

# FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION TO IDENTIFY CATEGORY OF CLAUSES: THE CASE OF LEBANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ESL

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**Resumen:** Un área de gramática que desafía a los estudiantes universitarios de primer año de inglés como segundo idioma ESL en la Universidad Libanesa es las oraciones. En una clase de instrucción centrada en la forma, los estudiantes de ESL suelen hacer bien en la construcción de oraciones adjetivas, y de alguna manera en las oraciones de adverbio, así, sin embargo, se enfrentan a dificultades en la construcción de oraciones nominales. Otro desafío mayor aparece cuando se pide a los estudiantes que identifiquen el tipo de la oración, especialmente cuando se usa el mismo pronombre relativo, como “cuándo” o “dónde”, para construir los tres tipos de oraciones: adjetivo, adverbio y sustantivo. Siguiendo el enfoque cuasi-experimental cuantitativo, a través de un pre y un post-test, el presente estudio investigó estos desafíos con ilustraciones del trabajo de los estudiantes, que hace el corpus de este estudio, y proporciona un análisis lingüístico cognitivo y análisis meta-cognitivo, para resolver este problema. Prosigue con la exploración de técnicas de enseñanza basadas en las características lingüísticas idiosincrásicas de cada tipo, en un intento de capacitar a los estudiantes para diferenciar entre los tres tipos.

**Palabras clave:** cláusulas, análisis meta-cognitivo, adquisición del lenguaje, instrucción enfocada en la forma

**Abstract:** One area of grammar that challenges first year university learners of English as a second language ESL at the Lebanese university is clauses. In a form-focused- instruction class, ESL learners usually do well on constructing adjective clauses and somehow on adverb clauses as well, yet they face difficulty in constructing noun clauses. Another greater challenge appears when learners are asked to identify the type of the clause especially when the same relative pronoun, such as “where” or “when”, is used in constructing the three types of clauses, namely adjective, adverb and noun. Following the quasi-experimental quantitative approach, via a pre- and a post-test, the present study investigated these challenges with illustrations of students’ work, which makes the corpus of this study, and provides a linguistics analysis, cognitive and meta-cognitive analysis, to solve this problem. It proceeds with exploring teaching techniques based on the idiosyncratic linguistic feature of each type in an attempt to enable learners to differentiate between the three types of clauses.

**Key-words:** clauses, meta-cognitive analysis, language acquisition, form-focused instruction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Noun, adjective and adverb clauses have specific syntactic structures and positions in a sentence. Mastering them and being able to identify the type of each has proved to be an uneasy job. These dependent clauses render sentences complex in the sense that each of these clauses depends on the matrix clause to complete its meaning. In another sense, these clauses are complex structures to learners of English as a second language as is the case in this study.

Lebanese university learners encounter difficulty not only in identifying clauses but also in verifying their choice of the type despite the fact that they use these complex structures while speaking or reading. Majoring in English language, learners are to grasp and use linguistic terminology; that is, they are expected to identify category of clauses and verify their responses.

On the lexical level, the difficulty evolves roughly from using some same subordinators<sup>1</sup> in forming these clauses. The relative pronouns *where* and *when*, for example, are used to form all three types of clauses. The relative pronoun *that* is used to form adjective and noun clauses in addition to adverb clauses if other lexical elements are added like *so* to *that*. Syntactically, all these clauses stand as dependent clauses on the matrix clause. Such clauses are also referred to as embedded. Endley (2010: 367) elaborates on the function of a matrix in a complex type of a sentence:

The matrix clause determines the central situation of the construction. It casts its syntactic and semantic 'shadow,' as we might say, over the situation described by the clause that follows. So the situation described in the embedded clause is contained by, and functions as an element of, the situation described by the matrix clause. [...] Care must be taken here, however; while by definition, every embedded clause must be subordinate, not every matrix clause is a main clause [emphasis added].

Endley (2010: 366) presents Example [1] to illustrate his notion about the overlapping function of the matrix clause. The clause *that the student said* is the first embedded clause in the sentence and depends on the matrix<sup>2</sup> clause *The professor wrote*. The second embedded clause *that he had done a lot of reading* depends on the matrix clause which precedes it. In this sense, the clause *that the student said* is both embedded and matrix.

