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RELATIVE CLAUSES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' GRAMMATICAL AWARENESS

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Abstract

The use of relative clauses in English language teaching and learning is considered as a useful way for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and teachers to give more information about the head noun of their written or spoken sentences. It modifies a noun or noun phrase (Richards & Schmidt, 1985, p. 494). In spite of the benefits of introducing relative clauses in classroom contexts, there might be some obstacles which students and teachers face in the process of construction and relative clause use. In addition, using the relative clause needs a good understanding of their different types, the punctuation, the right pronoun and the agreement. This paper is based on literature review and will also describe and analyse a complex sentence with a relative clause. The description and analysis will be organised through sentence components analysis, different types of relative clause, the aspects of relative clause construction and use and grammatical awareness development. The purpose of this paper is to help EFL students and teachers have an overall understanding of the aspects of relative clause construction and use, and then emphasize the difficulties, which occur in the classroom context. Accordingly, through a detailed discussion of relative clauses, this paper will determine how the understanding of relative clause construction and use might develop EFL students' and teachers' grammatical awareness.

Keywords

Relative Clauses, English Language Teaching and Learning, Language Acquisition, English as a Foreign Language, and Grammatical Awareness

1. Introduction

By having the understanding of relative clause through its sentence components analysis, different types of relative clauses and the aspects of relative clause construction and use, students and teachers might become more aware of the grammar that is used in their sentences. Tomlin and Villa (1994) define awareness as ‘a particular state of mind in which an individual has undergone a specific subjective experience of some cognitive content or external stimulus’ (p. 193).

In this research, through analysing sentence components, exploring different types of relative clause, knowing the aspects of relative clause construction and use, and developing grammatical awareness, relative clauses and their implications for students’ and teachers’ grammatical awareness are explored. Therefore, it can be seen how grammatical awareness requires opportunities to notice, process and apply grammatical rules.

2. Method

This research is based on a qualitative inquiry and interpretative paradigm or constructivist worldview (McKay, 2006). Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand individuals’ views on the world (Bell, 2010). As this research explores and finds out what participants think and understand about relative clauses and their implications for students’ and teachers’ grammatical awareness, it is therefore a practitioner research which is known as natural setting (Cohen, 2000; Robson, 1993; Wallen and Fraenkel, 2001). Therefore, the social context in which the research event appears is important (Neuman, 1994).

This qualitative research is an exploratory activity (Wellington, 2000, p. 133) and it is shaped by an interpretation process (Denscombe, 1998; Denzin and Norman, 2000). As Creswell (2014) states, qualitative research is ‘the approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’ (p. 4). Allwright (2005) defines Exploratory Practice (EP) as an indefinitely sustainable way of language teaching and learning, to develop understandings of life in language.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Sentence Components Analysis

In order to gain a better understanding of the relative clause, sentence components analysis—whereby the arrangements of words, which are formulated in the sentence, are analysed—will be applied. In particular, this is what Crystal (2004) means by ‘grammar which is the study of how sentences are structured and how they connect with each other’ (p. 9). This shows the substances of the words combined through certain rules to form sentences, which contain meanings. Noam Chomsky (1950) explained that a very explicit system of rules, specifying what

combinations of basic elements, result in well-formed sentences and define the syntactic structure of a language. Within these rules it is also useful to consider two productivity of language characteristics, such as phrase structure rules where some words seem to belong together or constituents and transformational rules which take a specific part of sentence and attach it in another place.

Related to the phrase structure rules, there are three main levels, which are essential; namely, word class level, phrase level and sentence structure level. These three levels will be seen clearly through the phrase structure in a syntactic tree below (Fabb, 1994).

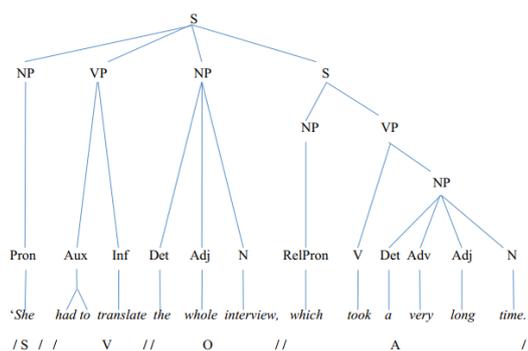


Figure 1: Syntactic Tree

In this sentence, the word class level are open classes such as Noun, Verb, Adjective and Adverb and also closed classes such as Pronoun and Determiner. The next level is the phrase level, which contains Noun Phrases (NP) and Verb Phrases (VP). For the sentence level, there are Subject (S), Verb (V), Object (O) and Adverbial (A). The sentence consists of two clauses, which are the main clause and the lower S as an additional clause or subordinate clause. At the sentence, the relative clause ‘which took a very long time’ gives an additional information for the antecedent. Because the role of the relative clause is only as further information, there is no change in meaning if the clause is omitted: the relative clause is not required to identify the antecedent. To discuss more about the sentence, the different types of relative clause are explored in the following section.

3.2 Different Types of Relative Clause

The relative clause is also known as an adjective clause, which is a type of a dependent clause since it hangs on the main clause and follows the modified nouns. Swan (1980, p. 489) states there are two types of relative clause. The first type modifies the noun and changes the meaning of the phrase by giving specific information to describe the noun, which is called restrictive relative clause. The second type is unrestrictive relative clause as shown in figure 1, where the relative clause ‘which took a very long time’ modifies the main clause by adding extra information about the time consumed.

