The Performance of Iraqi EFL University Students in Using Noun Clauses in English: Error Analysis

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Abstract

A noun clause is a dependent clause that works like a noun. It is one of the essential constructions in English grammar and a problematic area for the Iraqi EFL university learners.

The study aims at investigating the performance of Iraqi EFL university students in using noun clauses by form and function and finding out the area of difficulty in this regard and suggesting remedial work for the alleviation of these difficulties .

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners encounter difficulty in using noun clauses in English.

The study begins with the theoretical aspect encompassing definitions, forms, and functions of noun clauses in English. Then, the practical aspect represented in a diagnostic test applied to a random sample of (60) students taken from the third level in the Department of English ,College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon to assess Iraqi their performance at both the recognition and production levels.

The findings of the test show that Iraqi EFL university students face difficulty in using noun clauses which, in turn, verifies the hypothesis of the study. In the light of the results of the test ,some conclusions are drawn and a number of suggestions and remedial work are presented so that the learners can overcome the difficulty they encounter in using noun clauses in English.

الخلاصة

شبه ألجمله الاسمية هي عبارة غير مستقلة تعمل عمل الاسم .وهي واحدة من التراكيب الأساسـية في النحو الإنكليزي ومجالا ذا صعوبة للطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية .

تهدف الدراسة الى استقصاء اداء الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية في استخدام أشباه الجمل الاسمية شكلا و وظيفة ,والكشف عن مجالات الصعوبة في هذا المجال ثم اقتراح برنامج علاجي تعليمي لتجاوز هذه الصعوبات.

افترضت الدراسة إن الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية يواجهون صــعوبة فــي استخدام أشباه الجمل الاسمية في اللغة الانكليزية.

تبدأ الدراسة بالجانب النظري الذي يشتمل على التعاريف وتصنيف اشباه الجمل الاسمية من حيـث الصـيغة والوظيفة وفي الجانب التطبيقي اختيرت عشوائيا عينة تتالف من(60) طالب من المرحلة الثالثة لقسـم اللغـة الانكليزية/ كلية التربية للعلوم الأنسانية/ جامعة بابل لتطبيق الاختبار الذي يغطي الجانبين التمييزي والأنتاجي .

اظهرت نتائج الاختبار بأن الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الأنكليزية لغة اجنبية يواجهون صــعوبة في استخدام اشباه الجمل الاسمية وهذا بدوره يؤكد صحة فرضية الدراسة.في ضوء هذه النتائج ,استخلصـت

مجموعة من الاستنتاجات و الاقتراحات التي تشكل برنامج علاجي لتجاوز هذه الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة
في استخدام اشباه الجمل الاسمية في اللغة الانكليزية.

1. Introduction

The noun clause is an essential construction in English represented in a dependent clause which works like a noun. This topic is a problematic area for the Iraqi EFL university learners since the noun clauses are difficult to identify and produce because they are of different types and have various functions since they act as a subject, subject complement, direct object, indirect object, object of preposition and appositive.

The study aims at :

1.Investigating the area of difficulty that Iraqi EFL university students encounter in using noun clause in English.

2. Accounting for the errors committed by the learners.

3. Identifying the sources of errors in students' performance.

4. Suggesting some points which can be considered as remedies to the difficulty the students may face in using the topic under investigation.

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL university learners represented by a sample of students find difficulty in using noun clauses in English.

The procedures followed in this study are as follows:

1.Surveying the available theoretical study concerning noun clauses in English.

2. Designing a test to be conducted to a random sample of students to investigate their performance in using noun clauses.

3. Analysing the results of the test.

4. Drawing conclusions in the light of the findings of the test.

The study limits itself to the area of noun clauses in English and the sample of the test will be taken from the third year level in the Department of English/College of Education for Human Sciences/ University of Babylon.

