

# Arab Students and the English Relative Clause

**Nayef N. Kharma\***

---

\* **Ph. D. Applied Linguistics (Language Teaching) London University.**  
**Assistant Professor of applied linguistics, English Department, Kuwait University.**

### **Abstract**

This paper claims to be the most comprehensive study so far of the difficulties encountered by Arab students in the formation of relative clauses (particularly in written English). First, all kinds of errors were collected from the free essay writing of university students, as well as from papers of translation from Arabic into English. These errors were classified into fourteen different types. To find out which of the errors were the most persistent, translation and multiple choice elicitation tests were specially constructed and administered to large samples of students; the former to those at university level, the latter at both secondary and university levels. The results of these tests have been thoroughly examined in an attempt to arrive at the sources of the errors. This paper attempts to show that almost all the persistent errors and the majority of all error types can be ascribed to negative transfer (or interference) from Arabic. It is suggested that syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers bear this in mind when dealing with English relative clauses.

---

### **The Problem**

Difficulties with relative clauses encountered by Arab students learning English have been observed for some time now, by both language teachers and researchers. "In his attempt to learn the English relative clause, the Arab learner of English faces several problems", states Ibrahim, (1973:6). Others reiterate the same remark, (Tadros, 1979 : 234: Scott and Tucker, 1974: 83, and Mukattash, 1982: 265). Very recently, Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic have stated that, "Because relative clauses are such a frequent and important construction in English, and because Arabic-speaking students have so much difficulty with their formation ..., although not with their use, an examination of their counterpart in Arabic should prove insightful" (1983: 617). This, together with the present writer's very long experience of teaching English relative clauses (in the context of E.L.T. in general) to Arabic-speaking students at all levels, is sufficient evidence of the relative difficulty of this aspect of the English language. The difficulty, therefore, deserves very extensive study.

This study is an error analysis for pedagogic, not psycho-linguistic purposes. It will cover all the areas of difficulty exhibited by the errors actually committed by students, then employ the various types of tools necessary to ascertain the sources of those errors, and the gravity of each difficulty. This will hopefully prove of benefit to teachers of English to Arab students, as well as to syllabus-designers, textbook writers and educational planners.

### **Related Literature.**

There have been a number of short studies of this problematic area, each dealing with one or more aspects of the relative clauses. For instance, Ibrahim (1973) deals with one type of error. Fox (1970) adds two more, one of which does not, in fact, occur at all. Schachter (1974) tackles the strategies employed by Persian, Arabs, Chinese and Japanese in the acquisition of the English relative clause in an attempt to demonstrate the comparative difficulty of the structure for students of different linguistic backgrounds. Scott and Tucker's study (1974) was too extensive to spare more than a small part for relative clauses. Tadros (1979) deals with only one type of error, already mentioned by others. Mukattash (1982) refers to relative clauses in passing, and recently, Thompson-Panos and colleague (1983) have made a quick (and rather sketchy) survey of difficulties facing Arab students learning English in almost all aspects of the language, including relative clauses (cf. also Kharma and Hajjaj-forthcoming). The present study claims to be a much more comprehensive investigation of this area than all the rest, and hopes to leave no stone unturned.

## **Subjects**

The subjects of this study have been mainly the writer's own students in the English Department, Kuwait University, during the two terms of 1983-1984, and a number of those taught by some of his colleagues. The total was 408 students. This is fairly representative of the whole student population of just over 1,000 at the English Department. In addition, one of the tools of the study was administered to 30 classes (1159 males and females) of the second secondary grade in the government schools of the country.

## **Tools and Procedure**

The tools employed in this study were several and various. In the first instance, hundreds of papers of free writing (i.e. essays) by students of the English department as well as translations of connected Arabic writing were thoroughly examined in order to discover **all** types of errors committed in the formation of relative clauses. The next step was to classify those errors into types. On the basis of this classification, three elicitation tests were constructed: a multiple choice test for secondary school students; a similar but longer and more advanced test, as well as a special Arabic-to-English translation elicitation test were given to the same university English department student group at different times. The aim of these tests was twofold: first, to ascertain the relative difficulty of the errors collected from the essays and translations, and second, to attempt an interpretation of the errors and arrive at a fairly clear idea as to the source of each.