In the syntactic tree, it is clearly seen how the comma has a significant role in separating the relative clause from the main clause. It means that whenever the relative clause is omitted, the meaning of the sentence will remain the same. Therefore, at the sentence level, the relative clause is called an Adverbial Clause (Crystal, 1996, p. 50). Another way of constructing unrestricted relative clauses when between a subject and a verb is by placing commas before and after the relative clause, e.g. my house, which was built in 1900, is made of red bricks.

3.3 The Aspects of Relative Clause Construction and Use

Crystal (2004) points out that the relative clause is the most complex kind of post modification – that is, the way of making clear the thing or person we are talking about–in the noun phrase. The construction of relative clause can be achieved by using either relative pronouns or relative adverbs. As in the sentence given, the relative clause is a kind of wh relative because it uses ‘which’ as one of wh-word functions, yet it cannot be substituted by ‘that’ (Cobuild, 1992, p. 580). There are also other forms of relative clause that use non-whrelatives, which contains that-relatives and bear relatives. This will become a complicated way for Indonesian students and teachers to use English relative clauses. In Bahasa Indonesia, the use of relative clause is only authorised by the word ‘yang’ and there is no difference in types of relative clause, the punctuation, the right pronoun and the agreement. For example, the translation of the given sentence in Bahasa Indonesia is “Dia harus menerjemahkan seluruh wawancara yang menyita banyak waktu”. All relative pronouns are translated into ‘yang’ and there is no comma used. This might challenge students and teachers in Indonesia because the nature of how to formulate and apply the relative clause in Bahasa Indonesia is less complex compared with English.

Related to its use, the relative clause in the sentence is a type of nominative for things using ‘which’ or ‘that’. For the nominative type for people, the relative pronoun used is ‘who’. The other types of relative clause are possessive for people and things using ‘whose’ and objective for people using ‘whom’ and for things using ‘which’ (Murphy, 1985). The use of ‘whom’ as an object of preposition can be made in two different forms. First, the preposition, which comes at the beginning of a relative clause and before the object and the second form is the preposition comes after the verb. In this case, Bahasa Indonesia does not have objective relative clauses because it will be directly changed into the use of ‘for’ or ‘untuk’. Here is the example: I have a friend with whom I study every Monday becomes Saya punya teman untuk belajar setiap hari Senin.

In constructing relative clauses, subject-verb agreement has to be considered which means the verb in a relative clause must agree with the subject. If the relative pronoun is the subject of the clause, then the verb must agree with the noun that the pronoun replaces. In figure 1, the

relative clause uses the verb 'took' because the main clause uses simple past tense. Here, in Bahasa Indonesia there is no difference of verb use for specific subjects or tenses; therefore, it might be problematic for students and teachers to recognise subject-verb agreement. A sentence such as 'David who play badminton is an actor' may be produced given the omission of comma and lack of necessity to make the subject-verb agreement. Teaching may become further complicated when raising learners' awareness of the process of reducing the relative pronoun and maybe introducing other words and showing how the relative pronoun follows a preposition in some sentences.

As the result of these problems, the construction and use of the relative clauses for Indonesian students and teachers are often misused which may lead to grammar poor grammatical understanding and potentially breakdowns in communication. To overcome these issues, especially in spoken language, the use of relative clause needs to be supported by some tools such as pauses and changes in tone and instant feedback. This will help the learners to use the relative clause properly and deliver the message appropriately. In written language, correct use of relative clauses may be particularly important in order to successfully move beyond simple sentences.

3.4 Grammatical Awareness Development

To know the rules of grammar means to know how to make sense of sentences with right ordered words and right sentence endings (Crystal, 1988, p. 5). Therefore, the sentence component analysis task might be a useful way for teachers to introduce how sentences are constructed and use. By analysing the sentence components into word class level, phrase level and sentence level, which is taught step by step, I as a teacher can develop my grammatical awareness as well as improving the awareness of my students. The introduction of sentence component should, I contend, be taught as basic knowledge at beginner level when students can become aware of the right structure and order of words. Meanwhile, further understanding of relative clause will be required for intermediate-level students because it needs a deep comprehension on the new knowledge of complex sentences.

Finally, by knowing how language is organised, teachers and students will become better language learners. The sense of grammar is 'the way in which a language is organised' (Butt at all., 1994, p. 22 and this understanding might improve teachers and students' confidence in using relative clause as they become more aware of the grammar within the sentences. On the other hand, the process of teaching and learning relative clause to improve grammatical awareness should be supported by a 'fun' learning activities such as little games, quiz and discussion, and some sources for example dictionary, pictures and glossaries so that teachers and students are encouraged to comprehend the relative clause constructively within meaningful contexts.

4. Conclusion

The relative clause is very important to help EFL students and teachers deliver specific and informative messages. More than that, by understanding the different types and aspects of relative clause construction and use, students and teachers might be aware of the difficulties that may occur when using relative clauses. It has been shown that, like most languages, Bahasa Indonesian has some salient differences in terms of relative clause use compared to English.

Besides its importance, there might be some challenges for students and teachers in the way of appropriately applying the relative clauses in the classroom. Teachers should fully comprehend the relative clause aspects before they teach the students. Otherwise, the problems relating to relative clause understanding might become more complicated for students. Defining things (e.g. an information gap crossword) or giving additional information might be meaningful contexts in which to frame the grammatical teaching point. Therefore, an interesting way of teaching and learning relative clause should be implemented to achieve comprehension of grammatical awareness.

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