Acquisition of English Clauses by Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract. As an internationally recognized language, the importance of English is becoming increasingly apparent. Grammar is the core component of the English system, and the correct understanding of sentences is crucial for mastering English grammar. The use of subordinate clauses is a typical feature of English sentences. For non-English major students, their exposure to English is significantly reduced after entering university, and they can only acquire limited knowledge through university English courses, which puts them in a non systematic teaching state. In view of this, this study focuses on the English clause mastery of non-English major students in the context of non systematic teaching, using a questionnaire survey method to systematically examine their English clause mastery level. The research results show that participants have a certain level of proficiency in certain English clauses in specific contexts and sentence structures. However, the study also revealed significant deficiencies in the subjects' mastery of subordinate clauses, mainly manifested as: firstly, they are unable to accurately judge various subordinate clauses and grasp of their application; secondly, the overall structure of the subordinate clause is not well understood by students; thirdly, there is a problem of confusing different types of subordinate clauses and other grammatical structures, especially in translation question types, which often leads to diverse deviations in the translated text due to the confusion of subordinate clause types. The results of this study can provide targeted references for optimizing English grammar teaching, especially clause teaching, for non-English major undergraduate students.

Keywords: English clauses, Connectives, Types of English clauses.

1. Introduction

Learners find it difficult to reach the level of native speakers in the process of second language acquisition, and their language system is always at a certain stage in the interlanguage continuum [1]. Under the wave of globalization, the importance of English as an international international language is becoming increasingly prominent [2]. In the English system, grammar is the cornerstone of language rules. The foundation of learning grammar is sentences, and a correct understanding of sentences is one of the key elements of learning English grammar well. The most typical feature of English sentences is the use of subordinate clauses. Non English major students gradually have less exposure to English after graduating from high school and during their university years. They only gain some English knowledge during the course of college English, and are in a state of not receiving systematic teaching. Moreover, the differences between their mother tongue and target language can affect the development of second language acquisition, which may lead to deviations and confusion in acquiring subordinate clauses [3]. So this study aims to understand what deviations and confusions non English major students may experience in mastering subordinate clauses under non systematic teaching.

Subordinate clauses are used as adjuncts to modify the main clause or main clause verb, and are subordinate conjunctions that mark the semantic relationship between the main clause and the subordinate clause [4]. At the same time, it is also learned about the types and classifications of subordinate clauses (subject clause, object clause, predicate clause, adjective clause, adverbial clause, appositive clause). In terms of language learning, Complement clauses (henceforth abbreviated as COMP-clauses) are commonly defined as subordinate clauses functioning as an argument of a predicate; they may serve as subject or object of the superordinate clause, The subject clause, object

clause, and predicate clause we refer to are both complement clauses [5, 6]. There are two main types of modifying dependent clauses: adverbials and relatives. Adverbials, often introduced by an adverb, modify the matrix clause. In contrast, relative clauses modify a noun or noun phrase in a sentence [7].

This article studies the mastery of subordinate clauses by non English major students, aiming to enrich the theoretical system of second language acquisition, assist in second language teaching practice, and especially provide theoretical support for English teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature has studied the level of English acquisition and mastery among non language major students from various aspects, such as writing, speaking, vocabulary, and pronunciation. For example, in terms of vocabulary, the research of scholars Qin Chaoxia and Yan Minfen shows that these learners have not yet been able to establish a vocabulary semantic network based on the principle of vertical and horizontal semantic relationships between words, which affects their vocabulary production ability [8]. In terms of oral communication, relevant literature has found that learners in university mainly learn written language, and there are more public basic courses and non English general courses. Formal oral training is mainly limited to two classes per week, and there are few opportunities for post class oral training and English communication, which may also lead to a low degree of distinction in phrase use among learners [9]. From this, it can be seen that various studies have shown that non-English major students have certain problems and obstacles in learning English as a foreign language. However, there is also a gap in research in this area, that is, although existing studies have started from multiple aspects and studied the level of English proficiency of non English major students, there are studies on sentences, especially subordinate clauses, but the quantity is limited.

This study aims to conduct a questionnaire survey among non-English major students to explore the effectiveness of their acquisition of English subordinate clauses, as well as the difficulties and obstacles they encounter during their learning process. This article mainly studies two questions. Firstly, what are the common characteristics of non English major students' choices of English clause leading words (such as the commonality of making mistakes); The second question is whether non English major students can correctly determine the types of English clauses.

