

# A Research on Error Analysis of Attributive Clause in Senior High School English Writing Teaching

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## Abstract

Writing has always been regarded as a window of integrated ability. In daily writing, attributive clauses are always used, but due to the negative transfer of mother tongue, students are prone to make various mistakes. The error analysis aims to analyze the types and reasons for students' errors and then correct the errors to promote their grades. Therefore, the paper decides to take attributive clause as an example and applies the error analysis method to English writing teaching in senior high school. It randomly selected 63 students in a high school to finish an attributive clause test, do a questionnaire and interviewed the teachers responsible for them. The types of errors made by students in attributive clauses were summarized through qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis. In view of the above problems, the author puts forward some teaching suggestions, which enrich the relevant researches on error analysis from the theoretical perspective and provide new inspirations for the researches on second language acquisition.

## Keywords

Error Analysis Theory; Attributive Clause; Writing; Senior High School Students.

## 1. Introduction

English is the most widespread language globally, and it is just like a bridge that can connect the world. Coinciding with China's rapid economic growth and steady deepening of reform and opening-up, international communication is becoming increasingly frequent, and English has been taken as one of the most crucial subjects in China. In recent years, China has attached increasing importance to English teaching and learning.

According to current reform of High School English Curriculum in China (Ministry of Education 2017: 31) is to renew the idea of English education and teaching, train students to use English thinking and expression habits, and then promote the development of students' language learning. With the implementation of the curriculum standard reform, the examination of English written expression ability is taking an increasing proportion in the college entrance examination. In the 2018 Zhejiang College Entrance Examination English test, the writing score is 40 points, accounting for 26.7% of the 150 points, so its significance can be caught sight of. However, most students think that written English expression is difficult and their English writing level can not meet the requirements of the curriculum standards.

High school students have appropriate and accurate requirements for grammatical structure in their writing ability. Grammar learning can ensure the accuracy of language and convey the speaker's intention. Furthermore, the attributive clause is regarded as one of the most significant and frequent grammar points in the college entrance examination. Therefore, the attributive clause of grammar teaching in senior high school plays a crucial role in English teaching.

In English, attributives can be used as adjectives, nouns, pronouns, numerals, participles, infinitives, etc. They can also be used to guide sentences. This kind of sentence structure

modifies nouns and acts as adjectives in sentences is called attributive clauses. As a modifier in English, attributive clause makes senior high school students encounter various difficulties learning because of the negative transfer of their mother tongue. In the process of English teaching in high school, there are some problems in teaching attributive clauses, such as long time and poor effect. However, in daily teaching, most of them are fragmented teaching, such as sentence pattern practice according to grammar rules, and there is a lack of research in real text discourse. Therefore, the study of attributive clause error analysis can provide a new framework for senior high school writing teaching and has vital guiding significance for teaching and learning.

The theory of error analysis was put forward by S. P. Corder (1973) in the 1970s, who regarded error analysis as the primary method to investigate learners' learning of a second language. Error analysis is an analytical method based on the creative structure used to study students' mistakes in foreign language learning. According to the theory, students learn a foreign language just as children learn their mother tongue. They collect relevant language information through contact, make assumptions about the target language, and then explore and approach it by verifying its correctness. The application of this theory aims to identify, narrate and elaborate on various types of errors to explore the way learners process input information, find out the main factors of students' mistakes and assist students in correcting their mistakes.

Using error analysis theory, this paper categorizes the errors that occurred in students' use of English attributive clauses and summarizes the reasons for the errors so as to help researchers to explore the rules of foreign language learning, teachers to improve foreign language teaching methods and students to master and use attributive clauses more flexibly.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Studies Abroad

As for studies on attributive clauses abroad, Brown (1971) and Schachter (1974) carried out an earlier starters. In the study of attributive clause errors, Brown chose children or adults as native English speakers, while Schachter studied Arabic, Persian, Chinese and Japanese learners. In the study, Schachter found that although attributive clauses did not exist in Chinese and Japanese, by comparing the mistakes made by the two groups of subjects, Chinese and Japanese learners made fewer mistakes in the test than Persian and Arabic learners. However, this does not mean that Chinese and Japanese learners have better grasp of attributive clauses, because Chinese and Japanese learners seldom use attributive clauses. Therefore, Schachter proposed the avoidance theory, pointing out that non-native English learners would avoid using the structure of the target language because of the difference between the structure of the target language and that of their mother tongue. In addition to Brown (1971) and Schachter (1974), Tavakolian (1981), Romaine (1984) and Roth (1984) conducted studies with native English learners as experimental subjects to verify this theory.