## **Results.**

### **a. Types of Errors**

It has been possible to classify the errors collected from the students' writing and translation into the following fourteen types (all the examples are actual):

Type 1: Repetition of the subject of the relative clause; e.g.

\* I can give you examples of large families which (they) are living a good life.

Type 2: Repetition of the subject of the main clause in a sentence with an embedded relative clause; e.g.

\* Anyone who drives a car (he) must be careful.

Type 3: Repetition of the object of the verb or of the preposition in the relative clause; e.g.

\* They face some problems which they cannot solve (them).

\* This is the house which I live in (it).

---

Type 4: Omission of the relative pronoun when the relative clause modifies an indefinite noun; e.g.

\* In spite of that, a small family (...) has one child may have more problems.

Type 5: Use of a personal pronoun instead of, or in addition to, the relative pronoun, especially with prepositions; e.g.

\* My father is a merchant who (he) gives us all we need.

\* This is the house in (it) I have always lived.

Type 6: Lack of agreement in Number between the relative pronoun and the following verb; e.g.

\* The life of the orphans who (hasn't) got enough love is a difficult one.

Type 7: wrong use (or avoiding the use) of "whose"; e.g.

\* The man (who his) blood was tested died.

\* The Arabs have been described by many writers (their) descriptions were biased.

Type 8: Use of the wrong connector: "which" for "who (m)" and vice versa; e.g.

\* I know a lot of people (which) differ from those you are talking about.

Type 9: Use of the wrong "case" of the pronoun "who"; e.g.

\* I asked the passengers, (whom) were my wife, my brother and my sisters if they felt cold.

Type 10: Use of coordination for subordination; e.g.

- She is an eccentric woman and she always dresses like a bride.

Type 11: The use of "what" for "that" after "all"; e.g.

\* This is all (what) I know about this question.

Type 12: The use of other relative pronouns for "that" after superlative adjectives. (This is not exactly an error of usage; it is simply more idiomatic and acceptable to use "that" here); e.g.

\* The best thing (which) you can do is to have a good night's sleep.

Type 13: Omission of the antecedent before a relative pronoun; e.g.

\* A recent research has shown that children who fail in their studies are (...) who spend more time watching T.V.

Type 14: wrong positioning of the relative clause in the sentence, or wrong structure of the sentence with an embedded relative clause; e.g.

\* Computers are widely used for their great memory and vast abilities (which make few mistakes).

\* The book was useful (which the boy borrowed).

## b. Test Results

In order to discover the relative difficulty of each aspect of the relative clause in which errors are committed, the two types of specially-constructed elicitation tests referred to above were administered to the various groups. A multiple choice test was given to a large representative group of secondary school students with a view to finding out which of the error types detailed above are the most persistent and the most resistant to teaching and learning. Here is a summary of the test results.

- The type of error which ranked highest in order of difficulty, both at secondary and university levels, and both on the multiple choice (recognition) and translation (production) tests was type 8, (78% sec. school students; 77% univ. students on m.c. test and 86% on translation test). This finding goes against the impressionistic expectations of the writer and is one that has never been emphasized by any of the other researchers.
- Next came two types ranging between second to fourth in order of difficulty. These were types 5 and 11. Between 79% and 70% of the two groups of students committed these errors, with little improvement visible over the years from secondary school up towards the end of the students' careers in the English Department.
- From here onwards, the rate falls considerably, mostly below 50% on most items and on all tests, except for a few cases that will be dealt with shortly. One more item, however, which ranked similarly for the two student groups on all three tests (9th on the scale), but with different percentages (36%, 28% and 48%), was error type 3. Comparing the two m.c. test results we find that university students did much better on this item (28% vs. 36%), but that this percentage rose to 48% on the translation test (where Arabic interference is felt much more definitely).
- Another item on which the rank ordering was quite similar was error type 1. However, the rate of difficulty was not high here (32%, 13% and 23%).

The lowest five items on the m.c. tests proved to be those in **Table I**. In almost all cases, the translation test results were comparable.

