

THE USE OF DEPENDENT CLAUSES IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG MỆNH ĐỀ PHỤ TRONG VIẾT TIẾNG ANH HỌC THUẬT

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ABSTRACT

In English writing, understanding the function and use of dependent clauses contributes significantly to students' ability to fully and accurately convey ideas. This study examined the use of dependent clauses in 111 essays from the end-of-term writing test by English majors at the University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS). The quantitative method was applied to explore the kinds of dependent clauses and identify the syntactic errors that students committed. The findings indicate that adjectival clauses were the most common type, followed by roughly equal frequency of nominal clauses and adverbial clauses. Five kinds of errors are also identified, namely errors of selection, addition, omission, errors of verb conjugation and errors of expression. From these findings, students who are preparing for English academic writing tests, as well as English teachers and learners in general, can apply some pedagogical implications for teaching and learning English writing skills.

Keywords: *Academic writing, dependent clauses, English writing, error analysis.*

TÓM TẮT

Trong kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh, việc nắm vững chức năng và cách sử dụng mệnh đề phụ đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc giúp học sinh diễn đạt ý tưởng một cách đầy đủ và chính xác. Nghiên cứu này khảo sát việc sử dụng mệnh đề phụ trong 111 bài luận cuối kỳ của sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ (ULIS). Phương pháp nghiên cứu định lượng được áp dụng nhằm khám phá các loại mệnh đề phụ sinh viên sử dụng và xác định những lỗi cú pháp mà sinh viên mắc phải. Nghiên cứu tìm ra mệnh đề tính ngữ là loại phổ biến nhất, mệnh đề danh ngữ và trạng ngữ có tần suất sử dụng gần như nhau. Năm loại lỗi được xác định gồm: lỗi lựa chọn, lỗi thừa, lỗi thiếu, lỗi chia động từ và lỗi diễn đạt, từ đó sinh viên đang chuẩn bị cho bài kiểm tra viết học thuật, giáo viên và người học tiếng Anh có thể áp dụng các gợi ý tư phạm vào việc dạy và học viết tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: *Viết học thuật, mệnh đề phụ, viết tiếng Anh, phân tích lỗi sai.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the language learning process, the four skills of language, including Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, are a set of skills that enable the learners to absorb and produce language for effective interpersonal communication. Due to their different processes involved, these four skills of language learning are divided into two types: receptive skills and productive

skills. As reading and listening aid learners in receiving information, they are considered the receptive skills. Speaking and writing, therefore, are productive skills because they involve the process of generating words, sentences and paragraphs.

Of the two skills regarded as productive ones, written language requires learners to use their hands and brains to create the written symbols to represent their ideas and

opinions, which greatly contributes to proper and effective communication. Even though Vietnamese students stand a good chance of being exposed to English, especially grammar at the early stage, they are still put under great pressure to obtain a satisfactory result when it comes to writing, in which grammatical competence plays a crucial role. According to Cambridge Assessment English, there are a lot of factors needed to generate a high-quality writing paper, which can be grouped into the criteria, namely task fulfilment, logical organization of information, and good control of vocabulary and grammar. Regarding the requirements, it is essential that learners be able to utilize various types of sentences, especially complicated ones, to express their thoughts as clearly as possible. Particularly, dependent clauses serve as a pivotal part of complex sentences, one type of sentence needed in any good piece of writing.

The analysis of dependent clauses can no longer be regarded as a novel line of inquiry, as it has been extensively investigated in prior research. For instance, one study examined students' errors in comprehending dependent clauses through multiple-choice test formats [1].

Another study conducted by Gustira, Eliza, and Artika analyzed learners' use of relative clauses in academic writing and reported a range of error types, such as omission, addition, and misordering [2]. Their findings suggest that difficulties with dependent clause structures remain evident in authentic learner-produced texts. Likewise, Mora investigated complex sentence use in EFL students' writing and observed a substantial number of errors in subordinate clauses, particularly in noun, adverbial, and adjectival clauses [3]. This indicates that learners continue to experience challenges in constructing dependent clauses accurately in extended written discourse. Similarly, research conducted by Hendrawaty reported that 67.67% of writing errors occurred in complex and compound-complex sentences, which inherently involve dependent clauses [4]. In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen Quynh Chi's study at ULIS-VNU also provided an in-depth examination of sophomore students' use of dependent clauses in academic writing [5]. However, there are not many concerning the error analysis of those dependent clauses when students complete an essay. Students can master grammatical knowledge when it comes to some selected response tasks. However, when dealing with writing tasks at a higher level of assessment, they are more likely to

have difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentence structures, even those who are English majors. Therefore, the researchers, with a view to bridging the gap of those previous researches, decided to focus on the sentence types by scrutinizing the use of dependent clauses in students' essays and some problems students may encounter when using them. To achieve the aims, the researchers sought the answers to the following two research questions:

1. What kinds of dependent clauses can English majors use in their essays?
2. What are the problems those students meet with the most commonly used dependent clause type?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Dependent clauses

Quirk and Greenbaum define dependent clauses as nominal clauses, adjectival clauses and adverbial clauses according to their functions [6].

