

## English Relative Clauses: What Malay Learners Know and Use

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### ABSTRAK

Pelajar bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua menghadapi masalah semasa memperoleh klausa relatif (Hawkins and Chan 1997; Wong 1999). Kajian ini meneliti dan menerangkan keadaan pelajar dalam menggunakan klausa relatif. Bahasa ibunda pelajar-pelajar L2 yang terlibat ialah bahasa Melayu. Satu instrumen (*GJT*) dilaksanakan untuk menentukan kebolehan pelajar untuk membezakan klausa relatif yang gramatis dan yang tidak gramatis. Tugasan tersebut memperlihatkan kecekapan terperoleh di kalangan pelajar dalam kajian. Kecekapan ini seterusnya diteliti dalam konteks tugasan penghasilan yang mengukur kebolehan mereka membentuk klausa relatif melalui penggabungan ayat. Keputusan daripada *GJT* menunjukkan skor rendah yang konsisten daripada pelbagai ekstruksi dalam membina klausa relatif. Keseluruhannya, pelajar Melayu gagal mengenali dan menghasilkan binaan klausa relatif yang sesuai. Data tersebut mengesahkan penemuan lain bahawa klausa relatif adalah punca masalah bagi pelajar L2 dan boleh membawa kepada implikasi pedagogi dalam pembelajaran komponen tatabahasa yang penting ini.

### ABSTRACT

Second language (L2) learners have problems when acquiring relative clauses (Hawkins and Chan 1997; Wong 1999). This study examines and attempts to explain the learners' competence in the use of relative clauses. The L2 learners are L1 (first language) speakers of Malay who were gauged to have elementary proficiency in English by the Oxford Placement Test. A grammaticality judgment task (*GJT*) was administered to determine the subjects' ability to distinguish between the grammatical and ungrammatical forms of relative clauses. The task revealed the students' acquired competence in this particular area. This competence is further examined in the context of a production task which gauged their ability to form relative clauses through sentence combining. Results from the *GJT* showed consistently low scores for a variety of extractions from various positions in the formation of relative clauses. This is further supported by the results obtained from the sentence-combination task where the production of correct sentences using relative clauses was the focus. In sum, the Malay learners failed to recognise and produce appropriate relative clause constructions. The data confirmed other findings that relative clauses are a source of difficulty for these L2 learners and these findings have pedagogic implications for the learning of this essential grammar component.

### INTRODUCTION

A relative clause is a basic structure that could be subordinated to another clause and it undergoes a process of embedding. In forming a relative clause a constituent becomes 'missing' inside the clause and that is represented by a *wh*-

constituent (Börjars and Burridge 2001:221). Keenan and Comrie (1977) posit that there are restrictions imposed on noun phrases (NPs) that can be relativised. The most accessible for the relativisation process is the subject and the least accessible is the object NP of comparison.

In English, relativisation is accessible from most positions.

### RELATIVE CLAUSE FORMATION IN ENGLISH

Formation of relative clauses in English involve movement of a *wh*-phrase to the specifier position of the Complementizer Phrase (CP) in the embedded clause (Chomsky 1986b and subsequent work). This movement leaves a trace in the position from which the *wh*-phrase has moved. The movement is presented below using the conventional linguistic symbols:

- 1a. The teacher<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> who<sub>i</sub> Ø [Maria will invite t<sub>i</sub>]] is Mr Ali.
- 1b. The teacher<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> Op<sub>i</sub> that [Maria will invite t<sub>i</sub>]] is Mr Ali.
- 2a. The teacher<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> who<sub>i</sub> Ø [t<sub>i</sub> will accept the invitation]] is Mr Ali.
- 2b. The teacher<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> Op<sub>i</sub> that [t<sub>i</sub> will accept the invitation]] is Mr Ali.

More example sentences for the various relative clause structures in English are shown in Appendix A (adapted from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999).

### RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Hawkins and Chan (1997) and Wong (1999) have found that relativisation is problematic among L2 learners. There is a need to further extend this area of investigation situated in a localised population to better understand the acquisition of relative clauses by L2 learners.