[1]

The professor wrote that the student said that he had done a lot of reading.

MAIN CLAUSE    EMBEDDED CLAUSE (1)    EMBEDDED CLAUSE (2)  
MATRIX (1)                                  MATRIX (2)

Such examples as in [1] pose another greater challenge to students in determining the matrix clause of each dependent clause.

<sup>1</sup>The term *subordinator* is used in this paper to include relative pronouns, wh-words.

<sup>2</sup>The *matrix* is another term for *main clause* or "*superordinate clause*" (Quirk et al, 1985).

Yet, another major problem resides in cleftability in sentences. In some constructions, a cleft clause is considered a relative clause<sup>3</sup> and in others, a noun clause. Huddleston and Pullum (2006: 211) consider the cleft clause *that I can't stand* in [2] as a relative clause. Similarly, Quirk et al. (1985: 744) consider *to which I gave the water* in [3] as a post-modifying relative clause. However, the cleft clause (*that*) *I first noticed it* in [4] is considered by Quirk et al. (1985: 744) as a noun clause. The analysis of such structures detours into considering topical and focused elements, which is beyond the scope of this study. Yet, considering the same relative pronoun *that* used in [2] and [4], in the first as an adjective clause and in the second as a noun clause creates category identification problem to learners.

[2] It was Kim *that I can't stand* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2006: 211).

[3] It was the dog *to which I gave the water* (Quirk et al. 1985: 774).

[4] It was in September (*that*) *I first noticed it* (Quirk et al. 1985: 774).

[5] I'll eat *what's left* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2006: 211).

The clause *what's left* in [5] is referred to as "fused relative" (Huddleston and Pullum, 2006: 212) since the relative pronoun *what* fuses the nominal element in the matrix clause with the subject in the relative clause. He reads the whole phrase as *I'll eat that which is left*. Thus, he considers *what's left* as a noun phrase NP, and not a clause. In this sense, all fused-like structures are relative clauses. This is an area which poses a predicament to learners.

## 2. PROCEDURE AND METHODOLOGY

Considering such grammatical dilemmas with clauses and constructions is an eye-opener to teachers and learners. With the advent of form-focused instruction class, such difficulties in Lebanese learners' language were revealed, especially that they are majoring in English language. Broadly speaking, the form-focused instruction class focuses on language features to be taught. This strategy has always undergone controversy whether to teach grammar explicitly or implicitly or even to teach grammar in the first place. Krashen (1981), who was an opponent to teaching grammar, modified his view upon considering the age of SL learners (Krashen, 2003: 8). That is, high school learners or older may benefit from explicit grammar instruction in comparison to those who are younger and can acquire language roughly like the native language.

Rod Ellis (2005: 10-20) highlighted ten principles to consider while applying the form-focused instruction approach. These principles received much attention identifying a shift to meaningful grammar teaching rather than incidental and implicit grammar teaching instruction. The principles that are most relevant to this study are focusing on form and meaning while highlighting the importance of input, output, and students' built-in syllabus.

<sup>3</sup>*Relative clause and adjective clause* are used interchangeably in this study.

**2.1. Populations**

206 first year Lebanese university students constituted the population of this study. Their ages ranged mainly between 18 and 20 years. The majority of the students are females. Academically, the participants passed the Lebanese Official Exam, BAC II and finished 12 years of basic education, in which English was taught not only in the English subject, but also in the scientific subjects. They also passed the entrance exam to major in English language. It is worth noting that attendance is not obligatory, which might affect the results.

**2.2. Instruments**

This quasi-experimental research study includes a pre-test and a post-test. Actually, the pre-test was the diagnostic exam, which is usually run before any course, and the post-test is the final exam.

In the course entitled “Modern English Grammar”, learners sat for a pre-test and a post-test that included several test items, one of which was about clauses. Figure [1] presents the question about clauses in the pre-test and Figure [2] presents that in the post-test. The instruction required three actions on the behalf of the learner: underlining, identifying and verifying.