3. Research Design

The research subjects of this article are undergraduate students from multiple universities who are not majoring in English. The research tool is a questionnaire, which is distributed to conduct research. This study refers to one of the tests used by Touchie to investigate the acquisition of English relative clauses by Arab students. However, in order to adapt to the actual situation of Chinese students and the purpose of this study, the author has made modifications to the original design. Also, combined with the actual English proficiency of non English major college students, three types of questions, namely choice judgment and translation, were used to test the participants. The multiple-choice and true/false questions set the only correct answer. There are both English to Chinese and Chinese to English translation questions, and the answer is not unique. The author needs to personally correct it to determine whether the respondent's judgment of the type of subordinate clause is correct, in order to study students' mastery of subordinate clauses. From the perspective of purpose, the purpose of each question type is different: multiple-choice questions mainly aim to hollow out the guiding words and see if students can correctly choose the guiding words. True or false questions are based on whether students can correctly grasp the guiding words and determine whether the sentence is a complete clause or not. Translation questions mainly depend on whether they can determine the type of subordinate clause.

The data analysis is based on the combination of descriptive statistical analysis and text analysis: for the research on the characteristics of non-English majors' selection of English clause guides and

whether they can correctly judge the type of English clauses, the descriptive statistical analysis model is used first. By calculating statistical measures such as mean, median, and standard deviation, we can understand the overall scores of students on multiple-choice, true/false, and translation questions, as well as the frequency distribution of different clause types and guide word choices; Then, by analyzing the text, we will study the acquisition situation of non English major students.

4. Research Results

4.1. The Master of Connectives

Table 1 lists the average scores of the subjects in the subject clause type multiple-choice test. From this table, it can be seen that although the average score is not low, some participants still did not score because they tend to confuse the leading word of the subject clause by choosing which or who, and from the value of the standard deviation, it can be seen that the special subject "It is... that" often confuses the leading word "that" in the sentence. Students may confuse 'that', 'which', and 'who' due to their native language structure. In some languages, introductory words like 'who' can serve multiple functions, leading learners to confusion when understanding and using them. In addition, a lack of sufficient grammar training and contextual understanding may also be a contributing factor to this issue.

Table 1. The scores of subjective clause multiple-choice questions

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
1. _____ I care about is your personal life experience.	50	0.000	2.000	1.800	0.606	2.000
8.It is obvious to the students _____ they should get well prepared for their future.	50	0.000	2.000	1.440	0.907	2.000

Table 2 lists the scores of the subjects in the object clause questions. The correct answer to the second question is ' how he will go ', but many students choose the word ' where ', indicating that participants are particularly prone to confusion when it comes to connectives in the form of special interrogative words; also, another reason for the low scoring rate of this question is the unclear understanding of the word order when using special interrogative words as connectives in the object clause. The correct answer to the third question is ' how' , and many participants chose ' what' , which also confirms the conclusion of confusing special interrogative words mentioned above. On the contrary, the subjects had a strong grasp of the connectives ' that 'and' which 'in the object clause, and were also proficient in their use. The reason for the errors in these questions is most likely due to students not connecting with the context and relying on their English language sense to make judgments.

Table 2. The scores of multiple-choice questions on object clause selection

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
2. - Do you really know _____ tomorrow? - By plane.	50	0.000	2.000	0.400	0.808	2.000
3. The prize winner described to the class _____ he had managed to achieve excellence in his studies.	50	0.000	2.000	1.080	1.007	2.000
11. We learnt from his letter that he was in Spain.	50	0.000	2.000	1.360	0.942	2.000
14. Only you can decide which one suits you best	50	0.000	2.000	1.600	0.808	2.000
15. I can’t think what his name.	50	0.000	2.000	1.880	0.480	2.000

Table 3 shows the test results of the subjects in multiple-choice and true/false questions in the relative clause test. According to this table, it can be seen that non-English major undergraduate students have a relatively accurate grasp of the basic structure of relative clauses and commonly used introductory words (which, who, that). But when encountering fixed collocations or prepositions+which, significant mistakes can occur. Table 3 shows that both the fourth and tenth questions examine verbs is followed by prepositions, but they require prepositions+which to be used as attributive clauses in advance. With no doubt, the scores are relatively low, indicating that the subjects have not mastered the use of this guiding word proficiently. Similarly, the score for question 22 is significantly lower than other questions, indicating that students often have structural understanding biases when encountering fixed combinations. Because they see that using 'that' as an attributive clause is reasonable. But they overlooked that the sentence has a 'such', and the fixed collocation of 'such' should be 'as'. This shows that the subjects have poor acquisition of the fixed collocation and preposition+which combination.