L2 learning in Malaysia addresses also the issue of ethnicity which is a major characteristic in this L2 composite language environment. The study focuses on the L1 Malay speakers who comprise the dominant ethnic group with Malay as the national language and the medium of instruction in school. A study of this nature will shed light on the status of the learnt domain that is manifested in use among this large group of L2 learners.

An initial exploration of common types of errors in the use of relative clauses form the stepping stone for the investigation. This approach rationalises the move from the known to the unknown as finally the problems are expected to be infinite.

Researchers have found that one of the common problems in the use of the relative clauses is when the object pronoun in the

embedded sentence is retained in the form of a pronominal reflex (copy) or a resumptive pronoun. The following is an example:

*Shirley called out to the boy that/who she knew him.*

Two other types of constraints that are frequently used in grammaticality judgment tasks to test L2 learners' knowledge of relative clauses are Complex Noun Phrases (CNP) and *wh*-Islands, for example:

3. \**These are the students who I heard the rumour will help you solve the problem.* (CNP)
4. \**The girl who I think why likes you come from a respectable family.*  
(*wh*-Island)

Second language acquisition (SLA) studies (e.g. Ioup and Kruse 1977) have found that there is only a limited variety of extractions for relativisation and they involve either the subject or the object in the clause. Object extraction is found to be harder to acquire than subject extraction. This distinction is addressed in this study. The extractions used in the study are illustrated below.

5. Subject extraction – *The girl who speaks Tamil is my cousin.*
6. Object extraction – *I know the place that you visited.*
7. Prepositional Object extraction – *The boy whom you gave the ball to is my cousin.*

Subject extraction, object extraction and object of preposition extraction may occur in both the main (upper) and embedded clauses.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the study was to examine the grammaticality judgment of English relative clauses among Malay students and to identify some of the common problems that they face in the construction of these structures.

Specifically, the study sought to determine differences in the recognition and judgment of relative clauses with extractions from the positions of subject, object and prepositional object found in upper and embedded clauses. It also investigated the manner in which learners manifest their ability in the construction of relative clauses through a sentence-combination task. Both the tasks would reveal the students' competence and performance in relation to relative clause formation in English.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a standardised proficiency test, the Oxford Placement Test (Allan 1992) to gauge the subjects' linguistic competence. After the establishment of the subjects' general competence, a grammaticality judgment task (GJT) was administered. This task comprised grammatical and ungrammatical relative clauses. Examples of the grammatical and ungrammatical relative clauses with extractions from the various positions are found in Appendix B. Altogether there were 12 items, 6 grammatical and 6 ungrammatical, for each type of extraction. The grammatical structures were paralleled with the ungrammatical ones.

Another task that was used to gather data was a sentence combining task. This task complements the GJT in understanding the use of the relative clauses among the subjects. The items required the subjects to form relative clauses with extractions from the subject, direct object and prepositional object positions from given pairs of sentences with a focus on the use of relative pronouns (*who, whom, which, that, where and why*).

The GJT was scored following a marking scheme in which answers were given marks according to the acceptability criterion. The responses followed a four-point scale ranging from totally acceptable to totally unacceptable. Scoring was done according to marks that ranged from 0 to 3. Thus, a correct response was given a score of 3 while an incorrect response was scored 0. Intermediate responses were given either 1 or 2 depending on the degree of unacceptability.

The sentence combination task was not given scores as we are interested in the qualitative nature of problem construction. In the analysis, problem constructions are grouped together to obtain a pattern of regularities.

Ninety-four Malay learners of L2 English took part in the study. They were secondary and

post secondary students at various public institutions in the Klang Valley in Malaysia. From the Oxford Placement Test, the majority of the students were found to be placed in the elementary level within a band of 50-64%.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion are presented according to the tasks given in the study.

### *The Grammaticality Judgement Task*

The following are results obtained from the GJT. Responses to the grammatical structures are first presented followed by those involving the ungrammatical ones.