<p><b>Underline</b> the dependent clause in each of the following sentences, <b>identify</b> its type and <b>verify</b> your choice.</p> <p>[S1] Imagine you are at a party where you know several people.</p> <p>[S2] The issue was again discussed by the committee where everyone was seated.</p> <p>[S3] The police asked where we had hidden the money.</p>
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Figure [1]. The test item about dependent clauses in the pre-test

The sentences chosen include the same subordinator (relative pronoun) *where*. Cleft clauses are avoided. Punctuation is also avoided especially when it comes to restrictive or non-restrictive<sup>4</sup> relative clauses. Each of these sentences contains only one embedded clause. The same type of clause is not repeated.

<p><b>Underline</b> the dependent clause in each of the following sentences, <b>identify</b> its type and <b>verify</b> your choice.</p> <p>1. The place where we used to spend our vacation is now a private resort.</p> <p>2. Can you imagine where this will take us?</p> <p>3. Where you go, I go.</p>
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Figure [2]. The test item about dependent clauses in the post-test

**2.3. Result and Analysis**

In response to this question in the pre-test, 14 students out of 206 did not solve this exercise. The rest had different approaches. Some just underlined, correctly or incorrectly, without responding to the other two actions. Others underlined and identified the type without verification. Few are those who responded to the three parts of the instruction. Students’ responses to this question are tabulated in Table [1] and are analyzed.

In response to the first action in the instruction – *underlining*, 150 out of 192 correctly underlined the clauses. The rest had different responses: not underlining at all, underlining the subordinator only, underlining one or two dependent clauses, or underlining the independent clause.

	Underline	Identify	Verify
<b>Adjective clauses</b>	150	54	18
<b>Adverb clauses</b>		35	4
<b>Noun clauses</b>		52	9

Table [1]. Students’ responses to the instruction in the pre-test

In response to identifying and verifying the type, 54 students were able to identify adjective clauses but only 18 verified correctly; 35 students recognized adverb clauses and only 4 verified correctly; and 52 detected the noun clause but only 9 verified correctly. Some students only underlined the dependent clause but did not attempt to respond to the other two parts of the instruction.

In the post-test, which was the final exam at the end of the semester and included test items relevant to everything covered in the course including clauses, learners’ performance was significantly better. The results tabulated in Table [2], show a substantial change in identifying and verifying scientifically each type of clauses.

	Underline	Identify	Verify
<b>Adjective clauses</b>	153	131	96
<b>Adverb clauses</b>		110	62
<b>Noun clauses</b>		82	37

Table [2]. Students’ responses to the instruction in the post-test

198 students sat for the post-test and only 8 did not respond to this test item. In the underlining, the underlining is relatively equal. However, the majority of mistakes, which are 37, are related to underlining the adjective clause. Example [6] exemplifies how learners underlined the adjective clause along with the predicate of the matrix clause.

[6] The place *where we used to spend our vacation* is now a private resort.

The progress is manifested in the successful number of identification of clauses and verification of the type in comparison to the results of the pre-test. 131 learners were able to identify the adjective clause and 96 of them gave proper verification to their answers. As to identification of adverb clauses, 110 learners successfully identified the clause but only 62 verified correctly. The lowest number is in the identification of noun clauses; only 82 were able to identify correctly and only 37 learners provided proper verification.

Though the results of the post-test are better mainly in learners’ ability to identify and verify their choice, they show that learners still have a major problem with noun clauses. Based on learners’ responses, they seem to have confused noun clauses with adjective clauses due to fused relatives and with adverb clauses because of overlapping information relevant to what is an adjunct and a constituent.

<sup>4</sup> Restrictive clause means defining and non-restrictive clause means non-defining.

The results would have been even better if the post-test had been administered directly after the introduction of form-focused instruction and the cognitive and meta-cognitive analytical strategies. Yet, postponing the post-test gives an idea of what learners have retained and how their minds work, especially long-term memory.

### 3. STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY CLAUSES

The results of the diagnostic exam show a critical case in identifying the type of clauses on one hand and in verifying the choice on the other. These results were the drive behind seeking linguistic, cognitive and meta-cognitive analytical strategies.

