose, is used as a possessive pronoun , whereas in Arabic, there is no equivalent to whose. Due to this fact, the Arab learners in most cases tend to avoid using whose and thus replace it by inappropriate forms such as 'who his', 'who her', 'who their'. Because of this inappropriate understanding,

the subjects of this study produced sentences as the following:

- Our friends who their houses are far away can not attend early morning.
- Musfer who his car is new can drive very fast.

**Miscellaneous :** The subjects also committed different types of errors in this area, but less frequently than the other three types mentioned above.

**Subject-Verb agreement in Relative Clause :** As mentioned above, in Arabic, the number in relative clause is always decided by the antecedent and the relative pronoun .i. alathy and alaty for singular and alatheena and alatee for plural. Whereas in English, the number is decided by the antecedent and not by the relative pronoun e.i. who is used for singular and plural.

A common type of error made by the subjects in relative clause formation in English was the lack of subject-verb agreement in the clause. Most of these errors occurred after 'who'.

e.g.,

- The teachers who was teaching us last year never come back.
- Many people who is living in the village come to the city.

This type of error may be ascribed to intra-English where the main Arabic relative pronoun is inflected for number and gender whereas the English relative pronouns are not inflected for number. Since most of the errors occurred after the pronoun 'who' it might be argued that the subjects thought 'who' is always singular.

**Restricted and non-restricted Relative Clauses :** There was a tendency among the subjects to use restricted relative clauses even in the wrong contexts and avoid using non-restricted relative clauses e.g.,

- Wadi Alddwaser which is in the south of Riyadh is very nice.
- My friend Fahed who studies with me is friendly.

In fact, there is a distinction between restricted and non-restricted relative clause in Arabic. It seems that not many native speakers of Arabic are, however, aware of such a semantic distinction except

'probably' those who are linguists (or linguistically trained). Accordingly, such type of error could be attributable to English language difficulty.

**Wrong Placement of the Relative Clause :** The final type of error in this category that the subjects committed was the wrong placement of the English relative clause, however, it should not be considered as a major problems for the subjects since not many of them committed this error. The following are some examples from the data :

- The people are in our city who are cleaver.
- The car is very beautiful which I bought last year.
- The original camels are from our village who are very expensive.

This type of error is most probably due to the way of teaching since both English and Arabic relative clauses demand that the relative clause should be very close to the antecedent.

#### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

To conclude this study, it appears clearly that the English relative clauses constitute a big problem for the Saudi learners of English where the proportion of errors to total usage was found to be 46.22%. Another matter of importance is that most of the errors in this category were due to Arabic interference. This is due to the fact that there are, to a large extent, many differences between the two systems of relative clauses.

The study findings can be used as a beginning point for providing pedagogical implications that should be taken into consideration for both teachers and syllabus designers. The implications are as follow:

Prior to teaching a specific grammar point, teachers review several grammar reference books to determine how the structure is formed when it is used, and if there is any exception to the grammar rules.

The atmosphere in the classroom should be relaxed that encourages learners to take risks and also give opportunities for communication in pair and group work.

Teacher should provide a variety of written and oral exercises and activities that range from tightly controlled such as completion, transformation

and combination to those that are more free and encourage creative use of English.

As a first step, learners need to be exposed to simple sentences which can be used when the relative clauses are introduced and practice. The teacher then explains how these sentences have been combined to form a relative clause constructions.

As a second step, learners need to know how to distinguish the function of the relative pronoun i.e. whether it is a subject or an object of the verb in the main clause.

Once this distinction is made, the next step is what happens when the sentences are joined e.g. which words substitute for which, which words have to be changed; and which have to be deleted.

Finally the most important step, learners need to be taught is to delete the object pronoun in the relative clause ,e.g.

I lost the book which I bought ( it) last week.

In such sentence, learners need to be taught to delete (it) since the relative pronoun (which) already function as an object of the verb (lost) in the main clause.

Or in the occurrence of a pronominal reflex with the object of a preposition.

In this case contrastive teaching of English and Arabic to show the structures of both languages and the differences between them is a good way to reinforce the correct usage in English.

Whose has no equivalent in Arabic, thus the teachers should emphases this to their learners and give several practice in teaching this point. They also should elicit several examples from their learners to check that they understand this grammatical point.

After this presentation, learners should be given a series of exercises indicating forms and functions of the relative clause constructions to reinforce what they have been taught.

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