

# Acquisition difficulties of attributive clause and the use of TBLT

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the challenges of acquiring attributive clauses for English learners, investigating factors such as syntactic complexity and learners' language backgrounds. Drawing on various theories and empirical studies, including the Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis and the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy, it examines the difficulties learners face and the pedagogical implications for teaching. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerges as a promising approach, emphasizing meaningful communication and student-centered activities. By integrating TBLT principles, educators can design engaging tasks to enhance attributive clause acquisition while fostering language proficiency. The abstract underscores the collaborative efforts between students and teachers in navigating these challenges and highlights the potential of TBLT in achieving effective language learning outcomes.

**Key words:** attributive clauses; English language learners; acquisition difficulties; TBLT

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## 1 Introduction

The English attributive clause is unique in its grammatical structure. Its acquisition is an inescapable grammatical issue for English scholars. Likewise, there has been a lot of research on attributive clauses from a variety of perspectives. However, there is still much more opportunities for additional investigation into the acquisition of attributive clauses by English learners, which has drawn the attention of numerous scholars to study on attributive clause acquisition. Furthermore, most studies only focus on learners of a certain language background at a certain stage, lacking comparative studies on learners of different language backgrounds with different stages, and lacking an overall and dynamic grasp of the acquisition of the use of attributive clauses for general English learners. Therefore, the definitions of attributive clause are covered first. Then based on the influencing elements of attributive clause acquisition, pedagogical implications for teaching and learning are proposed in this thesis.

## 2 Understanding, acquisition and challenges: exploring attributive clauses in English grammar

### 2.1 Definition of attributive clause

So far, many scholars in linguistics have come up with definitions to attributive clause or relative clauses. Attributive clauses, according to Lapalombara, are subordinate clauses that modify a noun or nominal, and are functionally equivalent to adjective modifiers [1]. According to Keenan and Comrie, a syntactic object can be a relative clause if a wider set is stated and subsequently restricted to some subsets by a restricting sentence [2]. The limiting statement must be true, and the larger set is known as the domain of relativization. For example, in the phrase "a T-shirt that Lucy likes the most," "T-

shirt" (NP) is the domain of relativization and "Lucy likes the most" is the restricting clause.

Similarly to how different scholars define attributive clause, different academics characterize attributive clause from various perspectives. Sheldon (pp. 272-281), for example, classified attributive clauses into four categories (SS, SO, OS, OO) based on whether the clause is embedded in the subject or object position of the main sentence [3].

## 2.2 Influencing factors of attributive clause acquisition

Due to the general attributive clause's syntactic peculiarity and structural complexity, native speakers can readily acquire it, while learners who are natural speakers of other languages always struggle with it. As a result, Kuno (pp. 117-136) puts forward the Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis (PDH) [4]. He believes that the attributive phrases in the middle of the sentence will make it difficult to digest the main statement. Because they are limited by instantaneous memory, they are more difficult to process than those positioned on the right branch of the main sentence. Keenan and Comrie (1977) offer Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) and Accessibility Hierarchy Hypothesis [2] (AHH), a reduced version based on NPAH. Hamilton (pp. 123-157) proposes the SO hierarchy hypothesis [5]. The easiest attributive clause to understand is one in which the core word is an object in the main sentence and the attributive clause lacks a subject (OS).

## 2.3 Difficulties of attributive clause acquisition for English learners

Under the influence of hypotheses about the difficulty of attributive clause acquisition, some researchers investigate the extrinsic elements that influence attributive clause acquisition, such as formal language guidance, input, and output. Doughty (pp. 431-469) studied whether formal language assistance could influence foreign learners' acquisition of relative clauses [6]. This study's participants came from a variety of nations, including China, Russia, Japan, France, Spain, Turkey, and Italy. Participants were divided into two groups. Although one group of participants did not get formal relative clause assistance, they were able to read the relative clauses on their own. The other group was given formal and quite extensive instructions. Two tests were carried out by the researchers. Before and after the experiment, all participants should complete three tasks (Grammatical Judgment, Sentence Combination, and Oral Test). The study's findings revealed that the group of members who had received formal supervision did better in all three test tasks.

