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The Acquisition of English Relativization by Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The current quantitative descriptive study investigates Iraqi EFL students' use of the English relative pronouns. Twenty Iraqi college students were asked to fill out a multiple choice item survey. The survey involved items that check the learners' acquisition of English relative pronouns. The findings showed that the learners faced some difficulties in the use of relative pronouns. These difficulties were obvious in various errors of omission, addition, selection, word order, and avoidance. The findings also implied that the mother tongue might be one of the reasons behind learners' misuse of relativization (El-Badarin, 1982) in addition to overgeneralization and ignorance of rules restriction, which could be attributive to the lack of exposure to English rules and insufficient practice of grammatical activities. This study offered pedagogical implications that suggested instructors' use of contrastive analysis in order to explain the similarities and differences between Arabic and English. This explanation helps learners understand their errors and assists them in using the correct form of relativization in the target language.

Keywords: acquisition, error analysis, relative pronouns.

Introduction

Relative pronouns in English represent one of the difficult areas of English to Iraqi EFL learners. This study investigates this difficulty by describing errors committed by Iraqi EFL learners when asked to use relative pronouns. Making errors is part of the process of learning. In EFL learning, learners use the system of their mother tongue and their own strategies in learning the target language. Recently, second language acquisition (SLA) research has shifted its focus from teaching perspective to learning perspective (Ammar & Lightbown, 2004). Relative pronouns represent one of the main areas of the syntactic structure in English and Arabic. Therefore, this study aims at investigating errors committed by Iraqi EFL learners when using the relative pronoun 'who'.

Ellis (1997) argued that there are three reasons for focusing on students' errors. First, these errors result from the question "why do learners make errors?" Second, diagnosing students' errors helps EFL instructors in developing their teaching pedagogies. Third, specifying these errors helps learners construct a new language system. This study specifies the grammatical rules of the relative pronoun "who" in English and Arabic then it summarizes the major trends in SLA in terms of language errors.

The purpose of this study is to describe errors of Iraqi EFL learners in using English relative pronouns. The study aims to answer the following question:

What are the types of errors committed by Iraqi EFL learners when using English relative pronouns?

Relative Pronouns

Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in acquiring the relative pronoun "who" because of the structural differences of this pronouns in Arabic and English. Part of the difficulty of acquiring this pronoun is its form and use. The four forms of "who" represent a very confusing case for Iraqi EFL students. Most of these students cannot decide when to use the four forms, which are: who, whom, whose, and whoever. This confusion is part of the difference between English and Arabic, because "who" in Arabic takes eight forms that agree with number, gender, and case. The eight forms of "who" in Arabic are: الذي، التي، الذين، اللذان، اللتان، اللواتي، اللاتي، الألى (Ibrahim, Kassabgy, & Aydeliott, 2000). Since the forms and uses of the relative pronoun "who" in English are different from those in Arabic, then Iraqi EFL learners find it difficult to transfer the rules of this relative pronoun from their mother tongue (El-Badarin, 1982). Moreover, the relative pronoun "who" in English is used with definite and indefinite nouns, for example:

I travelled with the man who owns a house in Rome.

I assist people who are sick.

But in Arabic, the relative pronoun is only used with definite nouns.

If we consider the translation of the previous two examples the following sentences will result in Arabic:

سافرتُ مع الرجل الذي يملك بيتاً في روما.
أنا أساعد الناس المرضى.

Another difference between English and Arabic in the use of the relative pronoun is that in the case of English prepositions can precede the relative pronoun:

This is the woman with whom I cooked yesterday.

While in Arabic no prepositions precede the relative pronoun. The translation of the example above would be:

هذه هي المرأة التي طبخت معها يوم أمس.

Acquisition of Relative Pronouns

The mother tongue has a crucial role in FL learners' acquisition of the target language. This effect, whether positive or negative, is investigated by what is called "error analysis" (Ellis, 1997; Odlin, 1990; Prentza, 2012; Noor, 1996). However, Richards (2010) refuted the notion of L1 transfer in his comprehensive study. His participants were learners from different backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, and Indian and West African Languages). His study showed that the students' errors resulted from the second language itself and are categorized into:

1. Interference errors: when the student applies his/her L1 in learning L2.
2. Intralingual errors: this is due to general characteristics of rule learning such as overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.
3. Developmental Errors. Learners attempt to build up hypotheses based on their limited experiences.

