

# An Investigation of Sources of Errors in the Use of Relative Clauses by English Majors

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## Abstract

Based on a small corpus, this thesis tries to analyze the sources of errors in the use of relative clause by English majors. After analyzing, two main sources of errors are found, interlingual errors and intralingual errors.

**Keywords:** sources of errors, interlingual errors, intralingual errors

## 1. Introduction

In the process of English learning, the master and usage of subordinate clauses are always the most difficult points, especially relative clauses. To some extent, the understanding and production of the English relative clauses reflect the learners' English level. However, most learners are not good at using relative clauses into their writing. To make matter worse, they even have the tendency of avoiding using relative clauses. As we know relative clauses are very important in English writing. English learners avoiding using or wrongly using relative clauses will usually lead to the loose structure, lack of unity and coherence and lacking of logicity.

Problems arise and press us to look into such field. What are the causes for these errors? It is the problem discussed in this thesis.

## 2. Theory

Here are the theories of sources of errors:

One of the first and most important studies conducted in the field of Error Analysis was the one done by Richards (1971). His study involved learners from different language background (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalong, Maori, Maltese, and Indian and West African Languages) and showed the different types of errors relating to production and distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles, and the use of questions. Based on this, he distinguished three sources of errors:

- 1) Interference errors: errors resulting from the use of elements from one language while speaking/writing another.
- 2) Intralingual errors: errors reflecting general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.
- 3) Developmental errors: errors occurring when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences.

According to Richards (1971), intralingual errors are also subdivided to the following categories:

- 1) Overgeneralization errors: the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of other structures in the target language.
- 2) Ignorance of rule restrictions: the learner applies rules to context where they are not applicable.
- 3) Incomplete application of rules: the learner fails to use a fully developed structure.
- 4) False hypothesis: the learners do not fully understand a distinction in the target language.

Brown (1980) further classified sources of errors into the following categories:

- 1) Interference transfer: meaning that in the early stages, the native language is the only previous linguistic system learners can draw upon; thus interference is inevitable.

2) Intralingual transfer: that is the negative transfer of items within the target language. In other words, the incorrect generalization of the rules within the target language,

3) Context of learning: Richard called “false concepts” and Stenson (1974) called “induced errors”, including a) misleading explanation from the teacher, b) faulty presentation of a structure in a text book, c) improper contextualized pattern, d) confused vocabulary items because of contiguous presentation, e) inappropriately formal forms of language.

4) Communication strategies, meaning that in order to get the messages across, a learner may use some techniques like word coinage, circumlocution, false cognates, and prefabricated patterns, which can all be the sources of errors.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Purpose of the Study*

Based on the theory of error analysis, the sources of errors in the use of relative clause by English majors are analyzed.

#### *3.2 Research questions*

In this thesis, errors in the use of relative clauses have been examined, through the analysis of errors by English majors, the following questions will be answered:

What are the causes of the errors in the use of relative clauses by English Majors?

How to each relative clauses effectively?

#### *3.3 Subjects*

In this research all subjects taken in the experiment are college students. They are 120 English majors from Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities in grade 2013. All of the participants have learned the relative clause in senior high school, have passed the College Entrance Examination and are in their first grade at college. They have the moderate proficiency of English.

#### *3.4 Research Instrument*

The main study instruments are: corpus studies (regarding students' composition text as corpus). The participants are asked to write an essay on the topic of “Advantages and Disadvantages of Surfing on the Cell phone” by themselves without referring to any compositions or materials. Besides that they are asked to use relative clauses in their compositions and the numbers of relative clauses in their compositions must not be less than four.

#### *3.5 Research Procedure*

The study lasts for two months. It has the following steps:

Firstly, participants are asked to finish a composition with at least four relative clauses and, thus data are collected and a small corpus of relative clauses is built up.

Secondly, types of errors made by the English majors are identified according to the grammatical rule of relative clause.

Lastly, typical errors are analyzed and classified; sources of errors are found out.