As can be seen from Table 1, these elementary level subjects are generally weak in the acquisition of English relative clauses. There appears to be little difference in their ability to recognise and judge these structures located in upper clauses and embedded clauses as all the learners scored below the 50% mark. Especially difficult is object extraction from the upper and embedded clauses (33.9% and 34.5% respectively). Structures such as "I know the place that you visit" is seen to be more difficult to recognise and judge as grammatical compared to structures such as "The girl who speaks Tamil is my cousin". This confirms earlier studies which had concluded that object extraction posed more difficulties than subject extraction in relative clause formation among L2 learners. The extraction of the object proved to be the most difficult with an average percentage score of 34.5%, compared to 39.9% (extraction from subject) and 41.9% (extraction from prepositional object).

In the recognition of ungrammatical relative clauses, the subjects showed a lack of intuition with regard to the grammatical status of the structures. They lack the ability to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical relative clause structures. The trend, as exhibited in the

TABLE 1  
Mean of correct judgements (%) on grammatical relative clauses involving  
extraction from the upper and embedded clauses

N=94	Extraction of subject (active)	Extraction of object	Extraction of prepositional object
Extraction from Upper Clauses	40.4	33.9	38.3
Extraction from Embedded Clauses	39.9	34.5	41.9

recognition and judgment of grammatical relative clauses, is reflected in the judgment of the ungrammatical relative clauses with extraction from embedded clauses (Table 2).

Table 2 shows the response judgment to ungrammatical relative clauses. Interestingly, a similar trend is exhibited, in which the highest score went to object extraction from both the upper and embedded clauses (33.1% and 35.1% respectively). The learners had the most difficulty in recognising these structures as ungrammatical. The scores are even lower than the recognition of the grammatical counterparts in the upper and embedded clauses.

On the whole, the Malay learners were unable to distinguish clearly between the grammatical and ungrammatical relative forms. When they had to decide on whether clauses were ungrammatical, they made even more errors. The data suggested that learners' interlanguage stabilises at a rather low level as far as the use of the relative clause is concerned. There is, therefore, no distinction made by these elementary students between different types of relative clauses with regard to their grammatical properties.

The difference in relative clause formation in Malay and English may have a bearing on the performance of the respondents. The learners first started learning English at the age of seven. At that level, they were already exposed to the foundations of relative clause formation in Malay which has a different formation system from English. As a result, they may not be able to use the new input in the target language (English) in constructing well-formed relative clauses especially when English is taught only as a subject, with exposure and use being minimal outside the classroom.

#### *Sentence-combination Task*

The sentence-combination task, in which the items are regarded as the controlled stimuli, revealed the weaknesses of the learners in the productive aspect. Nine stimuli were used. They were designed to tap the production of a variety of relative clauses with extractions from different positions using different relative pronouns (*who, whom, which, that, where and why*). A lead-in is provided to guide the expected answer. The sentences produced from the stimuli are discussed according to the type of extraction focused on. The following are two examples.

#### Example 1 (stimulus)

The student is Muthu.

Muthu causes the most problems.

The student \_\_\_\_\_

#### Example 2 (stimulus)

The student is Muthu.

I observe Muthu causes the most problems.

The student \_\_\_\_\_

The least problematic of the relative clause formation is subject extraction from the upper clause. The common problem, as illustrated below, is the occurrence of a fragment which shows the inability of the students to construct a complete sentence that incorporates a subject relative clause.

8. \*The student who causes the most problems.

Subject extraction from the embedded clause proves to be even more problematic. The constructions produced are:

9. \*The student which observe causes the most problems.

10. \*The student whom I observe Muthu causes the most problems is Muthu.

TABLE 2  
Mean of correct judgements (%) on ungrammatical relative clauses  
involving extraction from the upper and embedded clauses

N=94	Extraction of subject (active)	Extraction of object	Extraction of prepositional object
Extraction from Upper Clauses	29.9	33.1	29.3
Extraction from Embedded Clauses	27.4	35.1	25.7

11. \*The student which observe Muthu causes the most problems is Muthu.
12. \*The student that I observe the most problems is Muthu.
13. \*The student who Muthu I observe causes the most problems is.
14. \*Corruption is the way that make Marcus became rich.
15. \*Corruption is the way that Marcos became rich by choosing corruption.
16. \*Corruption is the way to become rich that chosen by Marcus.
17. \*Corruption which Marcos became rich by choosing corruption is the way to become rich.