Lowest Items on M.C. Tests

| Secondary students |     | University students |     |
|--------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| Error 4            | 18% | Error 14            | 3%  |
| Error 10           | 20% | Error 2             | 9%  |
| Error 7            | 24% | Error 13            | 10% |
| Error 14           | 30% | Error 1             | 13% |
| Error 1            | 32% |                     |     |

- In a few other cases, however, and under the influence of Arabic--as will be shown below--a much higher proportion of the students made the error on the translation test, as shown by **Table II**.

#### More Errors on Translation Tests

| Error Type | M.C. Test | Trans. Test |
|------------|-----------|-------------|
| 6          | 24%       | 69%         |
| 10         | 33%       | 61%         |

- In seven error types, there has been some, or a substantial, improvement over the secondary stage, i.e. after two more years at school and 1-3 years in the university English Department, as shown in **Table III**.

#### Evidence of Improvement on Certain Items

| Error Types | Sec. ST. | Univ. St. |
|-------------|----------|-----------|
| 1           | 32%      | 13%       |
| 2           | 76%      | 9%        |
| 3           | 36%      | 28%       |
| 6           | 64%      | 24%       |
| 12          | 56%      | 46%       |
| 13          | 38%      | 10%       |
| 14          | 30%      | 34%       |

- With the seven others, the situation did not change and often even deteriorated. (See **Table IV**.)

#### No Improvement on Other Items

| Error Type | Secondary | Univ. (M.C.) | Univ. (Trans.) |
|------------|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| 4          | 18%       | 53%          | 19% (?)        |
| 5          | 70%       | 79%          | 70%            |
| 7          | 24%       | 35%          | 36%            |
| 8          | 78%       | 86%          | 77%            |
| 9          | 44%       | 54%          | 39%            |
| 10         | 20%       | 33%          | 61%            |
| 11         | 74%       | 75%          | 71%            |

Results of the translation test support this last finding, except in the case of error type 4, which calls for an explanation. By examining the individual translations of this items on the test, it was found that most students had avoided the embedded relative clause altogether; instead they had rendered the Arabic sentences into perfectly good English without the relative. Consequently, had the students attempted the expected translation, the percentage of errors would have been much higher. However, the **avoidance** strategy adopted by many students can be considered in itself clear evidence of the difficulty.

If these types of error, are still committed even by students of the English department after one to three years of intensive English teaching, and following eight years of E.L.T. at school level, we are certainly justified in saying that they are to be considered among the most **persistent** errors committed by Arab learners of English.

### Interpretation of Results

What I intend to do in this section of the paper is to show that almost all the most persistent errors, in fact that the majority of all types of errors committed by Arab students in the formation of relative clauses, **can** be accounted for in terms of negative transfer (or interference) from Arabic. I am not, however, contending that this is the one and only source of error in this area; there is always the possibility of there being certain other **additional** sources. However, this should not belittle the importance of the interference factor.

In fact, what I shall be doing is not to employ C.A. (contrastive analysis) to **predict** potential errors. I am well aware of the great variety of factors that may cause errors in E.F.L. learning (Norris 1983: 21-42). I am also aware of the development of the C.A. theory and practice since its initiation by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), of the great number of contrastive analysis projects that have been completed or are still in progress, of the controversy that has been raging for a long time over the usefulness or futility of C.A. for predicting or/and interpreting errors and the present status of C.A. (see reference list, particularly Carl James' book, and Spolsky's summing up of that status (Spolsky 1979: 253).

Moreover, the error analysis carried out here is not related to the psycholinguistic direction that current error analysis has taken. The present study is an analysis of actual errors of performance with possible pedagogic implications. Hopefully, it will help educationists gain deeper insights into this problematic aspect of English syntax and will eventually be of some use in improving the teaching of the relative clause to Arab students.

Let us now proceed with our analysis.