### **4. Results and Discussions**

Being not familiar with the rule of foreign language, learners subconsciously apply the vocabulary, rules and usage of their mother tongue language to foreign language learning. If the knowledge of the foreign language is far beyond the master of the learners, the learners are bound to turn to their mother tongue language for help. If language structure of the mother tongue language is similar to the target language, foreign language output will be correct. This kind of transfer is called positive transfer which can help the learning of foreign language. If language structure is different from the target language, errors will appear. This kind of transfer is called negative transfer which will hinder the learning of the foreign language. Negative transfer will bring about errors, especially in the initial stage of learning a foreign language. Interlingual errors in this thesis mainly refer to grammar transfer.

After examining the quantitative analysis, the following wrong types of relative clauses are caused by interlingual transfer, negative transfer of mother tongue: resumptive pronouns, absence of antecedent, inappropriate ellipsis of relative words, disagreement between subject and verb.

## 4.1 Interlingual Transfer

### 4.1.1 Resumptive Pronouns

Resumptive pronoun is a commonplace in learners' language and it is usually regarded as the feature of interlanguage. Scholars and researcher have been exploring the phenomenon of resumptive pronouns. Hawkins (1994) said that applying resumptive pronouns can help reduce the difficulty of dealing with a complex structure. It is commonly believed that resumptive pronouns is caused by negative language transfer. That is to say, learners deal with pronouns in the way they deal with their mother tongue language. In Chinese, relative clauses allow the existence of resumptive pronouns, while in English relative clauses don't allow the existence of resumptive pronouns.

There are 60 errors of this kind in students' essay. The number and percentage of errors are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Resumptive pronouns

RC Type	Number of errors	percentage
SU	9	15.00%
DO	15	25.00%
IO	13	21.67%
OPREP	15	25.00%
GEN	2	3.33%
OCOMP	5	8.33%
Non-restrictive which	1	1.67%

From table 1, we can see errors on the resumptive pronouns are mainly found in "DO, OPREP, IO" types of relative clauses. We can draw a conclusion that when the relative pronoun acts as the direct or prepositional object, students are likely to commit this type of errors.

Here are some samples of wrong use of pronouns in relative clauses. "S" stands for samples.

(S33) However, relying on cell phone too much can also be a bad thing that it may bring you some trouble. (×)

(S19) Surfing on the cell phone to find information can help us to solve the problem that we can't deal with it. (×)

(S27) Some of the boys I visited them didn't come. (×)

(S14) As we all know it, no pains, and no gains. (×)

(S61) This is the bike which I lost it last week. (×)

(S98) This is the most interesting TV series that I watched it from CCTV8. (×)

This is the magazine I bought it in bookstore yesterday. (×)

The functions of the relative words are mainly about: they functions as connections, used to introduce a clause; they are used to replace the antecedents of the relative clauses or parts of the relative clause and even the whole part of the relative clause; they act as sentence parts in the relative clause, therefore, no matter they are relative pronouns or relative adverbs, they refer to the antecedents, so they can't occur in the relative clause again.

### 4.1.2 Absence of Antecedents

Errors of this kind frequently occur because of the habit of one's mother tongue language. In Chinese, when antecedent is a person or a thing, omission of the antecedent doesn't influence the integrity of the sentence, but in English, relative clauses must modify antecedents. These antecedents can't be omitted.

There are 16 errors of this kind in students' essay. The number and percentage of errors are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Absence of antecedent

RC Type	Number of errors	percentage
SU	0	0.00%
DO	5	31.25%
IO	7	43.75%
OPREP	4	25.00%
GEN	0	0.00%
OCOMP	0	0.00%
Where	0	0.00%
When	0	0.00%
Why	0	0.00%
Non-restrictive which	0	0.00%

From table 2 we can see that absence of antecedents mainly occurs to “DO, IO, OPREP” types of relative clauses. Besides that, the table also shows us errors of this kind frequently happen to interrogative sentences.

The following sentences in students’ sample are wrong because there are not any antecedents in these sentences.