From the examples, it is clear that the use of a nominal copy/reflex (sentence 10) is a feature. In sentence 10, the noun phrase or nominal copy, *Muthu*, is produced in the object position in the upper clause. This problem is not unique to our subjects as the same problem has been found in L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds (Hyltenstam 1984). Other than sentence 10, nominal copies and resumptive pronouns are also produced in relative clauses formed from other pairs of sentences given in the task. A nominal or pronominal copy is used when the learner is not able to extract the noun phrase from a particular position in the clause. As a result, a pronoun or a nominal copy is base generated in-situ. The *wh*-Islands and the CNPs used in the GJT to represent problematic relative clauses are not manifested as productive problems in the sentence combination effort. A semi-controlled task of this nature might have ruled out to a large extent such ungrammatical constructions. Instead, we uncovered other features which are discussed below.

The lack of awareness of clause constituents is an obvious compounding problem as a subject could be absent (sentence 11) and the essential presence of a verb in the embedded clause is also not realised (sentence 12). The common confusion with relative pronoun forms (sentence 9) is also found. Another problem that pervades among learners is the failure to recognize and extract the subject from the embedded clause because of the distance of the extraction site from the head noun of the relative clause.

Another kind of problem is associated with use of the passive and the 'by' adjunct. The following presents the controlled stimulus and the various ungrammatical relative clauses produced by the learners.

#### Example 3 (Stimulus)

Corruption is the way to become rich.  
 Marcos became rich by choosing corruption.  
 Corruption \_\_\_\_\_.

It is worthy at this point to compare the Malay and English systems of relativisation to note the differences in the operation of the passive formation.

In Malay, the passive is used frequently (and is an obligatory feature as well) in relativisation as in :

18. *Guru yang difikir (oleh) mereka t menggunakan komputer itu ialah Encik Ali.*

Translated:

\*Teacher C PASS+think (By) them  
 ACT+use computer the is Mr Ali.

Grammatical form:

*The teacher whom they think uses the computer is Mr Ali.*

19. *Doktor yang t ditolak oleh John ialah Dr Tan*  
 Translated: \*Doctor C PASS+push by John is Dr Tan  
 Grammatical forms:

*The doctor who is pushed by John is Dr Tan*

The doctor who John pushed is Dr Tan.

In English, we have two acceptable forms when the object is embedded in relativisation. Following the example above, the answers students could choose to construct are:

- 20a. *Corruption is the way that Marcos chose to become rich.*

- 20b. *Corruption is the way that was chosen by Marcos to become rich.*

But in Malay the use of the passive is imperative. This likely leads to the inability to distinguish the use of the adjunct *by choosing corruption* and the passive *is chosen by*. Instead of CNPs, what is evident could be termed as 'complex adverbial adjuncts' (CAAs) where the L2 learners seem to perceive repetition of the subject through the use of such adjuncts as necessary (sentences 15 and 17).

L2 learners also exhibited confusion in the use of cause and effect statements in embedded

clauses. The following highlights the stimulus and the ungrammatical constructions formed by the learners.

Example 4 (Stimulus)

Muscle injury is the reason.

Foo Kok Keng lost the badminton match because of muscle injury.

Muscle injury \_\_\_\_\_.

21. *\*Muscle injury that Foo Kok Keong lost the badminton match because the reason.*
22. *\*Muscle injury which Foo Kok Keong lost the badminton match is the reason.*
23. *\*Muscle injury is the reason that why Foo Kok Keong lost the badminton match.*
24. *\*Muscle injury which Foo Kok Keong had suffer is the reason that cause he lost the badminton match.*
25. *\*Muscle injury that Foo Kok Keong lost the badminton match because of muscle injury is the reason.*

It is difficult for the L2 learners to use the adverb clause of reason as shown in the above sentences. Sentence 23 shows overlearning in which the L2 learner has tried to use both the complementizer and the relative pronoun at the same time. In English they are mutually exclusive. For sentences 24 and 25, they exhibited the construction of two embeddings. As a result of using two embeddings, the learners also confused the structures with subordination. The errors can be described as compound errors with many confounding features.

