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The Use of Relative Clauses as a Syntactic Complexity Measure by NUL Students

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ABSTRACT:- The present paper explores the use of relative clause as a syntactic complexity measure in the examination scripts of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) fourth year students. The study is based on the employment of the interpretivist paradigm as well as descriptive and case study designs. Data was collected from the students' continuous writing in the (2016/2017) examination papers and analysed qualitatively, following the Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) and the Cognitive Grammar (CG), both of which formed the theoretical frameworks for the study. The paper shows that NUL students have a reasonably high level of syntactic complexity with the use of relative clause as the analysis reflects the use of both **wh**- and **that** relative clauses in their writing.

I. BACKGROUND

Relative clauses are finite subordinate clauses whose main function is to modify a noun phrase (Leech et al., 2002:383). The present study adopts this definition. The paper starts by showing that in English language, syntactic complexity features such as subordination that include relative clause, are used as measures of syntactic complexity in written texts. Relative clause is introduced by the **wh-** and **that** subordinating conjunctions. This feature is used to form a complex sentence. A complex sentence has an independent and a dependent clause and in such a structure, relative clause is a dependent clause. The ability to produce complex sentences is generally considered a measure of developing syntactic complexity and maturity (Hunt, 1965).

Earlier research

Research on syntactic complexity in English as a First Language has been carried out by many linguists in English as the First Language (L1) and English as a Second Language (L2). These researchers used different measures of syntactic complexity that include subordination. Unlike other studies, Beard et al. (2002) focused on identification of different syntactic structures including subordination. The conclusions drawn from studies in L1 acquisition were that initially children produce clauses which are subordinated but some of them fail to connect ideas appropriately; as a result, they write disjointed sentences. Some of them produced floating clauses as shown in example (1) below.

(1)   Or **[if it is the other way round]** you turn the black over (Beard et al., 2002:23).

Example (1) is disjointed and a subordinate clause observed in it is floating because it requires a main clause in order for it to convey a complete thought. Thus, this sentence does not have meaning.

The study
The current paper explores the use of relative clause in the NUL (English L2) students' written texts. It answers the questions:

1) Do NUL students use relative clause appropriately?
2) What are its syntactic functions in the students' sentences?
3) Which textual functions does it (is it observed in beginning, internally and at sentence final position) perform?

The first objective of the present study was to examine the syntactic complexity of NUL students' writing through the use of relative clause. The second objective was to explore its syntactic use in order to observe whether it has any syntactic functions or not and to observe whether students are aware of its textual functions.

The examination scripts of fourth year students of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) were purposively, systematically and randomly selected. Regardless of the faculties, all the NUL students are normally introduced to Communication and Study Skills (CSS) and Remedial Grammar of English in the first year of their university study. By the time they get to the fourth year, they have been involved in continuous writing for three years. The researcher was interested in investigating whether NUL students use relative clause to form complex sentences in their continuous writing and whether they use it appropriately or not. She was also examining its syntactic functions and exploring the environments in which this category is reflected in their sentences.

The students from the Faculty of Education and from the Faculty of Humanities language departments are extensively exposed to English language and linguistics courses throughout the four years of their university study. Their scripts were not included in the study. These students whose scripts were in the sample share the level, time frame, setting and genre.

In Lesotho, there are church, government and privately owned schools. The church and Government schools constitute the majority and in such schools, Sesotho, the mother tongue, is used as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3. From Grade 4, English, the second language (L2) is used as the medium of instruction up to tertiary education level. The fourth year students at NUL are therefore advanced ESL students. The high school graduates are admitted to NUL only if they obtain credit (high marks) in English Language examinations. However, those who fail to obtain credit are admitted into the Faculty of Science and Technology as long as they meet all the other criteria.

The data was collected from the continuous writing taken from the fourth year students' examination scripts for the academic year (2016/2017) across the faculties. Wendy et al. (2002) observe that written language can provide a rich data base for studying complex structures because it is likely to have longer sentences with more complex syntactic structures than spoken language. Kemper et al. (1989) and Weisberg (2000) also note that writing is the modality through which L2 learners initiate the use of new syntactic structures.

II.   DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed qualitatively, hence the reason for employment of the interpretivist paradigm and the Content Analysis (CA). In order to conduct a CA, the text was broken down into sentences. Then the text was examined using one of the CA basic methods, namely, the conceptual analysis, because it begins with identifying the concepts present in a given text. The researcher first identified the sample scripts from the students' essays, read them and identified relative clauses.

III.   THE FINDINGS

The findings are that, relative clause occurs in the writing of the students across the faculties at NUL. The students use this feature as a syntactic measure in their writing and they use it appropriately. The present paper adopts this definition. NUL students use only restrictive relative clauses as provided in examples 2(a) – (t).