(S55) She married whom I introduced her to. (×)

She married John to whom I introduced her. (√)

(S10) He would like to buy which we bought yesterday. (×)

He would like to buy the T-shirt which we bought yesterday. (√)

(S43) Is this cell phone that you want to buy from China Mobile? (×)

Is this cell phone the one you want to buy from China Mobile? (√)

(S78) Is this park where his father works? (×)

Is this park the place where his father works? (√)

#### 4.1.3 Inappropriate Ellipsis of the Relative Words

Inappropriate ellipsis of relative words results from negative transfer of mother tongue language and the complexity of relative clause itself. For example, in Chinese, there is only one relative pronoun “的”, but in English there are several relative pronouns. Most important of all, in Chinese, there is a structure

“subject + predicate + object + predicate of the object” for example, “我有一个哥哥在纽约大学生学习”. Chinese learners are likely to translate the sentence in this way. I have a brother studies in New York University. Learners apply Chinese language rules to English language, resulting in the errors. This sentence should be corrected in this way: I have a brother who studies in New York University.

There are 13 errors of this kind in students’ essay. The number and percentage of errors are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Inappropriate Ellipsis of the relative words

RC Type	Number of errors	percentage
SU	8	66.67%
DO	0	0.00%
IO	0	0.00%
OPREP	2	16.67%
OCOMP	0	0.00%
Where	2	16.67%
When	0	0.00%
Why	0	0.00%

From table 3 we can see inappropriate ellipsis of relative words is found in the “SU, OPREP, where” type of relative clauses. Relative words that function as objects of the clauses can be omitted. Relative words that function as subjects of the clauses can’t be omitted. Here are some error samples related to ellipsis of relative words.

(S35) There are a lot of young people prefer using the cell phone to using a computer. (×).

There are a lot of young people who prefer using the cell phone to using a computer. (√)

(S12) On the other hand, people depend on cell phone too much will be addicted to it. (×)

On the other hand, people who depend on cell phone too much will be addicted to it. (√)

(S52) It is common to see those people surf on the cell phone anywhere, on bus, in bed and in washroom. (×)

It is common to see those people who surf on the cell phone anywhere, on bus, in bed and in washroom. (√)

(S60) Those watch TV programs all day are wasting their lives. (×)

Those who watch TV programs all day are wasting their lives. (√)

(S17) Children eat a lot of sugar often have bad teeth. (×)

Children who/ that eat a lot of sugar often have bad teeth. (√)

#### 4.1.4 Disagreement between Subject and Verb

Disagreement between subject and verb in the relative clause is caused by negative transfer of mother tongue language as well. In Chinese there isn't any grammatical rule of the agreement between subject and verb, therefore some students often forget the grammar that if the relative word acts as the subject of the relative clause, the form of the verb in the relative clause should be concordant with the antecedent.

There are 10 errors of this kind in students' essay. The number and percentage of errors are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Disagreement between subject and verb in the RC

RC Type	Number of errors	percentage
SU	9	90.00%
DO	0	0.00%
IO	0	0.00%
OPREP	0	0.00%
GEN	0	0.00%
OCOMP	0	0.00%
Where	0	0.00%
When	0	0.00%
Why	0	0.00%
Non-restrictive which	1	10.00%

Table 4 shows the disagreement between subject and verb are mainly found in "SU" type of relative clauses.

When the relative pronoun functions as the subject in relative clauses, the predicate in the clause must be Subject-verb Concord, that is to say, the predicate of the relative clause should agree with antecedent. Here are some wrong sentences from students' writing samples:

(S40) Surfing on the cell phone will bring us many disadvantages which are (is×) harmful both to our body and our mentality.

(S23) She is one of the students who have (has×) passed the exam this time.

The antecedent of the above sentence is "students", so plural form "have" should be used.

(S5) She is the only one of the students who has (have×) passed the exam this time.

The antecedent of the above sentence is "the only one", so singular form "has" should be used.

(S21) She is one of the girls in the class who are (is×) active.

(S49) She is the only one of the girls in the class who is (are×) active.

#### 4.2 Intralingual Errors

In addition to errors caused by transferring rules from mother tongue (interlingual error), learners also commit a lot of errors, which shows they are processing the second language in their own terms. Richards calls intralingual errors developmental errors. According to James (2001) views intralingual errors are divided into two categories: errors of learning strategy and errors of communication strategy. Errors of learning strategy are divided into four parts: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized.

Wrong use of relative words belongs to interlingual errors. There are 85 errors of wrong use of relative words in students' essays. The number and percentage of errors are shown in table 5.