In addition to the study of attributive clause learning by learners in different language backgrounds, foreign researchers and scholars have also carried out a large number of studies on the mistakes made by native learners in the process of learning attributive clauses. Phoocharoensil (2014) analyzed the compositions of Thai college students based on the Thai Learning English Corpus (TLEC), focusing on the use of the relative word where by Native English learners in the process of learning attributive clauses, and analyzed the reasons for the incorrect use of where. The conclusion of overgeneralization of learners is drawn. In the process of research, he found that due to different research methods, the research results of errors such as multiple pronoun references and multiple prepositions in sentences in corpus were not consistent with the research results in 2012. Kusdianty (2016) conducted a study on the errors in the use of relative words in English attributive clause learning among 20 students

in Indonesia-Indonesian schools by conducting tests, and selected the students with lower scores in the test to conduct interviews. The results show that the reasons for the errors are that learners do not understand the meaning of the target language and the negative transfer effect of the mother tongue affects learners' use of attributive clauses.

In general, the foreign studies on the errors in the use of attributive clauses started earlier. Researchers in different countries have used different research methods to study the errors in the use of attributive clauses by English learners in different language backgrounds, and the research objects are more extensive.

## 2.2. Studies at Home

Compared with studies abroad, error analysis researches in China started much later, which rose in the 1990s. Although foreign researchers have conducted more extensive studies on the use of errors in attributive clauses, there are relatively few empirical studies on the use of errors in attributive clauses, especially on Chinese students. Therefore, in recent years, domestic scholars from different angles on learners learn the attributive clause of the mistakes made the empirical research, the purpose is to through the teaching practice found that Chinese learners of English acquisition and characteristics of the attributive clause, and reduce the learners' errors in the use of attributive clause, to solve the difficulties of Chinese students learn English attributive clauses.

Chinese foreign language researchers have made many studies on the errors in the use of attributive clauses by senior high school students. Guo Juan (2004) analyzed the errors in the use of attributive clauses in written expressions by high school students with different English levels, and concluded that according to the requirements of the task assigned by the teacher, high school students would imitate the use of attributive clauses, but on the whole, the frequency of students using attributive clauses was low, so the error rate was not high. Zhang Qingqing (2011) took senior one students as his research objects, focusing on the analysis of the mistakes made by senior one students in the early stage of learning attributive clauses and the reasons for their mistakes. Zhang Lijuan (2017) also used the test paper to study the errors in the use of attributive clauses by senior high school students, and classified the errors into five types: the errors in the use of relative words, the omissions of relative words, and the errors in the use of preposition + relative pronoun structure. The reasons are summarized as language transfer, overgeneralization, unsystematic grammar knowledge, little language input and the influence of environment, and some teaching suggestions are put forward. Wang Jiang (2011) studied sophomores in senior high school. By attributive clause test attributive clause to the student usage has carried on the investigation and interviews, the error classification, divided into relationship pronouns and adverbs used error, as using the wrong and the relationship between word ellipsis error, etc., and points out that the cause of the error of the migration of the main speakers and lack of various forms of exercise, etc. Xu Yanan and Zeng Xianmo (2020) classified the errors of the subject-subordinate relationship in Chinese high school students' English compositions based on the corpus, and analyzed the errors of the subject-subordinate relationship through the "five-step error analysis" proposed by Corder, which covered the expressions of errors in attributive clauses. This paper proposes to reduce errors by strengthening the teaching of master-slave relation grammar and distinguishing the differences between English and Chinese expressions.