2(a) *It includes a plan of work **[which is an outline procedure [which address [sic] the logical way of implementing a programme]]**. (FOA)*
*(b) In Geography, **[which is almost entirely the study of the environment]**, learners are taken out of the classroom to study a phenomenon taking place in the environment]. (FOE)*
*(c) Dyslexia is a learning disability **[which cause [sic] difficulty in reading and spelling of words due. [sic] to phonological dificit [sic]**. (FOE)*
*(d) There is now the 2 piece can **[which easily allows form till [sic] and seal]**. (FOHS)*

*(e) Everything about the area [**where the work is to be carried, [sic] together with its people**] should be considered. (FOA)*

*(f) The investors also aboden [**sic**] other areas of investment and invested in areas [**where they will get huge turn over**]. (FOH)*

*(g) In societies [**where a substance economy is in place**], that is a system [**where production is for consumption**]. (FOSS)*

*(h) However, in instances [**where the insurer himself has directed [that payment of a premium should be made in a certain manner [sic]]]**. (FOL)*

*(i)   This is the Situation [**where the sample will be that of [playing** tennis] **[where there exists rules of Confirmity [sic] with that rule]]]** but to the overruling of the opponent. (FOL)*

*(j) Crop rotation needs someone [**who fully understand [sic] the plant nutrient [sic] requirements**]. (FOA)*

*(k) There is always a group of other children [**who bullies [sic] others at schools**], [sic] a bullied child grows with a desire to revenge on that. (FOHS)*

*(l) Control group is made [sic] of learners [**who experience difficulties in reading and writing**]: [sic] learners [**who are more intelligent**]. (FOE)*

*(m) In this instance, the party [**who [sic] finds the avevements [sic] to be vague and embarrassing does not have [to automatically approach**] the court, he first has [**to notify**] the other party about the vagueness, and [if the other party, having been notified, fails to remove the vagueness and embarrasment,[sic] then the embarrassed party may apply for exception. (FOL)*

*(n) This is whereby everything or conditions [**that exist in a situation area**] are noted. (FOA)*

(0) *Fieldwork is any activity [**that occurs outside the classroom**]. (FOE)*

*(p) Science relies on experiment and observation, [when their [sic] are limited resources [**that could be used [to enhance learning of science such as Laboratory and its equipment**], [sic] There would be poor performance in science. (FOE)*

(q) *Education, [sic] through violent sports such as rugby or boxing [**that are played at schools**] can predispose children to violence and that can lead children to abuse others [because of that physical strength [**that they attain there**]. (FOHS)*

*(r) There are even shapes [**that can be packed easiling [sic] in shelves made of plastic**]. (FOHS)*

*(s) It can be done by using the language [**that is gender sensitive**]. (FOH)*

*(t) The theories are the set of ideas [**that help us to understand the world**]. (FOH)*

On the basis of these examples, it is observed that the information about the preceding nouns in all the examples is given and the references of the nouns have been specified. For instance, in example 2(a), the preceding noun phrase, **a plan of work** is specified as the referent and it is post-modified by the restrictive relative clause, **[which is an outline procedure].** The noun phrase, **an outline procedure,** is in turn the preceding noun phrase and referent for the restrictive relative clause, **[which address [sic] the logical way of implementing a programme]**. This result confirms the view presented in Maleke (2011:6) that relative clauses occur immediately after a noun, and are considered part of the noun phrase. In other words, relative clauses are embedded in a noun phrase. Maleke (ibid) argues that relative clauses provide a way to talk about nouns. They are used when a speaker wants to identify the noun or when the speaker wants to add information about the noun in question. Forrest (1984:89) observes that if the defining clause is not stated, a person is bound to ask a question such as *"which person"?* The findings of the present paper are supported by Forrest's (1984) and Maleke's (2011) observations that relative clauses occur immediately after the noun and if the defining clause is not stated, a hearer is forced to ask for more clarifying information. The findings show that in all the faculties, NUL students are able to build syntactic complexity through the use of relative clauses. This observation answers the first objective of the present paper since it shows that NUL students' writing demonstrates syntactic complexity.

It is further observed in this paper that the relative clauses are noted in three different syntactic environments. However, in the FOE, FOL and FOSS, NUL students occasionally place relative clause at the beginning of the sentence as indicated in examples (b), (g) and (m), the subordinators, **which, where** and **who**, appear at sentence-initial position functioning as prepositional complement. In these examples, the relative clause functions syntactically as a subject and this is supported by Mc Donough et al. (2015:69) who attest that their research subjects used relative clauses as subjects. Another interesting observation is that NUL students in the FOE and FOSS are able to build syntactic complex sentences through placing relative clauses at sentence-initial position where they function as prepositional complement. In the FOL, they use the relative clause as the subject and it is introduced by the noun phrase, **the party** and as such, it is used as a post-modifier. These findings prove that NUL students are able to form syntactic complex sentences through the use of restrictive relative clause that is placed at sentence-initial position. This observation is supported by Allan and Martins (1983), Leech and Svartvik (2002) and Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) who say that subordinate clauses perform

various functions in sentences where they are demonstrated. They further coincide with Leech and Svartvik's (2002:397) claim that subordinate clauses may function as subjects, prepositional complements and post-modifiers.