Table 3. The scores of multiple-choice questions on attributive clauses

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
4. Before leaving the village, he visited the old house _____ he spent his childhood.personal life experience.	50	0.000	2.000	1.480	0.886	2.000
10.The house _____ I grew up has been taken down and replaced by an office building.	50	0.000	2.000	1.480	0.886	2.000
12. I am watching the movie is very interesting.	50	0.000	2.000	1.600	0.808	2.000
13. The boy saw the girl who she lied to him.	50	0.000	2.000	1.560	0.837	2.000
18. The film is about a spy whose wife betrays him	50	0.000	2.000	1.640	0.776	2.000
19. She gave me this sweater, which she had knitted herself.	50	0.000	2.000	1.240	0.981	2.000
20. He gets a friend he speaks French.	50	0.000	2.000	1.680	0.741	2.000
21. I picked up the peaches, some of which were badly bruised.	50	0.000	2.000	1.480	0.886	2.000
22. I never heard such stories that he tells.	50	0.000	2.000	0.960	1.009	2.000

Table 4 lists the mastery of adverbial clauses by the subjects. It can be seen from the table that students' mastery of if-guided adverbial clauses is optimistic, but their mastery of when-guided adverbial clauses, especially those guided by hardly when, is not very satisfactory. Most students cannot identify this fixed collocation structure and thus choose incorrect answers such as after. Students' inability to identify the guiding words of fixed collocations may be due to a lack of sufficient grammar training, which leads to a vague grasp of this knowledge point.

Table 4. The scores of adverbial clause multiple-choice questions

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
5.Hardly had I started working on the computer _____ the electricity was gone.	50	0.000	2.000	0.920	1.007	2.000
7. _____ you want some samples of our new products, you might contact our sales manager.	50	0.000	2.000	1.720	0.701	2.000

Table 5 shows the subjects' acquisition of relative clauses. For relative clauses, the subjects had poor mastery of the guiding words "what" and "who". The correct answer to this question should be "what", but some students are influenced by the word "scientist" in the previous sentence and choose the connective "who". In fact, the key to solving this question is to use "what would I like to be" when asking the "scientist" question. When used in a clause, the declarative word order should be used, so the introductory word should be "what" instead of "who". In predicate clauses, the choice of "what" and "who" often depends on the content expressed in the clause. ”What "is used to express a question or description about something, while" who "is used specifically to refer to a person. In this test, participants often mistakenly chose "who" due to the term "scientist", but actually it chose "what" because the sentence structure expresses "the profession I want to become", not specifically referring to a certain person. It can be seen that participants are easily confused about the concept and selection of introductory words in subordinate clauses.

Table 5. The scores of multiple-choice questions on relative clause selection

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
9.—I would like to be a scientist. — That’s _____ I would like to be, too.	50	0.000	2.000	1.360	0.942	2.000

Table 6 lists the scores of participants in completing multiple-choice and true/false questions related to appositive clauses. It can be seen that students' judgment of appositive clauses following nouns is generally accurate, but they can become confused when encountering appositive clauses connected by two commas used to modify the preceding noun. In the true or false question 17, it can be seen from the average score and standard deviation that the scoring rate is relatively low. Most students judged it as an appositive clause and believed that the sentence was correct and error free. However, they overlooked the most important point - the form of the appositive clause is either a single word or a complete sentence guided by a leading word. So the condition for this question to be an appositive clause is' Mr. Green, who I was working, was very generic.'

Table 6. The scores of multiple-choice questions on apposition clauses

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
6.We all thought it a pity _____	50	0.000	2.000	1.600	0.808	2.000
17. Mr. Green, for who I was working, was very generous.for their future.	50	0.000	2.000	1.040	1.009	2.000

4.2. Judgment of Clause Types

Tables 7 and 8 respectively list the average scores for clause types and clause positions in the English-Chinese translation test of sentences. It was found in the study that there are some common error points among the subjects. The most general factor appears to be the similarities between various types of relative clauses and their relationships with other grammatical constructions [10].

Table 7 lists the scores of participants in the relative clause translation questions. In the translation test of relative clause 1, the sentence to be translated is "汤姆买的小说很有意思", and the relative clause is required to be translated. The answer is "The novel (that/which) Tom bought is very interesting. or The novel which is bought by Tom is very interesting. However, in the collected questionnaires, it was found that some students translated the relative clause into a post attributive in the present participle form - The novel bought by Tom was greatly interesting. Although relative clauses have the form of simplified relative clauses with missing relative pronouns or adverbs, appearing in the form of present participle or past participle phrases, the leading word and verb cannot be omitted when modifying the subject [11]. If omitted, it will change its nature and become a post attributive. It can be seen that non English major students tend to confuse the concept of relative clauses with post attributive modifiers.