Most of the theoretical studies on errors carried out in China are empirical studies, qualitative and quantitative studies based on corpus, mostly focusing on error classification and error correction strategies. There is no great breakthrough in theoretical research, and corpus mainly focuses on the English learning of junior high school students to college students.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Objectives

In this paper, the author attempts to explore the following questions:

- (1) What are the main types of mistakes in High school students' English writing?
- (2) What are the reasons for students' Mistakes in English writing?
- (3) How to effectively reduce the mistakes in students' English writing, especially in attributive clauses?

This research could also provide some help for students to reduce the errors in using attributive clauses. At the meanwhile, the quality of high school students' academic writing will be improved through these strategies and methods.

#### 3.2. Research Subject

The experimental samples of this research are all from X senior high school. There are totally 63 participants (50 valid answers). In order to eliminate other factors which may have an effect on the accuracy of the results, the author collect the sample classes whose English level of these two classes are on average in the whole grade. Therefore, the attributive clauses investigation of them can reflect the learning condition of most students. That is more representative and the data of the research will be more reliable.

#### 3.3. Research Procedure

Firstly, the author design test paper which are consist of 20 questions according to students' learning degree and then reliability and validity of the questionnaire should be tested. The author consult literature, use the previous literature for reference to design questionnaires for students and teachers. Secondly, choose research subjects and print test papers and questionnaires. Select two class students in grade two in X senior highschool to do the test. Students are asked to finish test paper within 30 minutes, during this period, students are not allowed to look up reference books or discuss answer with friends. Then collect test papers and students finish questionnaire within 10 minutes. Their English teachers supervised them when students did the test in order to confirm the authenticity and validity of the test paper and ensure students finish the questionnaire seriously. After that, the author do the teachers' interview with four experienced teachers. The test papers are used to analyze the errors of relative clause and questionnaires are used to know the students' and teachers' attitude toward relative clause, learning strategies and the reasons of committing errors. Thirdly, to count of errors and get the data of this research. First the author correct the 63 test papers carefully. Then the author divided different types of grammar points and sum up their error frequency, misused grammar points and misused frequency and so on. The statistics will be listed in detail in chapter four. The data will be calculated by Microsoft Office Excel 2000. Lastly, to do the error analysis in detail it is the key point in this thesis. Data from interview, together with that from test paper and questionnaire would be finally taken together for comprehensive analysis to answer the three research questions. The detailed results and explanations will be introduced in the next chapter.

#### 3.4. Research Instruments

The author will use quantitative and qualitative methods in this survey. The main instrument in this research are test paper, questionnaires for students and teacher interview questionnaire. Test papers aim to collect errors. Questionnaires are used to assist analyzing factors that students commit errors and try to find problems that exist in grammar learning. The author need to use them to propose suggestions for teachers and students in relative clause teaching and learning.

## 4. Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the author would analyze the data which are collected from questionnaire, quiz and then discuss the conclusion with interview.

### 4.1. Data Description and Discussion of Questionnaire

In this study, 63 papers were distributed to students from two classes of X senior high school, 50 were valid. The author designed the questionnaire mainly to further understand the students' learning attitude towards attributive clauses, the difficulties they encountered in the learning process and their own suggestions for teachers' teaching. By analyzing the results of the collected questionnaire, we can draw the corresponding conclusions.

**Table 1.** The Students' Views on Attributive Clauses

Number	Choice	Rate
1. The position of attributive clauses	A.very important	56%
	B.important	28%
	C.normal	10%
	D.not important	6%
2. The difficulty of attributive clauses	A.very hard	20%
	B.a bit hard	66%
	C.normal	10%
	D.not hard	4%
3. The frequency of errors	A.often	64%
	B.occasionally	24%
	C.hardly ever	12%
	D.never	0%

It can be seen from the statistical results that a total of 84% students think attributive clauses play a very important role in English grammar, indicating that most of the students attach great importance to the study of attributive clauses, while 6% of the students do not attach great importance to the study of attributive clauses, indicating that a small number of students are not motivated enough to learn this grammar and have a casual attitude.