Keenan and Comrie (1977) offered a universal implicational relativization hierarchy (subject>direct object>indirect object>object of preposition>genitive> object of comparative), which reflects the ease of relativization. This hierarchy was tested in many second language acquisition studies (Doughty, 1991; Eckman et al., 1988; Gass, 1979, 1980, 1982; Hamilton, 1995; Hyltenstam, 1984; Pavesi, 1986; Tarallo & Myhill, 1983). Based on Keenan and Comrie's hierarchy, Tang (1977) and Tsao (1986) discussed how the differences between Chinese and English relative pronouns affect the acquisition of Chinese learners of English. Their study proved that this differences causes difficulties in acquiring complex syntax. Furthermore, Gass (1979) found that the difficulty faced by L2 learners in recognizing relative clauses could be predicted on the basis of the accessibility hierarchy. The same results were shown in the research conducted by Schachter (1974), Hyltenstam (1984) and Pavesi (1986).

Other scholars focused on the effects of the instruction on relative clause acquisition. Aarts and Schils (1995) compared the production of Dutch learners of English on sentence-combining tasks before and after three lessons on relative clauses. They found that instruction has a great

effect on learners' performance of using relative clauses. On the other hand, Gass (1979) discussed the knowledge of L2 learners concerning relative clauses in relation to the accessibility hierarchy. In her study, two groups of L2 learners were used. One group received instruction on subject and direct object relatives, whereas the other group received instruction on object of preposition relatives. She concluded that learners who were taught on object of preposition relatives could generalize their knowledge to positions higher on the hierarchy. Similarly, Eckman et al. (1988) proved that the experimental groups were able to generalize their learning to relative clauses higher on the accessibility hierarchy. The study of Doughty (1991) also examined the effects of instruction on L2 relative clause acquisition. Rule-oriented instruction was compared with the instruction through a computer program that administered the lessons. The study proved that the second group outperformed the first one in acquiring relativization.

Methods

Subjects

A total of 25 2nd year English major students in the College of Education/Ibn Rushd participated in this study in the school year of 2017. The instruction on relative clauses is generally given in the first year of their English education. While it is certain that all the participants had received instruction on relative clauses, how well each participant learned may have varied.

Research Instrument

A survey of 15 items was created for the current study to answer the research questions. Items of the survey were of multiple choice type. Items 1-10 checked students' use of "who", "whose", and whom. The rest of the survey aimed to check students' comprehensive use of relative pronouns. No demographic questions were offered because all students were from the same section. Moreover, other demographic information were unnecessary since the goal of the study is to describe the acquisition of these students and the kinds of errors they commit when using relativization.

Data collection

Each of the participants was given a 15-item-multiple-choice grammar test relating to relative clauses in order to obtain learners' receptive knowledge about English relative clauses. Test items were created by the researcher to meet the objectives of the current study. SPSS was used to analyze data regarding the multiple-choice test.

Results and Discussion

Item 1 required the use of "whose". A percentage of (90%) answered correctly, and (10%) have chosen the relative pronoun (which) (See Table 1). Learners who chose "which" can improve their use of relativization with time because they filled the survey while in second year of study. They have

two more year of advanced study of grammar during which they will be exposed to deep grammar rules.

Table 1: Item 1 of the survey

Q1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	which	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	whose	18	90.0	90.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

The relative pronoun “who” is the answer to Item 2, 4, 5, and 8. A total of (80%) answered item 2 correctly, (20%) have chosen the relative pronoun (which) (See Table 2). Item 4 was answered correctly by (75%) and (25%) selected “which” (See Table 3). Item 5 showed that (70%) of the learners were correct in their answers whereas (30%) selected the wrong answer (See Table 4). Only (40%) answered item 8 correctly and (60%) had the wrong answer (See Table 5). Learners who answered incorrectly choosing “which” could be affected by their mother tongue. In Arabic, the relative pronoun “الذي” is used for both animate and inanimate entities, e.g.:

أحمد هو السائق الذي يسكن في الجوار.
 كتابي هو الذي تحمله بيدك.

