Relative clauses in the use of English as a second language are very often considered as one rather simple language construction, yet some space for their acquisition is left to the very end of student’s language learning. One of the possible reasons may be the fact that the necessity for their correct usage is much stressed in the written rather than in spoken language. Maybe because the fact that at this stage the possibility of writing is normally at a higher level, and errors that commonly occur mainly concern this written part where their possible incorrect usage is more visible and can significantly affect the meaning of the whole sentence. The relative clause is in speaking marked rather by intonation. The correct understanding of subordinate relative clauses can help students to make a better use of them in written language.

Key words: relative clause, written language, main clause, subordination, modification.

1. Introduction

Two clauses in the same sentence can be connected by coordination or subordination. In the case of coordination, the two clauses are “equal partners” in the same structure\(^2\). But in subordination, one clause (subordinate clause) “depends” on the other (the main clause). The sentence containing such clauses is called a complex sentence. According to R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum, a subordination is a non-symmetrical relation holding between two clauses in such a way that one is constituent or part of the other (A University Grammar of English, 1998):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I live in Rome} & \quad \text{and} \quad \text{you live in Zagreb}. \\
\text{(independent)} & \quad \text{(independent)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I live in Rome} & \quad \text{which is situated in Italy}. \\
\text{(superordinate or independent} & \quad \text{(subordinate or dependent clause)} \\
\text{or main clause)} & \end{align*}
\]

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1 Veleučilište u Šibeniku
According to Quirk and Greenbaum, the subordination enables us to organize multiple clause structures and each subordinate or dependent clause may become superordinate or the main one to one or more other clauses, resulting sometimes in the sentence of great complexity.

A main clause is the one that doesn’t depend on another clause, in other words, it can stay alone. The noun phrase can also be complex just as the sentence can. According to Merriam Webster dictionary a noun phrase is a phrase formed by a noun and all its modifiers and determiners, or it is any syntactic element (as a clause, clitic, pronoun or zero element) with a noun’s function (as the subject of a verb or the object of a verb or preposition).

A complex noun phrase is composed of three components:\(^3\):

a) the head, around which other components cluster
b) the premodification, which refers to all the items placed before the head
c) the postmodification, refers to all the items placed after the head.

Example:

\[
\text{The pretty girl standing in the corner……..is a friend of mine.}
\]

The premodification the head the postmodification

A relative clause is a type of postmodification. This modification can be restrictive and non-restrictive. It means that the head can be viewed only through the modification that has been supplied.

2. Restrictive clauses

Restrictive clause describes the preceding noun by distinguishing it from other nouns of the same class. They are essential for a clear understanding of the noun and the overall sentence.

In the sentence:

A woman who wears a blue dress works together with my mother.

“…who wears a blue dress” is a restrictive or defining relative clause.

If we omit it from the sentence, the meaning results incomplete and it wouldn’t be clear who is the woman we are talking about. It is important to say that these sentences are not separated with commas from the rest of the sentence. The easiest way to explain it is to give the example of two different sentences and the way they combine into one;

A girl was talking to me. Do you know her?

Do you know the girl who was talking to me? - restrictive relative clause

It can be noticed that by omitting this restrictive post modification the meaning would not be complete. A girl in this case is a subject of the sentence. Restrictive relative clauses can refer to the subject of the sentence as well as to its object; to both persons and things.

2.1. Restrictive relative clauses: PERSONS

2.1.1. Restrictive relative clauses; subject

They refer to subject by using the relative pronouns WHO and THAT.

A woman who was sitting with you on yesterday’s meeting was my sister.

A boy who was running around all the time was Emily’s son.

A relative pronoun THAT is also often used after all, everyone, everybody, no one, nobody and those.

Everyone who/THAT knew him loved him.

Nobody who/THAT watched her singing will ever forget it.

2.1.2. Restrictive relative clauses; object

They refer to the object of the sentence by using the relative pronouns: WHOM, WHO or THAT. Since the object form whom is considered very formal, relative pronouns who or that are frequently used in spoken language. The relative pronoun that is even more frequent in spoken language since it can refer to subject, object, to people and things, but it is also possible to omit the relative pronoun altogether.

A boy whom we met in front of the school handed me this notebook for my son.

It is also possible to say:

A boy who we met...

A boy that we met... or

A boy we met...

2.2. Restrictive relative clauses: THINGS

2.2.1. Restrictive relative clauses: SUBJECT

The relative pronouns WHICH and THAT are used to form these sentences.

This is the book which/that caused such a popularity.

The road which/that leads to the village is rather dusty and rugged.

2.2.2. Restrictive relative clauses: OBJECT of a verb

The relative pronouns WHICH and THAT to form these sentence or we don’t use them at all (they can be omitted).

You gave me the book. The book was interesting.

object

The book which/that you gave me was very interesting.

The book you gave me was very interesting.
2.2.3. Restrictive relative clauses: OBJECT of a preposition

The formal combination in this case is: **preposition + pronoun WHICH**, but the preposition can also be moved to the end of the clause and in this case relative pronouns WHICH or THAT are used (or completely omitted):

The boat **on which** we were sailing started to swing.

The boat **which/that** we were sailing on started to swing.

The boat we were sailing **on** started to swing.

3. Non-restrictive relative clauses: PERSONS

In non-restrictive clauses additional information is given which is not essential for identifying the head. (Quirk and Greenbaum). Non-restrictive relative clauses are therefore in writing enclosed by commas. Furthermore, Quirk and Greenbaum state that the “loose non-restrictive relationship is often semantically indistinguishable from coordination (with or without conjunction) or adverbial subordination”⁴. The use of pronouns in this case is limited to *wh*-items:

He met Jane, **who** invited him to a party.