Table 5. Frequency and percentage of wrong use of relative words

RC Type	Number of errors	percentage
SU	15	17.86%
DO	32	37.65%
IO	4	4.71%
OPREP	8	9.41%
GEN	5	5.88%
OCOMP	3	3.53%
Where	5	5.88%
When	6	7.06%
Why	4	4.71%
Non-restrictive which	2	2.35%

From table 5, we can see that there are errors of this kind in “SU, DO, IO, OPREP, GEN, OCOMP, where, when, why, non-restrictive which” types of RCs, especially in “SU, DO” types.

The use of relative words is the important and difficult points in learning relative clauses. English relative words are divided into two types, relative pronouns and relative adverbs. There are many grammar rules concerning the use of relative words and the use of relative words is complex. So it is hard for Chinese students to master the usages of relative words. But just because the usages of relative words are complex, so many students avoid using relative clauses or just use the simple relative clauses that they think are correct.

1) Error concerning “preposition+ relative pronoun”.

(S42) Who’s is the man with whom (who×, that×) you talked just now?

=Who’s is the man (whom/who/that) you talked with just now?

(S67) The room in which (that×) she lives is a large one.

=The room (which/that) she lives in is a large one.

When relative pronoun acts as object of the preposition, no matter in the restrictive relative clause or in the non-restrictive clause, when the preposition is prepositioned, we should use “whom” to refer to person, “which” refer to thing; but when the preposition is post positioned, it won’t be restricted by this, or it can be omitted, especially in spoken English

2) Errors concerning “which” and “that”.

(S45) Furthermore, through surfing on the cellphone, we can know any news (that) (which×) is related to the current society, like politics, history and entertainment.

(S12) I have finished every work (that) (which×) I should do.

In relative clauses when antecedent refers to thing, the relative word can be “which” or “that”, but in this sentence, only “that” can be used because the antecedent is modified by “all, any, no, much, little, few, every and so on”. “That” can also be omitted here. One more example,

(S8) “Kong Fu” is the very film (that) (which×) I’d like to see.

In this sentence, only “that” should be used because the antecedent is modified by “the very, the only, the next, the last”. “That” functions as object, it can also be omitted.

(S71) The headmaster spoke highly of our class and our performances that (which×) he say at the school’s hall.

In this sentence, antecedent is a two-coordinate-noun phrase both refer to person and thing, “that” should be used.

(S35) Which is the plane that (which×) crashed yesterday?

“That” instead of “which” should be used in a special question, when the principle clause begins with “which”.

3) Errors concerning “who\whom” and “that” referring to person.

(S2)Who is the student that (who×) won the first prize in the math contest?

In this sentence “that” instead of “who” should be used to introduce a relative clause because the sentence begins with “who, which”.

(S81) Do you know the professor in black with thick glasses who (that×) is making a speech at the meeting?

Relative word “that” can be used to refer to person, but in this sentence, “who” instead of “that” should be used because the antecedent is modified by a longer post positioned attribute.

(S14) I was the only person in my class who (that×) won the scholarship.

(S56) There is only one classmate in my class who\whom (that×) I want to make friend with.

Relative word “that” can be used to refer to person, but in these two sentences, “who\whom” should be used. Learners should follow this grammar rule that in the compartmentation relative clause, if the antecedent refers to person, in order to clarify the modification relationship, “who\whom” should be used.

4) Errors concerning “as”.

(S4) This is the same pen that I lost yesterday. (×)

This is the same pen as I lost yesterday. (√)

From the writing paper we can see students can't distinguish “the same...as” and “the same...that...” We know in abstract, there is no difference between the same category and the same thing, so the two words can be exchanged, for example,

I hold the same point of view as\that you have.

But when referring to material things, they have some differences: when referring to the same category, “as” should be used and when referring to the same thing, “that” should be used.

(S43) Zhao Chao's father works in the same factory that (as×) my father works.

=Zhao Chao's father works in the same factory that (as) my father works in.

When “that” in the “the same...that” acts as relative adverb, it can't be exchanged into as”.

Relative word “as” can refer to person or thing. When used to introduce a relative clause, it can act as subject, object and predicative etc. in the clause. When acting as object, it can be omitted. It is often used in some fixed structure “such...as...” and “the same...as...” For example:

As is well known, great changes have taken place in China.

They were satisfied with this decision, as was agreed beforehand

I never heard such stories as he tells.