Nominal clause

According to Greenbaum and Nelson, nominal clauses are subordinate clauses that have a range of functions similar to that of noun phrases [7]. "A dependent clause that functions as a noun in a sentence is called a noun clause" [8]. Since a nominal clause functions like a noun in a sentence, it can act as a subject, an object (direct or indirect) or as an appositive in a sentence. It is a type of subordinate clause, so it can not stand alone. As a subject, nominal clauses are likely to stand before the main verb, and as an object, this type of clause may tend to stand after the main verb. There are three main types of nominal clauses:

Noun clauses beginning with a question word (Wh-interrogative clause)

Eg: What she said surprised me.

Noun clauses beginning with "whether" or "if" (Yes/no - interrogative clause)

Eg: I don't know if she comes or not.

Noun clauses beginning with "that" (That clause)

Eg: That she comes from England is very important.

Adjectival clause

According to Greenbaum and Nelson [7], an adjectival clause or relative clause functions as a post-modifier in a noun phrase. The adjectival clause or relative clause does the work of an adjective that qualifies a noun, or a pronoun [8]. A relative clause is a dependent clause

specifying or giving information about someone or something. In the sentence, a relative clause comes after a noun or pronoun and often starts with a relative pronoun such as 'who', 'which', or 'that' [9]. There are two types of adjectival clauses [6], namely defining adjectival clauses and non-defining adjectival clauses.

Adverbial clause

Adverbial clauses are often in the position of the adverbial element in sentence or clause structure [9]. An adverbial clause functions as an adverb that modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb; and this clause usually denotes time, place, cause or reason, effect or result, extent, manner, comparison, contrast, condition, or purpose [8].

2.2. Error analysis

2.2.1. The significance of error analysis

Corder concurs that it is important to identify the learners' errors first, then comes the process of analyzing those errors [10]. Basically, errors can be distinguished as two main types:

- **Unsystematic Errors:** also known as mistakes. They do not occur from any system but they are usually accidental, which are not made regularly.

- **Systematic Errors:** also known as errors. Those errors occur systematically, which are made regularly and consistently.

To determine whether the errors are unsystematic or systematic requires long-term observation from the researchers. However, since it is a cross-sectional study, which involves looking at data from a population at one specific point in time, it is impossible to categorize those problems in sentence writing into mistakes or errors. The term "errors with dependent clauses" is henceforth used in this paper to refer to any problems of using dependent clauses encountered by students, regardless of whether those problems are unsystematic or systematic.

2.2.2. Types of errors

According to Corder, the errors should be divided based on surface category, including errors of omission, errors of addition, errors of selection and mis-ordering errors [10]:

- **Omission:** Some elements of the sentence, which should have been present, are omitted

- **Addition:** Some elements of the sentence, which should not have been present, are added.

- **Selection:** Some wrong items have been chosen in place of the right one.

- **Misordering:** Some elements presented are correct, but in the wrong sequence

In this study, to analyze the types of writing errors committed by FELTE students, the classification by Corder [10] as mentioned above was used, thanks to its widespread adoption in previous studies [1, 11, 12, 13].

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The research context

As mentioned in the Introduction, the data of this study were collected at ULIS. All the writings used as data were products of a writing course which was taught in the third academic year. Students were required to write a 250-word essay of various types (argumentative, discussion, cause-effect, and problem-solution), which was assessed based on four main criteria, including:

(1) *Task fulfillment:* whether students have met all requirements of the task or not;

(2) *Organization:* whether their writing is well-structured regarding coherence and cohesion;

(3) *Vocabulary:* whether the candidate can utilize a wide range of lexical items in a flexible and controlled manner;

(4) *Grammar:* whether the candidate can produce grammatically correct sentences and the use of various sentence types such as simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences.