First, a comparison of the structural descriptions of the relative clause in English and Arabic shows that they are identical at the structural level,

(Fox 1970: 132). The differences, however, arise in the surface structures. The linking element in both languages is a relative pronoun, not a "particle" as asserted by Thompson-Panos and colleague (1983: 617). This relative pronoun is used in Arabic merely as a linking element and it is this linking element (rather than the whole relative clause, as is the case in English) which modifies the antecedent, i.e. the head-word of the noun-phrase in the main clause. **This linking element in Arabic is not realized if the determiner is (—definite),** i.e. it is obligatorily deleted. This difference, which is, according to Scott and Tucker (1974: 69), "the most frequent source of error", gives rise to error type No. 4, which has been shown earlier to be one of the most persistent errors, even at university level.

The second important difference is that, although in both languages the identical noun, i.e. the noun in the embedded sentence, is pronominalized, the linking element **wh**, producing **who**, **whom** or **which** (which may be replaced by **that** or deleted if it is realized as the object of the embedded sentence), whereas in Arabic this pronominalized form is suffixed to the verb of the embedded sentence, (Fox: 133 & 134). This difference is considered by most researchers, including the present writer, to be the source of two types of error. The first is No. 1 above. This has been shown by our tests to have become less difficult at university level, the difficulty being more easily overcome than that with the other type. This other type is No.3, which is considered by many as "one of the most persistent instances of transfer" (El-Azabi, 1967: 159).

A third difference, which has not been paid sufficient attention, is that in Arabic, when the linking element is fronted, it must always be kept right at the beginning of the relative clause. It cannot be preceded, as in English, by a preposition or a prepositional phrase. This difference, in the writer's view, is the source of error type No.5. This seems to be supported by the fact that this type of error occurs most frequently in a sentence like the following:

\* This is due to several factors, among (them) are those mentioned above.

Another characteristic of Arabic sentences is most probably the source of error type 2. In equational sentences where the predicate is a verb, this verb is in fact a verbal sentence since it must always have a pronominal subject suffixed to it, explicitly when the subject is dual or plural, with the feminine suffix indicating the "understood" third person singular when the subject is feminine, and totally implicit when the subject is third person singular masculine. Thus, the literal Arabic equivalent of the English sentence: "The men went home" is:

\* The men went (they) home.

This becomes "the men (they) went home" at an early stage after the learner **reconstructs** the sentence into the normal English form of SV.

With short, simple sentences such as these, students, by the time they reach university, have usually mastered the correct form and overcome the negative transfer from Arabic. But when sentences grow longer and more complex, whatever type of clause is embedded, including relative clauses, some students seem to revert to the old habit. Thus, although a 36% rate of difficulty of this aspect at secondary stage gradually drops to around 10% at the university, the difficulty remains there, though it is not very serious.

Furthermore, English relative pronouns are not inflected for number (or gender), whereas the principal Arabic relative pronoun (*alladī*) is inflected for gender and number (singular, dual and plural). Not only does it have to agree with its antecedent (which it modifies and agrees with in Gender, Number and Case) but it also agrees with the verb in the relative clause in Gender and Number. This is most probably the cause of error type 6. Arab students seem to be confused when they use the verb after the non-changing relative pronoun. This view is supported by the fact that, although this error did not persist at a high level of difficulty, either in connected English writing or on the m.c. test (where it dropped sharply from 64% at the secondary level to 24% in the university), the translation elicitation test actually produced a 69% level of difficulty. Most other researchers have ignored this error, which they considered to be similar to that committed in other simple sentences with no embedded relative clauses. Another fact about Arabic relative clauses is the absence of an equivalent form of the English pronoun "whose". Instead, Arabic employs the relative pronoun as an (adjectival) connector only and exhibits the genitive case in the form of a pronominal suffix attached to the identical noun (subject or object) in the relative clause. Thus, the literal rendering of the English sentence "The man whose blood was tested yesterday died this morning" is:

- \* The man (who) his blood was tested yesterday died this morning; whereas the equivalent of the English sentence: "The man whose son you met is my cousin" is:
- \* The man whom (his) son you met is my cousin.

This fact is, in the writer's view, the main source of particularly this type of error made by Arab students. The example given under type 7 above illustrates this very clearly. On the university level tests almost all the errors were of this type, which is considered, (at the 35-36% level of difficulty) one of the seven most persistent mistakes.