**Table 2.** The Difficulties Encountered by Students in Learning Attributive Clauses

Number	Choice	Rate
4. The difficulties of attributive clauses	A.the judgment of the attributive clause	28%
	B.the use of relative pronouns	90%
	C.the use of relative adverbs	86%
	D.the judgment of the antecedent	52%

As can be seen from Question 2 and 3, 86% of the students think attributive clauses are difficult and most of them often make mistakes. Only 12% of the students have a good command of the attributive clauses and hardly ever make mistakes.

To sum up, it is necessary to analyze and study the errors in using attributive clauses with senior high school students.

Question 4 is a multiple choice. 28% choose A and 52% choose D which shows that students' basic knowledge of English grammar is relatively weak. Most of the students' difficulties in learning attributive clauses center on the use of relative words, which is basically consistent with the test results. Questions about attributive clauses mainly focus on the usage of grammatical rules.

**Table 3.** The Reasons for Errors in Attributive Clause and the Solutions

Number	Choice	Rate
5. Reasons for errors	A.vocabulary deficiency	14%
	B.uncomprehending of sentence meaning	66%
	C.uncomprehending of sentence structure	76%
	D.lack of review	12%
	E.a weak grasp of grammatical rules	70%
	F.influenced by Chinese	42%
6. Solution	A.self-reflection, find the reason by oneself	22%
	B.ask teachers and classmates for help	16%
	C.noticing errors but don't know how to avoid them	54%
	D.don't care, let it be	8%

From the result of Question 5, it can be seen that most students attributed their mistakes to analyzing the structure of sentences and not understanding the meaning of sentences, indicating that their English foundation needs to be improved. Affected by negative transfer of Chinese mother tongue and unable to use grammar rules, it indicates that the learning of grammar rules should be strengthened.

From the result of Question 6, it can be seen that most students are at a loss for the problems they encounter in the process of learning attributive clauses, but they do not take corresponding measures. Among them, 16% of students will not take the initiative to ask teachers and classmates for advice, but only solve by themselves, and another 8% of students hold a indifferent attitude. The overall problem of solving the definite article clause gets a rather passive attitude, and this attitude is not conducive to language.

As can be seen from the students' attitude towards the teaching of attributive clauses, 72% of the students basically agree with the teacher's teaching of attributive clauses and say that the teaching is effective. Based on the subjective opinions of the students collected in question 10, the students hope that teachers can create language environment for them to practice the attributive clause, and suggest that more guidance for basic grammar teaching.

To sum up, the author found that the conclusions drawn from the analysis of students' questionnaire results were basically consistent with the results of test analysis and the causes of errors. It can be divided into two categories: for students, in the process of acquiring attributive clauses, they are hindered by their own basic grammar knowledge, which makes them unable to solve the difficulties smoothly by themselves. In addition, a small number of

students' attitude is not active, learning motivation is not strong, which is also one of the reasons. Teachers also need to pay more attention to the amount of attributive clause exercises.

**Table 4.** Students' Attitude Towards Learning and Teaching of Attributive Clauses

Number	Choice	Rate
7.Students' attitude towards the teaching of attributive clauses	A.very effective	30%
	B.generally good	42%
	C.acceptable	22%
	D.unsatisfied	6%
8.The amount of practice in attributive clauses	A.very much	4%
	B.enough	16%
	C.about the amount	26%
	D.not enough	54%

**Table 5.** Students' Attitude towards Avoiding Errors of Attributive Clause in Writing

Number	Choice	Rate
9. Error avoidance motives tendency	A.never	0%
	B.seldom	20%
	C.sometimes	24%
	D.often	56%

It can be seen from the statistical results that students avoid using attributive clauses in attributive clauses for fear of making errors and avoid losing points, which impart bad influence on practising attributive clauses and do harm to language learning. And without attributive clauses, the writings will be broken down into simple sentences.

## 4.2. Data Description and Discussion of Test Paper

The author gives out 63 test papers and 58 test papers are taken back and 50 test papers are valid. There are 20 items in the error frequency of each question in the first part and we can also see the error frequency of different grammar points. There are totally 11 grammar points among the 20 items. From the statistics, we can see Question 14 focuses most testees problem which error rate was as high as 82 percent and question15, 16, 19 are other top three questions which error frequency are over 50%. and at the same time, testees can easily deal with the question 6 and 8 which error frequency are less than 10%.