Here is Jessica, **who(m)** I have already met…

We met in Venice, **which** was enveloped in fog.  
  **when** it was enveloped in fog.

We met in Venice, **which** he visited for the first time this year.

3.1. Non-restrictive relative clauses: SUBJECT

The relative pronoun WHO is used to introduce these sentences.

Mary, **who has been very motivated lately**, received a scholarship.

George, **who has been working the whole day**, suggested having a break.

⁴ R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, A University Grammar of English, 1998
3.2. Non-restrictive relative clauses: OBJECT

The relative pronoun WHOM is used to introduce these sentences. In these sentences, the relative pronoun cannot be omitted. Sometimes, in the spoken English, the pronoun who can also be found.

Jonny, whom everyone avoided, turned out to be a nice guy.

*The use of the possessive pronoun WHOSE is also possible (both in restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses).

Marry, whose children you are going to teach in school, is my best friend.
This is Tom, whose dog we found yesterday.

4. Non-restrictive relative clauses: THINGS

4.1. Non-restrictive relative clauses: SUBJECT

The relative pronoun WHICH is used to introduce these sentences. The pronoun that is not used in this case.

The bus for Zadar, which is usually very punctual, has been late.

4.2. Non-restrictive relative clauses: OBJECT

We use the relative pronoun WHICH to introduce these sentences (in this case it cannot be omitted like in the case of restrictive relative clauses). The pronoun THAT cannot be used here.

She gave me the scarf, which she had knitted herself.

We ate an ice cream, which was delicious.

*The use of the relative pronoun WHOSE

The relative pronoun WHOSE is generally used to refer to things and animals.

His house, whose heating did not function, was very cold.

5. Common mistakes among the second language students

1. Commas are not required in writing in restrictive relative clauses.

Mary is a CEO of the corporation which produces a wide range of products on international level. (correct)

Mary is a CEO of the corporation, which produces a wide range of products on international level. (incorrect)

The most important rule is that commas are not used to separate a restrictive clause from the rest of the sentence since its meaning is essential to its correct understanding.

2. The incorrect use of commas may lead to incorrect meaning.

The students who have regularly attended the lectures can take the written exam. (restrictive)
The students, who have regularly attended the lectures, can take the written exam. (non-restrictive)

The restrictive relative clause tells us that only those students who have regularly attended the lectures can take the written exam. The sentence implies that there were also other students who haven’t regularly attended the lectures and that they cannot take the exam.

The non-restrictive relative clause tells us that all the students (mentioned earlier in the context) can take the written exam since they all have regularly attended the lessons. That is the message understood by the non-restrictive clause, which by its definition gives extra information to the sentence because even if it gets omitted, the meaning remains the same.

3. We do not repeat the subject (personal pronoun or noun) after a relative clause.
   The man who was sitting next to me had a blue jacket.
   He lent me his book, which I found very interesting.

4. A relative clause can have only one direct object, when a relative pronoun is the object of the relative clause, we don’t need another object in the relative clause.
   He lent me his book, which I found very interesting.

5. When a relative pronoun is the object of the relative clause, we need a subject (pronoun or noun) in the relative clause.
   You handed me the book that you were looking for yesterday.

6. That cannot be used in a non-restrictive relative clause, just the relative pronoun who can refer to person in the subject position, while we use which if we refer to thing in the subject position.

   A student, who was awarded a scholarship, will receive 10000 kn.

7. Only the relative pronouns which and that can refer to subject in the restrictive relative clauses (in this case these relative pronouns can also be omitted).

   The car that I bought was…
   The car which I bought…
   The car I bought was…

8. A relative sentence must always follow the noun to which it refers.

   My office is about hundred metres from the centre, which I share with my colleague. (incorrect)

   My office, which I share with my colleague, is about hundred metres from the centre. (correct)
6. Conclusion

It may be concluded that at a certain point of language learning, a student needs to take a look at one correct usage of certain grammatical forms, like the form of relative clauses in this case in order to become more self-confident in the use of language. Relative clauses modify a noun to which they refer, ensuring in that way semantic clarity and richness of language and causing at the same time difficulty to second language learners of the English language. Couple of suggestions have been given in this article to help students understand the basic use and the most frequent mistakes in the use of relative clauses as well as to which changes on a sentence level their incorrect usage may lead.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y


Sažetak

UOBIČAJENE POGREŠKE U KORIŠTENJU ODNOSNIH REČENICA U ENGLESKOM JEZIKA MEĐU STUDENTIMA VELEUČILIŠTA U ŠIBENIKU

Odnosne rečenice u korištenju engleskog kao drugog jezika vrlo se često smatraju jednim prilično jednostavnim dijelom gradiva, no unatoč tome, posvećeno im je jako malo vremena tijekom procesa učenja engleskog jezika i to uglavnom na samom kraju učenja jezika. Jedan od mogućih razloga je činjenica da je nužnost za njihovu ispravnu uporabu znatno naglašenija u pisanom, nego u govornom jeziku, a poznato je da je za pismeno izražavanje potrebna viša razina poznavanja engleskog jezika, a greške koje se obično događaju tiču se uglavnom tog pismenog dijela gdje su one i najučljivije i mogu znatno utjecati na samo značenje rečenice. Relativna rečenica je u govoru označena uglavnom po promjeni u intonaciji. Pravilno razumijevanje određenih odnosnih rečenica može pomoći studentima kod njihove primjene u engleskom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: odnosne rečenice, pisani jezik, glavna rečenica, zavisna rečenica, modifikacija.