Since the clauses are limited to three: adjective, noun and adverb. A proper strategy to adopt while distinguishing between these clauses is to start eliminating one option after another: starting with adjective clause, then adverb clause and finally noun clause.

#### 3.1. Adjective clauses

To identify an adjective clause, students need to refer to its function and syntactic position in the sentence. Adjectives modify their preceding antecedent, which is a “nominal element” (Quirk et al, 1985: 774). Figure [3] demonstrates how to verify the adjective clause in Example [S1] by linking it to its antecedent via an arrow as indicated. The relative clause *where you know several people* modifies the noun *party*.

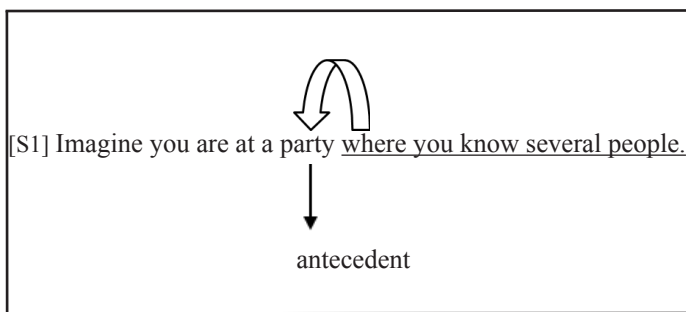


Figure [3]. Identifying and verifying an adjective clause

While identifying adjective clauses, learners can benefit from Arabic, their mother tongue. Since both English and Arabic display post-modification to nominal elements in the form of clause constructions, students can benefit from this *positive transfer*<sup>5</sup>. This mechanism facilitates the acquisition of the concept and, consequently, that of the construction.

##### 3.1.1. Form-Focused Instruction of Adjective Clauses

One common form-focused instruction to get learners meet their grammar target and know how adjective clauses function in a sentence is asking learners to combine two sentences making one a dependent clause. The common instruction is asking learners to combine two sentences making the second an adjective clause. In this sense, learners are given two sentences, which they combine to form one complex sentence.

[7] Mary is wearing a red skirt. She is my friend.

<sup>5</sup>Ellis (2015) defines language transfer as the influence of the linguistics features of one language on those of another language. That is, positive transfer results when L1 and L2 were similar.

Learners face several difficulties upon combining these clauses, which have been witnessed in other ESL learners, making combining clauses a common problem among ESL learners. One study by Nakamori (2002: 29) highlights the struggle they face concerning the position of head nouns in matrix clauses. They also fail to delete the Modified element in the relative clause, which is *She* in the second sentence in [7]. A third complexity appears in the potential of deleting the relative pronoun altogether, especially if in the mother-tongue language, the relative pronoun can never be deleted like Japanese (Kadoi, 2009: 14). Others end up making the first sentence an adjective clause to the first as in [8]. Structurally, it is correct but violates the instructions. Thus, with form-focused instruction, ample exercises with diverse situations are presented to surmount these difficulties.

[8] Mary, who is wearing a red skirt, is my friend.

A seven-step strategy, demonstrated in Figure [4], paves the way for learners to respond properly to the instruction of combining sentences:

- First, they find the common between the two sentences.
- Then, a relative pronoun is chosen based on the common item<sup>6</sup>.
- The common item is crossed from the second sentence.
- The first sentence is written up to the common item.
- Then, the relative pronoun is written followed by the second sentence without the deleted item.
- Then, the first sentence is continued (if any of it is left).
- Finally, commas are added if the relative clause is non-restrictive.

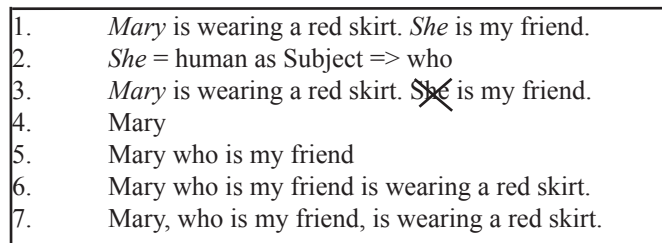


Figure [4]. Steps followed in attaining an adjective clause

Combining the two sentences to form one complex helps learners to comprehend how the relative clause is directly related to the head in the matrix clause. However, combining sentences depends on the position and components of the common nominal element in the second sentence. Consider the sentences in [9]. When combining the two sentences, the nominal group *most of which* is pre-posed before the whole clause as demonstrated in [10].