Furthermore, Arabic employs the same relative connector (*alladī* / *allatī*) both for ( $\pm$  animate) and ( $\pm$  human) whereas English employs two. This most probably accounts for type 8, which was shown above to be Number one on the list of the most difficult and persistent errors made by Arab students.

Another type can also be attributed to Arabic interference; this is type No. 9. It has already been mentioned that in Arabic the relative pronoun (not the whole relative clause) is the one which modifies the antecedent. This means that it agrees with it in case (among other things,), whereas in English the case of the relative connector depends on its function in the relative clause itself. Thus, when the antecedent is, for instance, in the subjective case, the Arabic relative pronoun should also be in the same case, and so on. Consequently, only the Arab student who is **aware** of this fact is liable to, and quite frequently does, confuse "who" with "whom" and sometimes with "whose" as well. This difference between the two languages almost certainly accounts for this persistent error whose difficulty ranges between 39% and 56%. The reservation stated above, namely that the student should be **aware** of this fact in order for us to consider his error due to Arabic interference has its reasons. The fact is that it is only in its "dual" form that the Arabic relative pronoun explicitly exhibits this "agreement in case"; in the other forms it is implicit. This may account for the not very high level of difficulty of this aspect. It also provides us with fairly strong grounds for believing that perhaps this error is **also** due to other reasons. One of these might be that "whom" in particular is gradually dropping out of use, especially in speech, where it is mostly replaced by "who". Another reason might be that inflection for "case" and other categories in English is very limited and this gives rise to several kinds of errors, including the one under consideration, because foreign learners of English who come from communities with highly inflected languages, like Arabic, tend to disregard the few inflections that have survived in present-day English. This is a phenomenon quite noticeable in the English of Arabs.

The tendency by Arab students to use more coordination than subordination has been noticed by several others, (Kaplan, 1966:7 and 1967: 11, and Yorkey 1974: 17). This tendency to use a compound instead of a complex sentence with an embedded relative clause could not be ascertained in the case of secondary school children, who are not yet required to do any sort of free connected writing. The m.c. test given to them showed that only 20% opted for coordination rather than subordination. With university students, however, 33% of those who took the m.c. test did the same, but 61% of the student group chose coordination on the translation test; this is error type No. 10 (probably wrongly termed an error).

Of the other four error types, only No. 13 **may** have Arabic interference as **one** of its sources. No. 13 seems to diminish as students grow older and more familiar with English. Nevertheless, although Arabic normally employs the antecedent, just like English, the writer has been able to collect hundreds of sentences from the Koran and from classical and modern standard and colloquial Arabic, where the antecedent is omitted if it is clearly understood from the context. However, the special items on both the m.c. and the translation tests failed to elicit a

substantial number of examples of this error. The difficulty must have been overcome by long exposure to English.

The other three errors are almost definitely due to other causes. No.11 is an idiomatic usage of the English language the difficulty of which persists among Arab students, (and most probably with other students of different linguistic backgrounds) simply because it is considered by teachers to be a very minor point and is rarely stressed in the course of teaching.

Error type No.12 is the same sort of error as the previous one. The rate of error ranges between 46% and 57%, fairly high. The pronouns used are generally "which" or "who", depending on the antecedent.

It is worth mentioning in this context, however, firstly, that it is quite usual to find "who" used in this type of relative clause as the **subject** of the clause for people, whereas the object is almost always "that" or the zero link. Secondly, that "that" is not very commonly used in **written** English as a relative pronoun, compared to the other relative pronouns, in addition to the fact that it is also used in various other capacities and with other meanings in English: to introduce noun clauses, as a demonstrative, etc. These may be the reasons why it is avoided by Arab (and probably other) learners of English as a relative pronoun.