Apart from the occasional placement of the relative clause at sentence-initial position, they are also placed at sentence-internal position as shown in examples 2(h), (i), (k), (l), (p) and (q) in the first occurrence. The subordinators are, **where, who** and **that**. These incidences are reflected in four faculties namely FOE, FOH, FOHS and FOL. A new claim is that NUL students in these faculties show ability to construct syntactic complex sentences through the use of restrictive relative clauses that are placed in the middle of the sentences. This internal placement of relative clauses is supported by the argument of Leech and Svartvik (ibid) that relative clauses can be used as post-modifiers because where they are noted, that is, in the middle of the sentences, they post-modify the noun phrases.

At sentence-final-position, the subordinators are **which**, **where, who, and that** and these are observed in examples 2(a), (c), (d), (e), (f), (g) in the second occurrence, (j), (l), (n), (0), (q) in the second occurrence, (r), (s) and (t). Amongst these subordinators, it is observed that **that** is mostly used over the others as shown in examples 2(n), (0), (p), (q), (r), (s) and (t). These findings are supported by Fries (1984), Kies (1999), Keens (2004) and Maleke (2011) who observe that subordinate clauses can be placed in three different syntactic environments for different purposes. The findings reveal that NUL students have the ability to use relative clauses to construct syntactic complexity.

A further observation is that in some environments, the **wh**-relative clauses embed other **wh**-relative clauses and they appear at the end of the sentences as illustrated in 2(a) and (i). In other contexts such as examples 2(h) and (m), **wh**-relative clause embeds **that**-nominal clause. It is also noted that relative clauses are embedded in other subordinate clauses as exemplified in 2(p), where time adverbial embeds **that**-relative clause which in turn embeds **To**-infinitive. This point supports the idea of embedding of subordinate clauses which is important in the formation of syntactic complexity. It further indicates that wherever the relative clauses are used in the given examples, they identify their referents and shows their defining capability as they make easy for the reader to be aware of the preceding noun phrase. Looking at all the presented examples, it is essential to note that NUL students' writing notably display syntactic complexity.

The findings in this paper are supported by Forrest (1984:89) who points out that a defining relative clause which is also referred to as restrictive relative clause identifies the referent for the reader because all the examples have identified the reader. In other words, it tells who or what the noun is. The prime job of a restrictive relative clause is to limit the possible referents of the preceding NP. That is, the relative clause makes the referent more accessible to the hearer (Berk, 1999:265). The findings of the present paper are also supported by Forrest (1984), Berk (1999) and Leech et al. (ibid) who claim that restrictive relative clause identifies the referent for the reader, they make the referent more accessible to the reader, they post-modify the preceding noun phrases and they possess the characteristic of being finite because they have finite verb phrases. In Beard et al. (2002), students varied noticeably in their use of relative clauses. Only a few of them used relative clauses (adjectival clauses constituted 13 percent of the subordinate clauses) appropriately which is not the case in this paper because in the present paper, the students used relative clauses appropriately. Mc Donough et al. (2015:69) state that in their study, the relative clauses were used as subjects and objects. In some incidences the subject relative clauses were used without overt relative pronouns. In the present paper, the students rarely use the restrictive relative clauses as subjects as it is only demonstrated in example (b). In all the examples, relative clauses perform the syntactic function of post-modifying the noun phrases. TGG and CG helped the researcher to identify complex sentences that were formed through the use of relative clauses. TGG further assisted the researcher to notice the recursive structures and Merge which is stipulated in the Minimalist program since the MP is entailed in TGG. CG helped in exploring the grammar of the identified complex sentences as according to CG, syntax and grammar must go hand in hand.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the NUL students make a frequent use of relative clause and where it is reflected, it has been used appropriately. The paper has achieved the proposed aims. The first research question of the study was to find out whether NUL students use this structure, whether they use it appropriately, what its syntactic and textual functions are. The assumption was that the use of this feature is frequent in students' writing.

The second assumption was that the students are aware of syntactic and textual functions of this feature. The two assumptions are supported. The students have a reasonably frequent use of relative clause. This is an indication that they have a fairly good control of the syntax of English.

A further conclusion is that students have an intuitive awareness of the syntactic functions of relative clause as a subject, prepositional complement and post-modifiers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study recommends that the students must be given a lot of exercises with regard to the syntactic functions of relative clauses especially the function of being a subject since based on the findings of this paper, it is idiosyncratic in the Faculty of Education (FOE), Faculty of Law (FOL) and Faculty of Social Sciences (FOSS).

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