[9] Her books are popular. I have read most of them.

[10] Answer: Her books, *most of which I have read*, are popular.

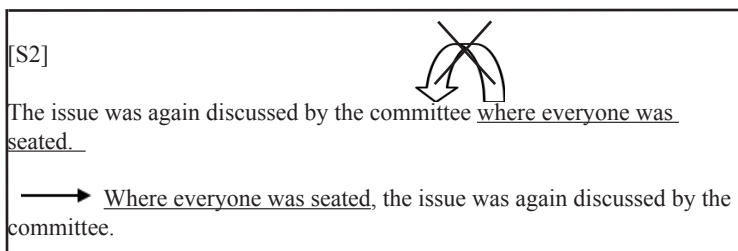
<sup>6</sup>The relative pronouns used to make adjective clauses are: who (human as subject), whom (human as object), which (inanimate), that (animate and inanimate), when (time), where (place), and whose (possession).

### 3.2. Adverb Clauses

In an attempt to identify the type of dependent clause in [S2], the strategy of deleting one option after another is followed. Figure [5] shows that the clause *where everyone was seated* fails to modify the noun *committee*. Cognitively, the noun *committee* cannot be modified by the relative pronoun *where*. Besides, the clause *where everyone was seated* describes a place. Thus, the underlined clause is not an adjective clause.

Having eliminated the option – adjective clause, the clause is either a noun or an adverb clause. Thus, the clause then undergoes another analysis: is it an adjunct or a constituent? Simply speaking, an adjunct is optional while a constituent is obligatory (Dowty, 2003: 34). In Example [S2], the clause *where everyone was seated* is optional because its deletion does not affect the meaning of the whole sentence. Though an adjective clause is also an adjunct, the question of adjunct/constituent is not posed before that of modifying an antecedent. This hierarchy is crucial.

[S2]



The issue was again discussed by the committee where everyone was seated.

→ Where everyone was seated, the issue was again discussed by the committee.

Figure [5]. Identifying and verifying an adverb clause

Another strategy to identify adverb clauses is by “flipping”<sup>7</sup> them. Since the subordinating clause is an adjunct, it can ‘move’ to the initial position<sup>8</sup> in a sentence. That is, the dependent clause takes the initial position in a sentence followed by the independent clause. In the case of [S2], the clause *where everyone was seated can be flipped* as is clear in Figure [5]. The conclusion is that the clause in [S2] is an adverb clause.

#### 3.2.1. Form-Focused Instruction of Adverb Clauses

In many grammar textbooks, instructions about combining two sentences with a subordinator are guided either by providing a clue or structural directions relevant to the position of the subordinating clause.

[11] There are some similarities between the ancient and modern Olympics. There are also many differences. (Maurer, 2006: 317)

[12] Although/Though/Even though/While there are some similarities between the ancient and modern Olympics, there are also many differences.

Learners are expected to find the relation between the two sentences and choose the suitable subordinator accordingly. As it is clear in [12], there might be several subordinators that render the same meaning.

<sup>7</sup>“Flipping” is a term coined by the author to convey the notion of swapping the position of 2 clauses in a sentence.

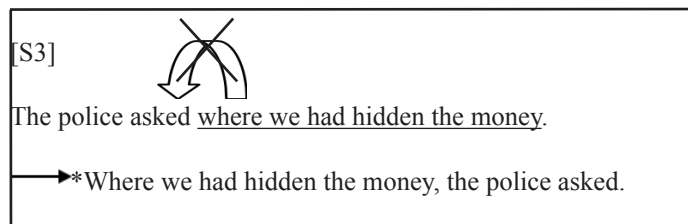
<sup>8</sup>Manipulating the position of a clause has its explanation in the notion of topicality.

Learners are expected to find the relation between the two sentences and choose the suitable subordinator accordingly. As it is clear in [12], there might be several subordinators that render the same meaning.