Other researchers place a greater emphasis on the elements that influence learners. Jin and Chen (pp. 58-60) investigated the effect of learners' English skill on relative clause acquisition in English [7]. They chose several sorts of attributive clauses and created four grammatical tests based on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hypothesis (Writing, Sentences Combination, Multiple Choice, and Grammatical Judgment). They separated 112 Chinese university students into three groups based on their English proficiency. They discovered that the better the participants' language proficiency, the more English attributive sentences and types of attributive clauses they produced. The higher the learner's English level, the greater the accuracy. At the same time, they maintained that pupils should be educated based on their English proficiency, and that teachers should engage in a range of instructional activities.

In a summary, attributive clause acquisition is influenced by explicit direction, English competency, input enhancement, output enhancement tasks, and working memory. Additionally, they have successful results with this grammatical project, attributive clauses. However, successful acquisition of the attributive clause entails the collaboration of students and language teachers.

# **3 Implementing TBLT in classrooms: principles, practices and pedagogical considerations**

## 3.1 Pedagogical approach - TBLT

To achieve the best learning outcomes, TBLT, a teaching style that focuses on meaning and communication, is worth considering. Long (p. 89) offers a widely referenced definition of task that focuses on real-world situations, defining a task as a piece of work completed for oneself or for others, willingly or for some benefit [8]. Nunan (p. 4) offers another

influential definition of task as a piece of classroom activity involving learners in perceiving, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language with an emphasis on meaning rather than form [9]. On the grounds of task definitions, we seem to be able to sort out some basic principles and criteria for task-based language-teaching activities.

### 3.2 The application of task-based language teaching in classroom

#### (1) Students as the center of the class

The teacher should take on a new role and make the class more student-centered. The teacher dominates the class in the PPP teaching approach, which includes conveying knowledge and delivering instructions for class tasks. However, students are the creators, organizers, and presenters of class activities in task-based language teaching. They should become participants in the class activity, and function as task takers and innovators, while the teacher is the organizer, guide, and advocate of the class process, preparing students for duties and raising their awareness.

#### (2) Tasks designed to stimulate students' study interest

Motivation is essential for students' success in their studies, and it is crucial to design projects that can raise students' interest and intention to learn. According to social structuralism ideas, knowledge is generated by learners through their interactions with others. The teacher can create numerous communicative tasks in one unit and incorporate the teaching materials into the activities for each task. Students are expected to search for relevant information on the topic and complete planned tasks such as a presentation, a dialogue, a discussion, a debate, and a role play. Students get a sense of self-accomplishment by preparing and completing projects that require them to use various types of abilities and knowledge that they have already learned. They also gain knowledge and test the accuracy of their work by completing tasks. Such formative growth can considerably increase pupils' drive to construct and acquire knowledge.

#### (3) Applying English in the whole class

The idea of "English Only" should be followed in class by both the teacher and the learners. The teacher should speak English as much as possible, including class teaching and grammar explanations. The teacher should not abandon the use of English because of difficulties in explaining grammar knowledge. On the other hand, it is this challenge that motivates the instructor to explain difficult concepts in a clearer and more understandable manner. Aside from that, the teacher should encourage students to use English to complete work in class. Students are often embarrassed to practice English in front of their peers. The teacher should assist pupils in overcoming this psychological barrier and encourage them to speak English both in and out of class.

## **4 Conclusion**

Teachers should focus not only on teaching grammatical understanding of the attributive clause, but also on providing students with more opportunities to apply in communication, so that they can grasp and employ the attributive clause skillfully. When designing learning activities, teachers should carefully research the teaching materials and develop the tasks with the teaching purpose, teaching task, and students' actual situation in mind. The form of tasks might vary, but each activity should have a clear objective, an appropriate level of complexity, and a specific level of challenge in order to pique students' interest in learning and exploration and achieve the desired educational effect. During the course of completing the activities, students may experience obstacles and make mistakes. Teachers should gently support and assist them, correct their mistakes, and encourage them to complete assignments using independent thinking and cooperative inquiry in order to increase their independent and cooperative learning capacities.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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