3.2. Sampling

Non-probability sampling, particularly convenience sampling, has been used as the sampling method of this research paper. According to Creswell [14], the traits of the non-probability sampling method can be summarized as "the researcher selects individuals because they are available, convenient, and represent some characteristic the investigator seeks to study" (p.145). Among many types of non-probability sampling, convenience sampling, a common non-probability sampling method, has been employed in this study because of its speed, cost-effectiveness, and ease of availability of the sample.

In this research, 111 writing pieces of the end-of-term test (essay writing) were analyzed. As these essays had already been graded and stored in the faculty's repository, they are available for research purposes. Therefore, the data collection process is also much more time-saving and cost-effective without time spent on

questionnaire designing and participation payments to research volunteers.

3.3. Research design

To address the research questions, a quantitative method was employed, for it allows quick data collection and efficient processing, which suited the limited timeframe [11].

3.4. Analytical framework

The researchers followed the framework by Quirk and Greenbaum [6] to identify all the dependent clauses used in the academic writings. For the analysis of errors, the framework by Corder [10] was used in an adaptive way, which means the newly emerged errors might be added during the data analysis process. The analysis results, therefore, might include more types of errors than what Corder [10] proposed.

3.5. Data analysis

Step 1: Pre-analysis data processing: After being collected, students' writings were kept in six PDF document files, both online and offline. The essays were given a number each (from Essay 1 (E1) to Essay 111 (E111) for the convenience of future reference.

Step 2: Syntactic analysis: The researchers functioned as independent coders, who independently analyzed each writing piece, detecting and numbering sentences containing dependent clauses. After that, those dependent clauses would be categorized into 3 types based on their function (nominal, adverbial and adjectival). The independent analysis results were then compared among five coders. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the results were checked by an English linguistic teacher who had been teaching English Syntax for 26 years.

Step 3: Error analysis: In the same way, dependent clause error analysis was also conducted independently by researchers. As researchers were non-native speakers of English, two separate experienced teachers of English (one with 17 years and the other with 26 years of experience in teaching English) were consulted for the identification of the errors.

Step 4: Quantitative tool employment: The statistics were noted in an Excel file for manual calculation. In addition to the number of each dependent clause presented in students' writings, the percentage that they comprise was also counted. Also, the numbers and types of errors were calculated.

Subsequent to the data analysis process, the findings were presented and discussed according to the two research questions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Answer to research question 1: What kinds of dependent clauses can English majors use in their essays?

The first research question deals with the students' ability to use the three clause types in their academic writing. Generally, all three types of clauses, namely nominal, adverbial and adjectival, were identified in the students' writings. The findings of clause types classification taken from students' writings can be shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The use of 3 clause types in students' essays

Clause type	Number of clauses	Percentage (%)
Adjectival	486	49.2
Nominal	252	25.5
Adverbial	250	25.3
TOTAL	988	100

Table 1 illustrates the number and percentage of each clause type among a total of 988 clauses. From what has been thoroughly analyzed, it can be concluded that among the three types of dependent clauses used by the students, adjectival clauses are the most common type (49.2%), followed by nominal clauses (25.5%) and adverbial clauses (25.3%).

Nominal clauses

Table 2. The use of nominal clauses in terms of structure

Nominal clause type	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
That-clause	238	94.4
Wh-interrogative clause	14	5.6
Yes-no interrogative clause	0	0
TOTAL	252	100

Among the 252 nominal clauses identified, students employed only two structural types: that-clauses (94.4%) and wh-interrogative clauses (5.6%). Yes-No interrogative did not occur, suggesting limited structural variation (Table 2).

Regarding function, nominal clauses were mostly used as adjectival complements (31.7%), subject complements (27.4%), and direct objects (26.5%).

Appositive clauses accounted for 9.9%, while uses as prepositional complements (2.8%) and subjects (1.6%) were frequent. No instances of nominal clauses functioning as indirect objects were found (Table 3).

Table 3. The use of nominal clauses in terms of function

Nominal clause functions	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Adjectival complement	80	31.7
Subject complement	69	27.4
Direct object	67	26.6
Appositive	25	9.9
Prepositional complement	7	2.8
Subject	4	1.6
Indirect object	0	0
TOTAL	252	100

Adjectival clauses

Table 4. The use of adjectival clauses in terms of structure

Adjectival clause type	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Defining adjectival clauses	383	78.8
Non-defining adjectival clauses	103	21.2
TOTAL	486	100

In terms of adjectival clauses (or relative clauses), a total of 486 clauses were found in students' writings (Table 4). Though both defining and non-defining clauses were used by the students, a huge difference in the number of clauses of these two types was noticed. Specifically, 383 occurrences of defining adjectival clauses had been recorded, which made up a significant proportion (78.8%). The non-defining clauses used were 103, accounting for 21.2%.