2. Clauses

The clause can be defined as a group of words which consists of a subject and predicate. It appears into two parts: main clause and subordinate clause. The main clause can make sense and stand alone while the subordinate clause cannot stand alone as a grammatically complete thought (Strumph and Douglas, 1999: 334):

1 I know the steps that you are following.

In this sentence, the main clause is "I know the steps" which has the subject 'I' and the predicate 'know the steps'. This clause can stand alone as a complete grammatical thought while the subordinate clause of this sentence is "that you are following" which has also a subject and predicate but cannot stand alone rather it relies on the presence of the main clause.

3. Noun Clause

3.1 Definitions

The noun clause is a dependent clause that functions as a noun in the sentence (grammar. About. Com/od/mo/g/nounclauseterm.htm.). Frank (1972: 62) adds that the noun clause consists of a subject and predicate which functions as a noun.

Parrott (2001: 43) mentions that the noun clause is a subordinate clause which follows the noun clause and is joined with it by one of the conjunctions. Smally and Ruetten (1982: 177) denote that these conjunctions depend on whether the clause is a statement or a question.

3.2 Forms of Noun Clauses

According to Thomson and Martinet (1990: 261), the noun clause is a dependent clause which has the place of a noun in the sentence. The dependent clauses, including noun clauses, are either finite or nonfinite.

3.2.1 Finite Noun Clauses

Leech and Svartvik (1975: 213) state that finite clauses are those whose first word of the verb phrase is finite. All main clauses are finite but many subordinate clauses are finite as well as in:

2 I said that I might go.

Thakur (1998: 88) mentions that a finite noun clause functions as a subject , object, complement and a complement to a preposition of another clause:

3 That the teacher could not control the classroom is obvious. (subject)

4 I do not understand what they want with your marks. (object)

5 My problem is whether I should ask for another loan. (subject complement)

6 They have made him what he is. (object complement)

7 It depends on Whether he will help me. (completive to a preposition)

3.2.2 Non Finite Noun Clause

Stageberg (1971: 225) shows that in nonfinite clauses the first verb in the verb phrase does not mark a tense or agreement.

Three types of nonfinite clauses can be mentioned :

A.Infinitives: Burton-Roberts (1986: 252) denotes that the verb phrase of an infinitive clause consists of an infinitive form of the main verb, either a bare infinitive encompassing the untensed stem of the verb without "to" or a "to-infinitive". An infinitive clause may occur with a subject :

8 I heard John reject their offer several times. (Winograd, 1983: 478)

Or it may appear without a subject:

9 All I did was hit him on the head.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1061) state that nominal to-infinitive clauses function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, appositive, and adjective complement, as in the following examples:

10 To be neutral in this conflict is out of the question. (subject)

11 She likes to go. (direct object)

12 The best excuse is to say that you will be busy tomorrow. (subject complement)

13 Your ambition, to become a pilot, requires much money. (appositive)

14 She is very happy to see you. (adjective complement)

B –Ing Clause: The nominal- ing clause may function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, appositive, adjective complement, and prepositional complement, as in the following examples:

15 Watching movie keeps them relaxed. (subject)

16 She enjoys playing tennis. (direct object)

17 His first interest is reading books. (subject complement)

18 Her research, investigating attitudes to racial stereotypes, takes up most of her time. (appositive)

19 They are busy preparing a barbecue. (adjective complement)

20 He is responsible for drawing up the budget. (prepositional complement) (Ibid: 1063)

C –Ed Participle Clauses: An-ed participle clause is always passive in sense, and like passive main clause, it can contain an agent expression:

21 The woman lay on the ground ignored by the people around her.(Leech,1989: 289)

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973, 311) mention that there is a restriction on the "-ed participle clause" which is both syntactically and semantically passive to admit only the four passive types of clause: SV pass C, SV pass A, SV pass O:

22 Defeated, he slunk from the room.(Type SV pass=active type SVO)

4. Functions of Noun Clauses

The noun clause takes the place of a noun which functions as a subject, direct object, indirect object, subject complement, object complement ,object preposition, and appositive (Megginson, 1996:1):

23 <u>Where he lives</u> is unknown. (subject)

24 She does not know <u>what to read</u>. (direct object)

25 She told us <u>that there are troubles in the occupied lands</u>. (indirect object)

26 To know her is <u>to love her</u>. (subject complement)

27 They have made her <u>what she is</u>. (object complement)

28 He spoke about <u>how he won the match</u>. (object of preposition)

29 The news <u>that he was dead</u> proved to be untrue. (appositive)

5. The Test

Richards et al. (1992: 377) define the test as any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge, or performance.