Table 2: Item 2 of the Survey

Q2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	who	16	80.0	80.0	80.0
	which	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Item 4 of the Survey

Q4

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	who	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	which	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Item 5 of the Survey

Q5

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	who	14	70.0	70.0	70.0
	which	6	30.0	30.0	100.0
Total		20	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Item 8 of the Survey

Q8

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	who	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
	which	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The relative pronoun “which” is the answer to Items 3, 6, and 10. A total of (70%) answered item 3 correctly, (30%) selected the relative pronoun (whose) (See Table 6). Item 6 was answered correctly by (100%) (See Table 7). Item 10 revealed that (85%) of the learners were correct in their answers whereas (15%) selected the wrong answer (See Table 8).

Table 6: Item 3 of the Survey

Q3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	which	14	70.0	70.0	70.0
	whose	6	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 7: Item 6 of the Survey

Q6

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	which	20	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 8: Item 10 of the Survey

Q10

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	which	17	85.0	85.0	85.0
	whose	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The results proved that Iraqi EFL learners sometimes face some difficulty in deciding between “which” and “whose” because in their first language there were no exact equivalents to those two pronouns. As with the above three items, (5%) learners selected “who” instead of “whose” in items 9 (See Table 9). However, (100%) of the learners answered item 7 correctly

(See Table 10) because the relative clause had a different subject and cannot suit other relative pronouns. In this first part of the survey, there is a chance of guessing the right answer because the multiple choices include only one word. However, results showed lower rate of right answers in the second part because the choice items required students to select from larger constructions which made it a little bit difficult for them.

Table 9: Item 9 of the Survey

Q9

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	who	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	whose	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 10: Item 7 of the Survey

Q7

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	whose	20	100.0	100.0	100.0

Items 11-15 involved the relative pronoun “that” in addition to “which”, “where”, and “whom”. Only (20%) of the learners selected the right answer, and (80%) have chosen the wrong answer in item 11 (See Table 11).

Table 11: Item 11 of the Survey

Q11

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	which I must speak to you	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	which I must speak to you about you	16	80.0	80.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Item 12 looked confusing to the learners. It had a place as a subject but the correct answer was “which”. A total of (40%) of the learners selected the right answer, (20%) chose “where”, and (40%) selected “whom” (See Table 12).

Table 12: Item 12 of the Survey

Q12

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	where	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	which	8	40.0	40.0	60.0
	whom	8	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Item 13 revealed that a total of (35%) of the learners selected the right answer, and (65%) chose the wrong one confused by the required preposition (See Table 13).

Table 13: Item 13 of the Survey

Q13

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	whom	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	to whom	7	35.0	35.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Finally, a total of (75%) of the learners selected the right answer for item 14 and (25%) answered it incorrectly (See Table 14), and (70%) answered the last item of the survey correctly (See Table 15).

Table 14: Item 14 of the Survey

Q14

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I went to	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	that I went	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 15: Item 15 of the Survey

Q15

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	that she lived	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	among whom she lived	14	70.0	70.0	80.0
	where she lived among them	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

There are a number of possible explanations for these results. First, the transfer of the learners' mother tongue. The second possible explanation is input exposure. However, this explanation supposes that the frequency of the overt form is what led learners to favor it over the covert one. These results can be considered as consistent with the results of the study conducted by Zagood and Juma (2012), who concluded that learners misused relative pronouns with indefinite antecedents and made errors that led to ungrammatical structures. On the other hand, Shaheen (2013) showed that as learners progress in their EFL learning, they gradually recognize that using relativization depends on the relativized position.