The final error type, No. 14, seems to have nothing to do with Arabic interference. In both English and Arabic, the general order of words in the sentence with a relative clause is quite similar, as are the structures of sentences. This error diminishes to 3% at the university, both in connected writing and on the m.c. test. The rate of difficulty of 60% on the translation test is rather misleading. In most cases, the students attempted to produce an English sentence which did not contain a relative clause at all, but in their attempt to do so, messed things up. The only possible cause of this error is the students' weak command of the English language in general, something which naturally improves with more exposure, teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown quite clearly, it is hoped, that almost half the errors committed by Arab students in forming relative clauses persist until towards, and probably up to, the end of their career, even in an English department at one of the good Arab universities. It has also been shown that six out of the seven most persistent error types can almost certainly be ascribed to negative transfer (or interference) from Arabic. All in all, it has also been shown that there is sufficient evidence that at least ten, probably eleven, out of the fourteen error types are due to the same source. This does not preclude the possibility of there being additional sources. The point to be stressed here is that this main source of error in this area should be borne in mind by everybody connected with the teaching of English to Arabs when he deals with this aspect of English

grammar. The other point that should be restated here is that all the errors made in this area are errors of **form** rather than **use** and that they do not seriously affect communication.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- EL-AZABI, YEHIA. **A Sector analysis of modern written Arabic with implications for teaching English to Arab Students.** Columbia University, Ed. D.Dissertation 1967.
- Corder, S.Pit. "Error analysis, interlanguage and second language acquisition." **Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts** 8 (4) 1975, pp. 201-218.
- Fisiak, Jacek (Ed.) **Contrastive Linguistics and the Language Teacher** Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981.
- Fox, Robert P. "The relative clause in three languages," **TESOL Quarterly** 3 (2): 1970, pp.131-136.
- Fries, Charles. **Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language.** Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1945.
- Hassan, Abbas. **Al-nahu-ol- waafi** (in Arabic). Cairo: Dar-ul-Maarif, 1963.
- Ibrahim,Muhd.H. **The relative in English and Arabic.** TEEL. Beirut: A.U.B. CELRT 7 (2) 1973. 6.
- James, Carl. **Contrastive analysis.** London and Harlow: Longman, 1980.
- Kaplan, Robert P. "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education," **Language Learning** 16 (1966) (1 and 2): 1-20.
- Kharma, Nayef. **Some cultural and linguistic problems of Kuwaiti students with written English.** unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. London university, 1972.
- Kharma, Nayef. **A contrastive analysis of the use of verb forms in English and Arabic.**(Studies in descriptive linguistics, vol. 10 ) Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag 1983.
- Kharma, Nayef and Ali Hajjaj. **Teaching English to Arabs.** London and Harlow: Longman. (Forthcoming).
- Lado, Robert. **Linguistics across cultures.** Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1957.
- Mukattash, Lewis. "Problems in error analysis." **Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics** 13: (1982). pp. 261-274.
- Nehls, Dietrich (ed.) **Studies in Contrastive linguistics and error analysis.** Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag. 1979.
- Norrish, John. **Language Learners and their errors.** London and Basingstroke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983.
- Quirk, Randolph and Sidney Greenbaum. **A University Grammar of English.** London and Harlow. Longman. 1973.

- Richards Jack C.      **Error analysis.** London and Harlow: Longman. 1974.
- Schachter, Jacquelyn. "An error in error analysis," **Language Learning**.24 (2) :(1974) pp.205-214.
- Schumann, John and  
Nancy Stenson (Eds.) **New Frontiers in Second Language Learning.** Rowley, Mass:  
Newbury House. 1974.
- Scott, Margaret S. and  
Richard, Tucker G.      **"Error analysis and English Language Strategies of Arab Students."** **Language Learning**. 24 (1): (1974), pp. 69-79.
- Spolsky, Bernard.      "Contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage and other useful fads." **The Modern Language Journal** 63: (1979) pp.250-251.
- Tadros, A.A.      "Arabic interference in the written English of Sudanese Students-relativization." **ELT Journal** 33 (3) (1979) pp. 234-239.
- Thompson-Panos,  
Karyn and Maria      "The least you should know about Arabic: Implications for the  
Thomas-Ruzic.      ESL writing instructor." **TESOL Quarterly**, 17 (4) (1983), pp. 609-623.
- Wright, William. **A Grammar of the Arabic Language.** Cambridge: the University  
Press. 1951.
- Yorkey, Richard. "Practical EFL techniques for teaching Arabic-speaking students."  
(Lecture delivered at the Lackland Air Force Base). A TESOL  
Publication. 1974.
-