The present test is designed to check the students' performance in using noun clauses in English and to determine the area of difficulty they may face in using this topic and then to point out the sources of their errors.

The random sample of the test consists of (60) students taken from the Department of English/College of Education for Human Sciences/University of Babylon to undergo the test.

The test encompasses two questions. The first question measures the students' performance at the recognition level. It consists of two parts, the first of which (A) has five items. The learners' task is to underline the noun clauses in the given sentences and to mention whether they are finite or nonfinite. The second part (B) has also two items and the testees have to underline the noun clauses in the given sentences and to show the functions of these noun clauses in the sentences. The second question is designed to measure the students' performance at the production level. In this question, the students have to give ten examples according to what is required from them.

5.1 Item Analysis

Baker (1989: 51) states that the most widely used types of item analysis are the discrimination index and the facility value.

5.1.1 Item Discrimination Index (DI)

The discrimination index (DI) of an item refers to what extent the high-scores on the whole test do better on that item than low scores (Ibid). Usually, the correct responses to the most difficult items are of those students with high scores and the incorrect answers to the same item are related to the students with low scores. The (DI) can be calculated by subtracting the correct responses in the low group from the correct responses in the high group and dividing the result by half the number of students.

The following tables show the discrimination index of question one and two respectively:

Table (1): The (DI) of Q1-A

Table (2): The (DI) of Q1- B

Items	Items DI	DI
1	0.66	0.33
2	0.53	0.40
3	0.46	0.23
4	0.23	0.46
5	0.60	0.13
Mean	mean 0.49	0.31

Table (3): The Discrimination Index (DI) of Q2

Item	DI	Item	DI
1	0.36	6	0.36
2	0.43	7	0.26
3	0.20	8	0.40
4	0.60	9	0.23
5	0.30	10	0.43
Mean	0.35		

   These tables show that there is no negative discrimination index for any item since all test items have positively valued discrimination indices. The (DI) of the item ranges from (0.13) to (0.66)which refers to the individual differences among the learners. The mean of the (DI) for the whole test is acceptable as it stands at (0.37) and the acceptable range of (DI) of the test items stands between (0.20 and 0.90) according to (Mousavi, 1997: 69).

5.1.2 Facility Value (FV)

   Richards et al. (1992: 192) define the facility value (FV) of the item as a measure of the ease of the item and it is the proportion of the learners who respond to the item correctly. It can be calculated by dividing the number of correct responses by the number of the testees. The following tables show the facility value of the items in question one and question two respectively:

Table (4):The (FV) of Items in Q1-A

Table (5): The (FV) of Items in Q1-B

Item	Item FV	FV
1	1 0.70	0.26
2	2 0.43	0.38
3	3 0.63	0.11
4	4 0.85	0.36
5	5 0.56	0.06
Mean	Mean 0.63	0.23

Table(6) The Facility Value (FV) of Items in Q2

Item	FV	Item	FV
1	0.21	6	0.28
2	0.35	7	0.20
3	0.10	8	0.23
4	0.56	9	0.11
5	0.18	10	0.25
Mean	0.24		

These tables show that the facility values of the test items range between (0.06) and (0.85) which are very apart and the mean of (FV) of the whole test is (0.33) which is acceptable.