Another case of a nominal copy/reflex is shown in sentence 26. This is seen in Example 5 which gives the stimulus and the accompanying ungrammatical relative clauses produced by one of the subjects.

Example 5 (Stimulus) :

The money belongs to her mother.

I saw Salmah took the money.

The money \_\_\_\_\_.

26. *\*The money that I saw Salmah took the money belong to her mother.*

In the above ungrammatical sentence, the nominal copy, *the money*, is the object in the embedded clause. In English it is considered redundant to repeat the object once it is relativised.

Other problematic structural areas are in tense and, often, the omission of the linking verb "is" (sentences 27 and 28). These are characteristically problematic for Malay learners, as in the Malay verb system, tense is not indicated when the verb form is changed. In addition, because the Malay verb system does not have an equivalent linking verb, the English linking verb "is" is often omitted.

27. *\*The money that Salmah had took belongs to her mother.*

28. *\*The money which I saw Salmah took is belongs to her mother.*

The responses to the stimulus in Example 6 also reveal some interesting ungrammatical structures.

Example 6 (Stimulus):

The man is the police inspector.

Rashid spoke to the man.

The man \_\_\_\_\_.

The learners' constructions are:

29. *\*The man whom Rashid spoke to his is a police inspector.*

30. *\*The man who Rashid spoke is a police officer.*

31. *\*The man whom Rashid to is a police inspector.*

In sentence (29), the learner uses a pronominal copy or resumptive pronoun in the wrong case. As discussed earlier, a pronominal copy is used when the learner is unable to move the noun phrase from a particular position in the clause.

The use of phrasal verbs is another constraint faced by the L2 learners as shown in sentences (30) and (31) where either the verb or the preposition is missing when they formulate the relative clauses.

From the data, it is clear that the Malay learners face a myriad of problems in the construction of relative clauses in English. The complex operation involves, among others, principles of movement, trace and use of obligatory elements, appropriate choice of pronouns, passivisation, and use of finite verb forms in finite clauses. To unravel the maze, the learners will find it necessary to adopt a very systematic approach in order to deconstruct and reconstruct the clauses. This requires the utilization of multiple knowledge bases. The list

of problems obtained and systematised may serve as a useful starting point for both learning and teaching.

To bring the discussion to a close, it is deemed pertinent, for pedagogic considerations, to sum up the features that determine the use of the relative clause (Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999). Four main criteria were identified in the construction of relative clauses. The first is the syntactic roles of the head noun and the relative pronoun as an influencing factor. The other refers to the definiteness and specificity of the referent. In other words, one must consider the specific function of the referent, that is whether it refers to the subject or object in the clause. The third criterion involves the status of the referent in terms of animacy or humanness. Finally, the discourse function of the relative pronoun is also an important determinant. The use of the patterns in speech and writing would differ to some extent and the choice of patterns could well be an option exercised by the user of the language in context. The first three were dealt with in explaining the data of the study while the fourth was considered beyond the scope of the study.

Nonetheless, it is noted that in speaking, the relative pronoun is deleted especially when it has a non-human antecedent, for example, *the latest calculator he marketed is cheap*. When prepositional objects are relativised, an option available is the deletion of the relative pronoun or it may be fronted leaving behind the preposition. In writing, the preposition is fronted and used together with *which*. Taking away these obligatory prepositions in the syntactic environment will render the sentences ungrammatical.

Example:

- a. In speech: *Roots is a book which he is currently referring to.*
- b. In writing: *Roots is the book to which he is currently referring.*

Deletion, also known as reduction, offers an option which, unless properly registered by the learner, may give rise to confusion about the subordination process.

- a. *Kuala Lumpur is the place ~~in which~~ I was born.* (relative adverb deletion)
- b. *Kuala Lumpur is the place ~~which~~ I was born in.* (relative pronoun deletion)

Learners might need to distinguish between the two examples above and an explanation to arrive at the patterns upon deletion will help them in the understanding of the patterns used. Deletion is not normal when a relative clause has a relative pronoun replacing the subject of the embedded relative clause.

- \* The teacher ~~who~~ will accept the invitation is Mr Ali.