The table also indicates that the subjects are unable to identify non-restrictive attributive clauses and have poor mastery of their marker words. In the sentence "Tom failed in the exam, which made his mother angry," some students translated it as "Tom的妈妈很生气因为他没有通过这次考试," which clearly shows that they did not identify the type and structure of the clause, and instead translated it into a sentence containing an adverbial clause of reason based on their native language thinking. This shows that some students are unable to identify non-restrictive attributive clauses and translate them into adverbial clauses of reason based on their language intuition.

Meanwhile, the table also indicates that the subjects are prone to translating attributive clauses into object clauses. In the answer sheet for Attributive Clause 2, the sentence to be translated is "The fact that she works hard is well known to us.", and the correct answer is "她工作努力的事实我们都知道. " However, most students treat it as an object clause when translating, and their answer becomes "我们都知道她工作努力的事实. " This shows that non-English major students, influenced by their mother tongue habits, unconsciously treat attributive clauses as object clauses in translation.

Table 7. The scores of subjects in the translation test of attributive clauses

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
C to E: 汤姆买的小说很有意思.	50	0.000	2.000	1.460	0.885	2.000
E to C: Tom failed in the exam, which made his mother angry.	50	0.000	2.000	1.750	0.625	2.000
E to C: The fact that she works hard is well known to us.	50	0.000	2.000	1.120	0.895	2.000

Table 8 lists the scores of the subjects in translating adverbial clauses. The table shows that although the average score of the question is not bad, it can still be seen from the standard deviation that some students use adverbial clauses as attributive clauses to solve the problem. In the test question, the question stem is "如果孩子们一直呆在室内并且得不到锻炼, 他们将变得很虚弱. " The correct answer to this question is "If children stay indoors all the time and don't get exercise, they will become very weak. From this, it can be seen that some participants have inaccurate judgments about the types of subordinate clauses.

Table 8. The scores of subjects in the translation test of attributive clauses

Questions	Sample capacity	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
C to E: 如果孩子们一直呆在室内并且得不到锻炼, 他们将变得很虚弱.	50	0.000	2.000	1.750	0.657	2.000

Based on the aforementioned research findings, this article suggests that in the process of English teaching practice, it is essential to impart to students the methods for judging clauses, with a focus on explaining and distinguishing the usage and differences of clause connectors (especially some special cases involving fixed expressions); clauses guided by special interrogative words should be judged based on their sentence patterns and meanings. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. More importantly, after the class is over, students should be required to do exercises to consolidate their knowledge points, so that they can grasp them more firmly.

5. Conclusion

5.1. The Result of the Research

This study investigated the mastery level of subordinate clauses among non English major undergraduate students by distributing questionnaires to them. The results showed that the subjects were able to judge the type of subordinate clauses and the accurate use of connectives in specific conditions and sentence structures (such as' that 'and' which 'in object clauses, the basic structure of relative clauses, and commonly used adverbial clauses guided by' which ',' who ',' that ', and' if '). However, this study mainly found that the subjects had insufficient mastery of subordinate clauses - firstly, they could not judge special forms of subject subordinate clauses and could not grasp leading words accurately; The second issue is the poor acquisition of some special fixed collocations and their connectives in subordinate clauses; The third issue is the inability to determine the correct guiding words for clauses that guide special interrogative words; The fourth issue is that the mastery and acquisition of the structure of subordinate clauses are not ideal; Finally, they can confuse various types of subordinate clauses and even other grammatical sentences, especially in translation problems where they can be confused and translated into a variety of answers.

5.2. Study Limitations

This study has certain limitations in sample representatives, mainly due to the limited number of participants. Firstly, this study ultimately included 50 participants, with a small sample size that did not cover a wider range of regions and specialties. This makes it difficult for the sample to fully represent the overall target population involved in the study, and cannot be directly transferred to other populations with different characteristics. The insufficient sample size also poses challenges to the stability and reliability of the research. In subsequent analysis, it may lead to significant fluctuations in the analysis results, making it difficult to form consistent and stable conclusions, and reducing the guiding value of the research results for practical applications. Secondly, the number of participants in the survey is smaller than the actual number of participants, and many people are excluded from the valid participants due to not answering the questions seriously, which may have a negative impact on the research.

5.3. Research Prospect

Subsequent research can delve deeper into exploration by addressing the limitations of limited subject numbers and models. Furthermore, it can have more researches on the mastery level of subordinate clauses among non-English majors, providing stronger theoretical support for classroom teaching practices.

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