### 4.2.1. Analysis of the Error Frequency

After the collection and analysis of the data, some specific examples from logical relation words, textual semantics and structure will be discussed and searched in this section. According to the test paper, the author conclude that errors in relative clause learning are mainly focused on the four types. They are the use of relative pronouns, the use of relative adverbs, the omission of relative words, the consistency of subordinate clause and main clause.

From Table 6, we can conclude the sequence of the four types of errors are relative words omission>relative Pronoun>the disagreement between predict and antecedent>relative adverb.

**Table 6.** Distribution of Language Points of Test Paper

Error Type/Percentage (average)		Number	Percentage
Relative Pronoun 40.2	Which	I-1, 9, 14	51.3
	Preposition + which	I-9	34
	That	I-4, 10, 17, 18	28.5
	Who/Whom	I-3, 11, 20	41.3
	As	I-5, 16	50
	Whose	I-2	42
	Non-restrictive relative clause	I-5	34
Relative Adverb 21.8	When	I-6	10
	Where	I-7, 13,15	47.3
	Why	I- 8	8
Relative words omission 52	/	I-19	52
The disagreement between predict and antecedent 36	/	I-12	36

#### 4.2.2. Analysis of the Error Types

As is mentioned above, there are four main types of errors, the author will explain each type detailedly.

The misuse of relative pronouns (Q1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20) include “who/whom,whose, as, which, that ”, which not only served as guiding clauses, but also used to refer someone or something.This type covers the largest number of antecedents. Students should first understand the meaning of the sentence, and then decide what is missing in the sentence. It can not simply decided by the front word of the blank.

The misuse of relative adverb (Q6, 7, 8, 13, 15) include “when, where, why”, which can somtimes be replaced by “preposition+which”. Prepositions are chosen according to the fixed collocation habit of predicate verb or antecedent in English.

To examine the relative words of the attributive clause of this two error types, students should first determine what type of the relative words are, then analyze what the relative words act as in the sentence, and finally determine the correct relative words. Students should have certain ability of sentence analysis and comprehension. If there is no subject, object or predicate, use that or which. If there is no adverbial, use the relative adverb when, where, why; If you don't have an attribute, use whose.

The error of relative words omission (Q19) which needs students to determine accurately when the antecedent can be omitted. They should first distinguish between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses and then remember the relative words could only be omitted in the restrictive clauses in some cases.



The error of consistency (Q12) which means the disagreement between predict and antecedent. That is said the relative pronoun refers to the antecedent and the predicate verb of the clause should agree.

### **4.3. Discussion of the Teachers' Interview**

The author interviewed two teachers responsible for this two class of testee, and the author will combine questionnaire and interview to find out the factors that cause students to commit errors.

#### **4.3.1. Language Transfer**

In the students questionnaire, the Question 2 and 5 are designed to investigate students' view on the difficulty and bottleneck for attributive clause. According to data of questionnaires, 86% students who think relative clause is difficult, and most of them think grammar rules is key problem.

In teachers interview, the two English teachers that the author interviewed considered that relative clause had difficulty for high school students to study. They point out main reason for difficult situation is that attributives in Chinese and English are completely distinguished. There is no attributive clause and no concept of antecedent in Chinese. And the structure of it is quite different from of relative clauses in English. This leads to the difficulty on understanding the rules of attributive clauses, and Chinese learners couldn't easily formed the consciousness and habit of using relative clauses, so they often commit errors in the process of learning.

#### **4.3.2. Lack of Grammatical and Lexical Knowledge**

From the interview, the teacher said that some simple grammar knowledge of attributive clauses had been learned in junior high school, so they were not systematically taught in senior high school, which caused some obstacles for the students with weak foundation to understand the attributive clauses. In the questionnaire, 70% of the students think that the reason of committing errors is that they didn't do enough to master the grammatical rules of relative clauses. The lack of systematic and comprehensive knowledge lead to their wrong cognition about this grammar. There are 76% of students can not make certain of the structure of sentences. These are all attributed to the weakness of grammar knowledge.