Have you bought the same book as I referred to yesterday?

The non-restrictive clause introduced by “as” is usually used in the fixed sentence structures. For example: as we can see, as can be seen, as we know, as is(well) known, as may be imagined, as often happens, as has been said before, as was mentioned above, as is often the case, as\indeed it is, etc.

5) Errors concerning “which, when” and “which, where”.

(S21) I'll never forget the days when I spent in Beijing with you. (×)

I'll never forget the days which I spent in Beijing with you. (√)

(S32) This is the place where we visited last summer holidays. (×)

This is the place which\that we visited last summer holidays. (√)

6) Error concerning “why” and “which\that”.

(S11) Have you asked her for the reason why may explain her absence? (×)

Have you asked her for the reason that\which may explain her absence? (√)

(59) I don't believe the reason why he has given for his being late. (×)

I don't believe the reason that\ which he has given for his being late. (√)

“The wrong use of relative words” is mainly resulted from “intra-lingual interference”. Learners' committing this error shows that they are processing the second language in their own terms. We can also say these errors are caused by overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction and incomplete application of rules.

1) Overgeneralization means learners use “learned” rules in new situation where that rules do not apply. That is to say, learners often construct some new structures that do not exist in the target language because they take it for granted that these structures are analogues. For example:

This is the place which (where ×) we visited.

Antecedent refers to place, relative word “where” should be used, which is not always right. This is the day that (when×) I will never forget. Antecedent refers to time, relative word “when” should be used, which is also not always right.

2) Ignorance of rule restriction means that the rule fails to recognize the restricted areas where the rule does not apply. It is a kind of extension of generalization.

Here are the examples concerning “ignorance of rule restriction” in students’ essays. For example, “This is the very bus that (which×) I’m waiting for.” We shouldn’t use “which” to introduce this relative clause because the antecedent is modified by “the very”. If antecedent is modified by “the only, the very, any, few, little, no, all” we should use “that” instead of “which”. One more example, “Do you know the things and persons that (whom×) they are talking about? When the antecedent is a two-coordinated noun phrases that refer to person and thing, we should use “that” instead of “which”.

3) Incomplete application of rules refers to the failure of a systematic use of a particular rule. For example:

This is the pen for which I am looking (×). When preposition in the verb phrase is prepositioned, we should use “which” referring to thing, “whom” referring to people. But in some fixed collocation of a verb phrase, verb and preposition can’t be allowed to be separated.

## 5. Conclusions

This thesis aims to investigate the sources of English majors’ errors in the use of relative clauses. According to the analysis of tasks participants take part in and analysis of the data, the study has the following findings.

1) In the process of using relative clauses, six types of errors made by learners are found. They are: wrong use of relative words, non-adjacency, resumptive pronouns, absence of antecedent, inappropriate ellipsis of relative words, disagreement between subject and verb,

2) Frequency and percentage of the errors in the use of relative clauses are indicated: wrong use of relative clauses (85, 32.95%), non-adjacency (75, 29.07%), resumptive pronouns (60, 23.26%), absence of antecedent (16, 6.20%), inappropriate ellipsis of relative words (12, 4.65%), disagreement between subject and verb (10, 3.88%).

3) Sources of errors on the use of relative clause are pointed out. They are interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors in this thesis refer to the negative transfer of the mother tongue language. Intralingual errors in this thesis come mainly from learning strategy and communication strategy. In a word, negative transfer of the mother tongue language, overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of grammatical rules is the main causes of the errors.

My study has limitations. The research participants are only students of two classes. That is to say, the research objects are limited, not the representatives of English standard of all English majors, so the collected data lack of certain scientific standard and accuracy. In addition to that, because it is difficult to determine the psychological factors of the students being tested, it is not precise enough to analyze student’s errors only according to the results and questionnaires. The author’s own research level is limited, both survey tool design and statistical methods are simple. Except that there are not general standards of error analysis. Therefore, there is lack of certain accuracy for the analysis of the data.

Because of the limitation of this study the following aspect will be improved later on. 1) Studies will include more testing tasks to get comprehensive test results. 2) More participants will be included in the test tasks to make sure the accuracy of the test results. 3) More types of relative clauses will be included into the study in the future

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