Table 5. The use of defining adjectival clauses in terms of function

Defining adjectival clauses	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Replacement of the subject	278	72.6
Replacement of the object	88	22.9
Defining adjectival clauses with relative adverbs	16	4.2
Replacement of possessive	1	0.3
TOTAL	383	100

There were a total of 383 dependent clauses used as defining adjectival clauses. A glance at Table 5 above reveals that students tend to put a priority on the

function of Replacement of the subject with 72.6%. Replacement of object won the second place with 22.9%, followed by the function of defining adjectival clauses with relative adverbs with 4.2%. Replacement of possessives was the least, with just 1 sentence employing this function, accounting for 0.3%.

Table 6. The use of non-defining adjectival clauses in terms of function

Non-defining adjectival clause	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Sentential clauses	99	96.1
Replacement of the subject	4	3.9
Replacement of the object	0	0
Replacement of possessive	0	0
Non-defining adjectival clauses with relative adverbs	0	0
TOTAL	104	100

In comparison to the number of defining clauses used, there was just a modest number of 104 non-defining clauses appearing in all essays. Not all the functions can be employed. As can be seen from Table 6, Sentential clauses were the dominant function used with an overwhelming 96.1%. The proportion of replacement of subject (3.9%) was the second largest; meanwhile, there was no sentence reported to be used as replacement of objective, possessive and non-defining adjectival clauses with relative adverbs.

Adverbial clauses

Table 7. The use of adverbial clauses

Type of adverbial clause	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Clause of time	70	28
Clause of reason	61	24.4
Clause of concession	51	20.4
Clause of condition	46	18.4
Clause of purpose	10	4
Clause of contrast	7	2.8
Clause of place	3	1.2
Clause of manner	2	0.8
Clause of similarity	0	0
TOTAL	250	100

A total of 250 adverbial clauses were recorded to appear in students' writing. It is obviously seen from Table 7 that the clause of time and the clause of reason

are the most frequently applied functions, with 28% and 24.4% correspondingly. This is closely followed by the clause of concession (20.4%) and the clause of condition (18.4%). The other three functions (clause of purpose, clause of contrast, clauses of place and clause of manner) account for a minority of percentage, which are 4%, 2.8%, 1.2% and 0.8% respectively.

4.1.2. Answer to research question 2: What are the problems those students meet with the most commonly used dependent clauses?

To analyze the error occurring in adjectival clauses, the researchers based their analysis on the theory of Corder [10]. Moreover, it is worth noting that two types of error had not been mentioned in Corder's theory. The researchers named these two as errors of *verb conjugation* and errors of *expression*. Detailed categorization will be shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Type of error in writing adjectival clauses

Type of error	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Selection	61	57.1
Verb conjugation	26	24.3
Omission	15	14
Addition	4	3.7
Expression	1	0.9
Misordering	0	0
TOTAL	107	100

Among the 107 incorrect adjectival clauses, errors of selection were the most frequent (57.1%). These errors involved inappropriate grammatical choices, including confusion in reducing relative clauses (e.g. misuse of present vs. past participles), incorrect distinction between defining and non-defining relative clauses, and misuse of relative pronouns. The frequent confusion between defining and non-defining clauses suggests that students struggled with discourse-level distinctions, such as noun definiteness and the use of punctuation, despite prior exposure to these structures.

The second most common error type was verb conjugation (24.3%). These errors typically involved subject-verb agreement within relative clauses or the incorrect use of verb forms. Such mistakes may reflect students' difficulty in identifying the true grammatical subject in complex sentences or lapses in attention during writing.

Errors of omission accounted for 14% of the total and were mainly related to the omission of obligatory relative pronouns, particularly in subject-relative clauses where omission is grammatically unacceptable. Errors of addition (3.7%) occurred when students retained an object in the clause despite the presence of a relative pronoun that already fulfilled that grammatical role. Finally, errors of expression (0.9%) were rare and involved grammatically correct but pragmatically or stylistically unnatural clause constructions, indicating issues of appropriateness rather than form.