Based on the results suggested by this study, it is worth noting that there are many factors involved in the acquisition of English relative clauses by adult EFL learners, which are as follows:

- 1- The age of participants. Younger participants had a lower acceptance of using relative pronouns than older ones.
- 2- The age at first exposure to formal instruction.
- 3- Childhood immersion results in a progressive recognition of the English relativization structure.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This study investigated the problem of Iraqi EFL learners' use of relative pronouns in college level. It also described the factors affecting the acquisition process of these grammatical constructions. The study concluded that learners sometimes are troubled by L1 negative transfer. It is evident from the findings that the learners made some common mistakes in their preference for the overt relative markers determined by definiteness. The current results clearly support the effect of several factors, such as learners' age, age of learning, and age of immersion. The current study deepens our understanding of the problems faced by Iraqi EFL learners and it adds to the growing body of literature on the factors that influence the acquisition of English relativization.

This study offers significant pedagogical implications for EFL instructors and curricula designers. It is important to study the difficulty of relativization because this area should be considered in the content of the courses taught to students at the English Department in the College of Education/Ibn Rushd theoretically and practically. Instructors should explain similar and different aspects of relative pronouns in Arabic and English in order to help students acquire relativization with the help of the distance between their mother tongue and the target language. Additionally, instructors are recommended to explain the restrictions of relative pronouns and make students aware of the most common errors related to language transfer and overgeneralization.

المستخلص

اكتساب الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية لضمائر الوصل

بيداء عباس

تتقصى هذه الدراسة الكمية الوصفية استخدام الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية لضمائر الوصل. طلب من 20 كالباً عراقياً أن يملأوا استبياناً يتكون من فقرات الخيارات المتعددة. تضمن الاستبيان فقرات تختبر اكتساب الطلبة لضمائر الوصل. بينت النتائج بأن الطلبة يواجهون بعض المشكلات في استخدام ضمائر الوصل. وهذه الصعوبات اتضحت في أخطاء متعددة تتعلق بالحذف والاختيار وترتيب الكلمات وتجنب الاستخدام. كما أشارت النتائج الى إن اللغة الأم قد تكون أحد الأسباب التي تؤدي الى استخدام الطلبة الخاطيء لضمائر الوصل (البدارين، 1982) بالإضافة الى التعميم والجهل بالقواعد التي يمكن أن تعزى الى قلة عرض قواعد اللغة الانكليزية وقلة ممارسة النشاطات القواعدية. تقدم هذه الدراسة أثراً تربوية تقترح استعمال الأساتذة للتحليل المقارن من أجل شرح التشابه والاختلاف بين اللغة العربية والانكليزية. فهذا الشرح يساعد الطلبة على فهم اخطائهم وبالتالي يساعدهم على استخدام الشكل الصحيح من أدوات الربط في اللغة النكليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اكتساب، تحليل الخطأ، ضمائر الوصل.

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Appendix

The Impact of English Learning

Please answer the following items:

1. I talked to the man..... bike had broken down in front of the house.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
2. Mr. Adam is a cap driver, lives next door.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
3. He often visits his aunt in Basrah is in the south.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
4. This is the man comes from Italy.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
5. That's Laila, the girl has just arrived at the station.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
6. Thank you very much for your letter was very interesting.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
7. The student, mother is a doctor, forgot his book.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
8. The children, shouted in the park, are not from our neighborhood.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
9. The bus, driver is a young man, is from Diwaniya.
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose
10. What did she do with the money her friend lent her?
 - a. Who
 - b. Which
 - c. Whose

11. There is something about _____ immediately.
- which I must speak to you
 - which I must speak to you about you
 - that I must speak to you about
 - that I must speak to you
12. Is this the address to _____ you want the letter sent?
- where
 - that
 - which
 - whom
13. Is Ahmed the person _____ you wish to speak?
- that
 - whom
 - to that
 - to whom
14. The party _____ last week was terrific.
- I went
 - I went to it
 - I went to
 - that I went
15. That play is by a famous writer. It's about the people in Spain _____ for two years.
- that she lived
 - that she lived among them
 - among whom she lived
 - where she lived among them