5.2 The Results of the Test

The students performance in the test items of question one and question two can be shown in the following tables respectively:

Table (7): The students' Performance in Q1-A

Items	No of Correct responses	Percentage %	No of Incorrect Responses	Percentage %
1	42	70	18	30
2	26	43.3	34	56.7
3	38	63.3	22	36.7
4	51	85	9	15
5	34	56.6	26	43.4
Total	225	63.7 %	109	36.3 %

Table (8): The students' Performance in Q1-B

Items	No of Correct responses	Percentage %	No of Incorrect Responses	Percentage %
1	16	26.6	44	73.4
2	23	28.3	37	61.7
3	7	11.6	53	88.4
4	22	36.6	38	63.4
5	4	6.6	56	93.4
Total	72	24%	228	76%

Table (9): The Students' Performance in Q2

Items	No of Correct responses	Percentage %	N0 of Incorrect Responses	Percentage %
1	13	21.6	47	78.4
2	21	35	39	65
3	6	10	54	90
4	34	56.6	26	43.4
5	11	18.3	49	81.7
6	17	28.3	43	71.7
7	12	20	48	80
8	14	23.3	46	76.7
9	7	11.6	53	88.4
10	15	25	45	75
Total	150	24.7 %	450	75.3 %

The following table shows the results of the whole test:

Table(10): The Results of the Whole Test

Question	No of Correct responses	Percentage %	No of Incorrect Responses	Percentage %
One	297	43.9	337	56.1
Two	150	24.7	450	75.3
Total	447	34.3 %	787	65.7 %

These tables show the following:

1. The number and percentage of the incorrect responses in question one (337, 56.1 %) are more than those of correct responses (297, 439%). These results indicate that the students face difficulty in using noun clauses at the recognition level.

2. In question two, the number and percentage of incorrect responses (450, 75. 3%) are more than those of correct responses (150, 24.7%). These results show that the students find difficulty at the production level.

3. In the whole test, the number and percentage of the incorrect responses (787, 65.7%) are more than those of correct responses (447, 34.3%). These results indicate that the students encounter difficulty in using the topic under investigation.

5.3 Error Analysis

Richard et al. (1992: 126) mention that error analysis is carried out to identify the causes of learners' errors and to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning.

5.3.1 Sources of Errors

Students' errors can be attributed to the following four factors (Brown, 1987: 177)

5.3.1.1 Interlingual Transfer

Lado (1964: 86) mentions that this source of error results from the native influence of the mother language on the performance of the learners in using the foreign language. The learner resorts to his native language in an attempt to make up the deficiencies of his knowledge of the target language. Some of the students' responses to items (6) and (7) in question (2) are examples of this factor:

Item (6) They did not know how they should answer.

*She does not understand what is she doing.

Item (7) She does not know what to read.

*I do not know what doing.

Interlingual transfer accounts for (2.11%) of all students' errors.

5.3.1.2 Intralingual Transfer

According to Richards (1974: 6), intralingual errors are related to the items produced by the learners due to the generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The first factor which is related to intralingual transfer is the **overgeneralization** which is the incorrect application of the learned material to the

actual context of the foreign language. The examples of this factor can be found in the students' unability to respond to the items of question (2) such as items (1) and (3):
Item (1): They made him what he is.
      *They asked him how is he.
Item (3): She can't talk without giving evidence.
      *She spoke about what was she doing.
The second factor is the **ignorance of restrictions** in which the learner applies some rule to a category to which it is not applicable. Some students' responses to item (5) in question (2) is an example of this factor:
Item (5): Your question, why she did not attend the lecture, has not been answered.
*The problem, how does she arrive is very complex.
The third factor is the **incomplete applications of rules** in which the learner finds that he can make effective communication by using simple rules. The students' failure to respond correctly to the items (2), (8) and (9) in question (2) are examples of this factor. The fourth factor is the **false concept hypothesized** which comes from the faulty comprehension of a distinction in the foreign language. The examples of this factor can be seen in the students' failure in their distinction between the finite and nonfinite noun clauses represented in their responses to the items (2) and (5) in question (1-A). Intralingual transfer accounts for (82. 81%) of all students' errors.