### 3.3. Noun Clauses

In [S3], the clause *where we had hidden the money* is not preceded by a nominal element, nor does it modify the whole sentence, so it is not a relative clause. Besides, this clause cannot be omitted as it is a constituent without which the meaning is affected. Moreover, this clause when “flipped” turns ungrammatical, violating the English syntactic structure as is indicated in Figure [6]. Due to all these cognitive and meta-cognitive analytical procedures, the underlined clause in [S3] is a noun clause.

[S3]



The police asked where we had hidden the money.

→ \*Where we had hidden the money, the police asked.

Figure [6]. Identifying and verifying a noun clause

#### 3.3.1. Form-Focused Instructions to Noun Clauses

Most exercises on noun clauses consider their relation to direct speech and wh-question structures. Learners are either asked to change from direct into indirect speech or to combine two sentences.

While performing the transformation from direct into indirect, learners get to realize the matrix clause and the noun clause. They tend to understand the difference between the two clauses. When embedding the clause as in [14], learners face difficulty in avoiding verb inversion as they have to cancel a procedure acquired earlier (Doman, 2012).

[13] I asked him, “How far is the nearest town?”

[14] I asked him *how far the nearest town was.*

As to wh-question structures, learners are asked to combine a question with its matrix as in [15]. Recognizing the two clauses apart and then combined enhances their cognitive analysis in this area. Upon combining the two sentences, learners add the subordinator depending on the type of the sentence. In [15], learners add *whether* or *if* while in [13], nothing is added.

[15] Is there a telephone booth nearby? I don’t know.

[16] I don’t know *whether/if there is a telephone booth nearby.*

Using some same subordinators like *whether* and *if* creates an identification problem. However, introducing such form-focused exercises tends to make them realize how the dependent clause and the matrix clause dependent on each other, with the dependent clause being a constituent.

<sup>9</sup>The clue is based on the function of the subordinating clause, whether it is time, place, concession, comparison, manner, result/reason and condition.

Yet, in [14] and [16], the noun clause appears in the object position. The complexity of noun clauses also resides in the fact that they occur in all the positions of a Noun: subject, direct object, indirect object, object of a preposition, object of a verbal, adjective complement, and predicate nominative.

[17] *What he feels in this situation* is beyond description. (as Subject).

[18] *Whom you met yesterday* is here now. (fused relative).

[19] The person *whom you met yesterday* is here now. (relative clause).

[20] Reading *whatever he spots* ameliorated his language skills. (as Object of the verbal *reading*).

When the embedded clause takes the subject position, learners are apt to confuse it with fused relative as the examples [17] and [18] show. It is difficult to learners to define the difference between the two clauses. However, placing a potential noun phrase before the noun clause elucidates the function and the type of the clause. A potential noun phrase *the person* can be positioned before the clause as in [19] while in [17], it is inapplicable.

Noun clause as an object of a verbal also generates doubts as to the function of the clause especially that a verbal is a noun and learners might confuse it as relative clause. Though the occurrence of such structure is not abundant, it remains crucial to distinguish it from relative clauses.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Exposing learners to all these strategies and analytical procedures showed ample evidence of their efficiency and made learners utilize their higher order thinking skills. Teaching clauses cannot be performed without linking syntax to semantics; this is the ambition of form-focused instruction.

In the post-test, it was clear that the explanation relevant to noun clauses left some students astray. The results in Table [2] show that the lowest number of learners is in identification and verification of noun clauses in comparison to the other clauses. One reason for that could be attributed to the confusion created between noun clauses and fused relative clauses. Thus, replicating such a study requires focusing more on such an area and giving learners more chances and time to experiment with them.

Problems related to identifying clauses can be surmounted through higher order thinking skills. Using cognitive and meta-cognitive analysis in addition to linguistic analysis and positive transfer, learners can identify the category of clauses and can even combine sentences to form complex ones. The results of the post-test clearly show the impact of these strategies on their linguistic performance and their ability to postulate proper verification to their answers. Form-focused instruction works with students 'built-in-syllabus' to better acquisition.

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