The deletion rule may also be favoured in a context where a number of relative clauses appear in sequence and reduction will likely occur in a relative clause when it is embedded in another relative clause.

- a. I've forgotten the name of the company which gave a quotation which is now being considered by the committee.
- b. I've forgotten the name of the company which gave a quotation which is now *being considered by the committee*.

When the head noun is modified by a relative adjectival clause and the relative pronoun is deleted, then the verb that follows has to be deleted as well in order to arrive at the grammatical pattern whereby the clause now becomes a phrase.

- a. The news that was favourable to the project was announced yesterday.
- b. \*The news ~~that~~ was favourable to the project was announced yesterday.
- c. The news ~~that was~~ favourable to the project was announced yesterday.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the highlights given in the study about the construction of the relative clause provide insights into the spectrum of problems encountered by the Malay learners of L2 English. The data reinforces earlier findings that extraction from the object position in the upper clause is problematic. It is similarly so with extractions from the various positions in the embedded clause.

Relativisation is part of the resources of English grammar that allows us to realize textual meaning. Lock (1996: 276) emphasizes that in order to move ahead, 'teaching needs to be informed by descriptions of grammar that accurately reflect authentic language and show how grammar is a resource for making and

exchanging meanings in context.' In the L2 situation, much is learnt from the actual processing of the language and the results could lead to improved management of problem areas. It is hoped that L2 learners and instructors will benefit from the description given about the use of relative clauses in an L2 context and language users will be able to practice meaningful communication with an awareness of the problem areas. Subjects certainly need to be given extra practice and be made more aware of how relative clauses are constructed. This is especially urgent in the context of effective and efficient use of the English language when ideas often need to be joined together to achieve fluency and variety in expression. The identification of the problems is seen to be useful as a point of reference in terms of understanding errors made by Malay learners who have elementary command of the English language. As mentioned earlier, this sample mirrors a large population of language users in the Malaysian language environment.

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## APPENDIX A

## Relative Clause Structures in English

Function of Head noun in main clauses	Function of identical noun in relative clauses			
	Subject	Direct object	Indirect object	Object of a Preposition
Subject	<i>The girl</i> who speaks Tamil is my cousin	<i>The man</i> who you saw is my uncle	<i>The woman</i> that I gave the bag to is here	<i>The place</i> which you talked about is Terengganu
Direct object	I know <i>the girl</i> who speaks Tamil	I know <i>the place</i> that you visited	I gave <i>the woman</i> that you mentioned the book	I know <i>the place</i> which you talked about
Indirect object	We gave <i>the girl</i> who broke the vase a warning	I sent <i>the boy</i> that Mutu saw a letter	I told <i>the boy</i> that you gave the file to a story	I gave <i>the boy</i> that you were talking about the pen
Object of the preposition	I talked with <i>the girl</i> who spoke Tamil	I work for <i>the company</i> that she owns	Mary knows about <i>the man</i> that I gave the present to	I know of <i>the place</i> which Johan wrote about
Predicate noun	Mr Thomas is <i>a headmaster</i> who is very hardworking	Moral studies is <i>a subject</i> that Mr Lee teaches	He is <i>the boy</i> that I gave the money to	Batu Rakit is <i>a place</i> which you would want to go to

## APPENDIX B

## Grammatical and ungrammatical relative clauses with extractions from various positions

## Extraction from main clause - subject position

The boy who speaks Tamil is my nephew                      \*The boy who he speaks Tamil is my nephew.

## Extraction from main clause - object position

He likes the composition that you wrote                      \*He likes the composition that you wrote it

## Extraction from main clause - prepositional object position

The girl whom you took the chocolate from is crying                      \*The girl whom you took the chocolate from her is crying

## Extraction from embedded clause - subject position

The girl who I think likes you comes from a respectable family                      \*The girl who I think why likes you comes from a respectable family

## Extraction from embedded clause - object position

The radio which I believe Nora bought is a Sony                      \*The radio which I believe the news Nora bought is a Sony

## Extraction from embedded clause - prepositional object position

He the man whom I told you about is over there                      \*The man whom I told you about him is over there

\* indicates ungrammatical structures