5.3.1.3 Context of Learning

Errors may also result from the passive effect of the situation of learning which has the undesired effect of motivating the learner to make faulty hypotheses about the language (Ibid: 178). Our students' textbooks do not provide enough learning opportunities for the distinction of finite and nonfinite clauses as well as the functions of noun clauses. The examples of this factor can be found in some students' responses to the items (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5).In both sections (A) and (B) of question one. This factor accounts for (5.27%) of all students' errors.

5.3.1.4 Communication Strategies

Farch and kasper (1983: 14) state that these strategies are used by the learner to solve what presents itself as a problem in reading a particular communicative goal. Some of these strategies such as 'guessing' can be found in the students' responses to the items (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5) in question (1-A). This factor accounts for (9.81%) of all students' errors.

6. Conclusions

The noun clause is a dependent clause which works like a noun. It is one of the essential constructions in English grammar and a problematic area for the Iraqi EFL university learners.

A diagnostic test has been applied to a random sample of Iraqi EFL university students (60 students) taken from the Department of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ University of Babylon to investigate their performance in the area of noun clauses in English. According to the results of the test, the total number and percentage of the incorrect responses (787, 65.7%) are more than those of correct responses (447, 34.3%). These results indicate that the students face difficulty in using noun clauses in English which, in turn, confirm the hypothesis of the study.

The following factors can be considered as the sources behind the poor performance of the students:
a.Intralingual transfer which constitutes the highest frequent error source in the data. It accounts for (82.817) of all students' errors.
b. The students' use of communicative strategies is the second rate of errors (9.81%).

c. The effect of the context of learning constitutes (5.27)which is the third rate of errors.

d. Interlingual interference constitutes (2.11%) which is the fourth rate.

To overcome the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL university students in using the topic under investigation, the following points can be suggested in this regard:

a. Due attention should be giving to teaching noun clauses in English as it is a problematic area for Iraqi EFL university learners.

b.The learners should be exposed to a variety of texts to ensure that they can distinguish between finite and nonfinite clauses as well as the different functions the noun clauses can have in the sentence.

c. Teachers and textbook writers should focus on the importance of presentation of finite and nonfinite noun clauses and their functions in the sentence.

d. Teachers have to adopt remedial works to simplify the process of learning and exercises to enhance the learners' receptive and productive knowledge.

e. More emphasis should be given to the topic under investigation at all levels of education.

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Appendix I: The Test

Q1/A. Underline the noun clauses in the following sentences and identify whether they are finite or nonfinite:
1. The idea is that we should leave on Sunday.
2. She does not know how she should answer.
3. My wish is to be a teacher.
4. I don't know how he will get the money.
5. She enjoys playing tennis.

Q1/B. Underline the noun clauses in the following sentences and show their functions:
1. They have made him what he is.
2. I don't know what to do.
3. The news that he was alive proved to be true.
4. Her first interest is reading books.
5. It depends on whether he will help me.

Q2/ Exemplify the following:
1. a finite noun clause acts as an object complement
2. a finite noun clause acts as an indirect object
3. a nonfinite acts as an object to a preposition
4. a nonfinite noun clause acts as a subject
5. a finite noun clause acts as an appositive
6. a finite noun clause acts as a direct object
7. a nonfinite noun clause acts a direct object
8. a nonfinite noun clause acts as a subject complement
9. a nonfinite noun clause acts as an apposition
10.a finite noun clause acts as a subject complement

Appendix II: The Answers of the Test
Q1/ A
1. finite
2. finite
3. nonfinite
4. finite
5. nonfinite
Q1/B
1. what he is.   (object complement)
2. what to do.   (direct object)
3. that he was alive. (apposition)
4. reading books. (subject complement)
5. whether he will help me. (completive to a preposition)
Q2/
1. They have made him what he is.
2. She told us that there are troubles in the occupied land.
3. She can't talk without giving evidence.
4. To know her is to like her.
5. Your question, why she did not attend the lecture, has not been answered.
6. They did not know how they should answer.
7. She does not know what to reed.
8. To know her is to love her.
9. Your assumption, that things will improve, is unfound.
10.The golden rule is that there are no golden rules.