4.2. Discussions

Overall, the findings of research question 1 show that students were able to use all three major types of dependent clauses, with a clear preference for adjectival clauses, particularly defining relative clauses. This study's findings about the use of dependent clauses resonate with the conclusion of Nguyen Quynh Chi [5], in that, regarding the structural classification, the participants appear to focus on certain types only. For instance, they tend to prioritize That-clauses when using nominal clauses, and defining relative clauses is in favor when it comes to adjectival clauses. In addition, the results of the present study are in line with those reported by Lestari (2025), who found that complex clauses occur more frequently than simplex clauses across various text types, including argumentative, descriptive, and narrative texts [16]. They further noted the prevalence of adjectival clauses in argumentative writing. However, what makes the findings of this study different is that it also digs deep into the use of those clauses' functions instead of the structure only. The findings, therefore, reveal that even in terms of functions, there still exists a limitation on the equal distribution. Particularly, students also tend to concentrate on certain functions, such as adjectival and subject complement (nominal clauses), reason and time (adverbial clauses), as well as replacement of subject and sentential clauses (relative clauses).

Regarding research question 2, the findings about errors in adjectival clauses are in line with the conclusion of Putra [1] in the aspect of error types. Also following Corder's [10] framework of error analysis, his research showed that students' errors could be divided into Replacement (or Selection), Addition, and Omission, with Selection being the most popular type of error. There is an absence of misordering errors in his research, which is also similar to the findings of this study. In contrast, Subekti's [17] document analysis of 40 student essays

reported additional error types, including incorrect verb formations (e.g. double finite verbs) and combinations of multiple errors, which were not found in the essays examined in this study. What distinguishes the present study, however, is the identification of further error categories, such as verb conjugation and errors of expression. The inclusion of expression-related errors indicates that the analysis extends beyond grammatical accuracy to consider the appropriateness of relative clause use in context. The study's findings are also comparable to Nguyen Quynh Chi's [5] as they both concurred that students tend to misuse two types of adjectival clauses - defining and non-defining. From that point, it might be predicted that those problems in using adjectival clauses are due to their lack of practice in writing those clauses (selection, addition, omission), carelessness and also the interference of their mother tongue as well (verb conjugation). Since the participants are anonymous, the researchers cannot figure out the exact sources of error committed. Therefore, these conclusions about the error sources are just based on the prediction of the researchers.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Recapitulation

This study investigated English majors' use of dependent clauses in essay writing, focusing on the types of clauses employed and the problems associated with the most frequently used type. The result shows that students used all three major types of dependent clauses; however, their distribution was uneven. Adjectival clauses accounted for the largest proportion of usage (49.2%), whereas nominal and adverbial clauses were used considerably less frequently (25.5% and 25.3%, respectively). This imbalance suggests that students tend to rely heavily on adjectival clauses while demonstrating more limited engagement with other clause types that are essential for expressing complex ideas in academic writing.

Although adjectival clauses were the most frequently used, their high occurrence did not correspond to accurate or flexible use. Error analysis revealed a range of problems, including selection, addition, and omission, as categorized by Corder [10], as well as errors related to verb conjunction and inappropriate expression. The persistence of these errors indicates that students' difficulties are not merely performance-based but may reflect deeper issues in grammatical competence. Such problems can be attributed to several interrelated factors,

including limited opportunities for extended writing practice, negative transfer from the first language, and insufficient awareness of the functional roles of adjectival clauses in academic discourse.

5.2. Pedagogical implications

For English-major students, the results can guide their development of writing skills by highlighting the importance of using dependent clause types effectively and avoiding common errors. The study also serves as a useful reference *for future teachers*, enabling them to better identify learners' recurring grammatical problems related to dependent clauses.

For teachers of language practice, the research provides practical and reliable insights into students' current understanding and challenges in using dependent clauses. Such information can inform instructional decisions, facilitating teachers in adjusting teaching methods, reducing students' errors in complex sentence construction, and enhancing overall writing proficiency.

For teachers of English Linguistics, the study contributes relevant findings to the fields of Syntax and dependent clause analysis. The results function as a form of needs analysis, which offers evidence of students' mastery and remaining gaps in using dependent clauses. This can support more targeted lesson planning and more effective instruction in linguistic courses.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study still presents certain limitations due to the constraints of time and human resources. The corpus of 111 essays is relatively small, limiting its representativeness and suggesting the need for larger datasets in future research. Also, in analyzing dependent clause types, the researchers focused mainly on key subtypes, which may have excluded other relevant forms. Additionally, the anonymity of the scripts and time constraints prevented interviews with students to clarify the causes of their errors. Future studies may employ narrative or longitudinal methods to obtain deeper insights into learners' error-making processes.

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THÔNG TIN TÁC GIẢ

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