#### **4.3.3. Lack of Practice**

The teacher said frankly that it is always not easy for students to balance so many other subjects at the same time. Under this circumstance, it is often given up time for most students to applied English in practice. In the students' questionnaire, there are 54% participants think they do not do enough exercise during they study attributive grammar. This suggests that the educational environment of senior high school students limits their adequate practice of English. In teachers' interview, one of the question in NO.5 is "What dissatisfaction do you have in the course of English teaching?". Two teachers all agree that one of dissatisfactions is the limitation of time and language environment. Language learning can be harder and boring for students who do not have language talent and it may lead to the loss of interest and confidence if they always fail in language learning. Furthermore, the grammar exercises of attributive clauses are seldom combined with the writing, and students are not required to consciously use attributive clauses in the essay.

## **5. Suggestions**

### **5.1. To Expand Learning Approaches and Create a Better Language Environment**

In the analysis above, one of the main factors of errors is negative transfer of mother tongue. However, according to the students' questionnaire, they seldom expand their English learning

through extra-curricular study. The reality is that Chinese learners is lack of English communication environment. In order to enable the students to express in a proper way , teachers should not only emphasize grammar rules of language, but also create real language environment. Teachers could encourage students to read more English newspapers and magazines or watch movies and TV series in English in order to create a better language environment. Teachers can also organize students to hold an English corner once or twice a week to discuss various English works in different forms that they have read or watched, and then ask students to write. Meanwhile, the attributive clauses they have learned should be used in their writing. In this way they can not only get in touch with the original knowledge of foreign countries, but also cultivate English thinking in the real world. It may also arouse students' interest in learning English.

### **5.2. To Consolidate Basic Language Knowledge and Strengthen Grammar Exercise**

Grammar is certainly difficult for learners of English as a second language but it is a process that can be gradually improved. Attributive clause studying is based on lexical and syntactic knowledge. Learning grammar well is the first step in English writing. Students should figure out the primary components of sentence, and if students can not distinguish them, they will be in trouble of choosing relative pronoun and relative adverb. Firstly, teachers should use effective methods to help students master more vocabulary such as providing students with context when they learn words and phrases. Pay more attention to the syntax, and let students analyze the components of sentences by themselves. Teachers should help students establish a knowledge system and emphasize confusing knowledge. Try to apply them to practice in order to strengthen impression. For example, how to choose relative pronoun and relative adverb, the difference between “that” and “which”, etc.

### **5.3. To Strengthen Guidance of Learning Strategies for Practice**

Modern foreign language teaching model requires teachers always put students in the main position, and cultivate the habit of self-directed learning. The task of the teacher is not only teach knowledge but also to cultivate students to form good learning habits. Teachers also should strengthen the guidance of learning strategy for students, and help students to learn grammar more efficiency. In the survey, 33 students were aware of they committed errors, but they did not know how to avoid them. This means students were influenced by teacher centered model for a long time, they lack of self-learning ability. This requires teachers pay more attention to the guidance of learning strategies and to cultivate students' correct learning methods. In teacher's interview, they all think teaching method is crucial for teaching effect. Such as guide students self reflection, find the deficiencies in their learning, encourage students to review grammar points which they did not master well, encourage students to generalize and summarize knowledge.

## **6. Conclusion**

Based on the theory of error analysis, this thesis investigates the acquisition degree of English relative clauses of grade 2 students in senior high school. By collecting and analyzing data from students' test paper, questionnaire and teachers' interview, the author found that there are four types errors in high school students learning of relative clause. The sequence of the four type of errors' frequency from high to low is relative words omission, relative pronoun, the disagreement between predict and antecedent, and relative adverb. Through the results from questionnaire of students and interviews of teachers, the author found that the cause of errors are mainly four types. They are language transfer, lack of grammatical and lexical knowledge,

lack of practice, treat errors incorrectly. In view of the above four reasons, the author puts forward corresponding solutions as suggestion.

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