

Analyzing Finite Dependent Clauses in English Writing: A Study of Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 Students

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ABSTRACT

Though the concept of subordination has been explored in the context of L1 and L2 speakers of English language, more attention has been on the learners of higher education. Against this background, the present paper set out to explore the use of finite dependent clauses by Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students where the main objective is to examine the extent to which the learners portray their ability to use finite dependent clauses and to also investigate whether they are able to use different types of such clauses. In order to achieve this objective, the study applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods, which included analysis of data obtained from students' sample essays. The study used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to select a sample of twenty-five students from whom the data was collected. The findings of the study revealed that students are able to demonstrate their ability to use the finite dependent clauses as on average, 96 percent of the total population were able to use finite dependent clauses in their writing and they used different types. The results further demonstrated that most students did not use the nominal clauses as compared to the other types of finite dependent clauses. The study, therefore, concludes that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 learners have ability to use finite dependent clauses. However, the recommendation is that more focus should be put on the nominal clauses.

KEYWORDS

Finite clauses; english writing; high school student.

INTRODUCTION

There are several studies, such as Hunt (1965), Maleke (2011) and Morato-Maleke (2019), that have been conducted to explore the concept of subordination. Some of the studies collected data from the participants who used English as their First Language (L1) while others collected data from the participants who used English as their Second Language (L2). Alroudhan (2016) argues that the concept of subordination cannot be discussed solely without finite dependent clauses. The finite dependent clauses are categorised into three sub-divisions namely, Relative/Adjectival clauses, Adverbial clauses and Nominal clauses. Therefore, this paper briefly explores the aforementioned categories. According to Alroudhan (2016) relative clauses which are categorised into restrictive or defining and non-restrictive or non-defining clauses are used by the speaker when they want to point out a noun or provide additional information about the noun in question. Adverbial clauses on the other hand, carry similar roles as the adverbs in the sentence which is to modify a verb, adjective or another adverb Lin (2015). Conversely, nominal clauses perform the same functions that are performed by simple noun phrases such as being the subject, direct

object, indirect object, subject complement and object of the preposition (Berk, 1999). The significance of the study therefore is to bridge the gap which is presented by the aforementioned studies as it explores the use of finite dependent clauses which is a concept of subordination specifically in high school students who are L2 speakers of English language.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present paper is framed by two theories namely, Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) which was pioneered by Chomsky (1957) together with the Cognitive Grammar (CG) which was established by Langacker (1987). According to Chomsky (1957), the TGG extends to explain some complex features of syntax and discusses how the complex sentences are formed, dependent clause embedding and sentence-combination. The TGG by nature focuses mainly on the aspects of a language from a syntax point of view and it assists in identifying the various clause types observed in the writing. As a result, the complex sentences will be easily observed in the students writing in the context of the current paper. Since TGG is a syntactic theory, the paper also adopted CG which focuses on aspects of grammar. The Cognitive Grammar mainly acknowledges that language is an end product of cognition. Thus, language cannot stand independent of the grammar. The collective application of these two theories (TGG and CG) made it possible for the paper to notice the ability of the students in terms of forming complex sentences using finite dependent clauses.

Additionally, the paper examines the use of finite dependent clauses in English language writing: A case of Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 Students and it answers these research questions:

1. To what extent do Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students show understanding of finite dependent clauses?
 - a. Are they able to use finite dependent clauses in their writing?
 - b. Do they use different types?

The descriptive research design was used together with the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The Quantitative Research Approach was employed to qualify the frequency of occurrence of dependent finite clauses in the writing of Grade 11 students. While The qualitative data approach was used because it aims at discussing deeply the underlying meanings of the concepts; therefore, the underlying knowledge of dependent finite clauses will be deeply explored. The Population of the study were the Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students and the all 25 students served as the sample of the current study. The purposive sampling technique, was employed on the basis that finite dependent clauses are part of sample students' syllabus and they are fully aware of the subject of investigation. The convenience technique was employed of availability and accessibility of the study sample.

Data was collected in an essay form where students had to write an argumentative essay on the topic whether smart phones should not be used in schools. Baroroh and Hani (2020) indicates that written language can be used for studying complex sentences as they provide rich data base with more syntactic structures. This is contrary to the spoken language because written language is likely to have longer sentences. Data was analysed through coding; The Nominal Clauses were coded N, Adverbial Clauses as A and Relative Clauses as R. For the subtypes of the adverbials, the researcher coded A-reas for Reason Adverbials, A-conc for Concessive, A-cond for Condition, A-Time for Time and A-purp for Purpose. Then the frequency of occurrence of each type of dependent clause was recorded and detailed discussion was done as they appear in the essays. The researcher

would observe the positions in which the dependent clauses appear to determine whether they are placed properly in the sentences or not as well as the reasons for such. Ultimately, research ethics were taken in to consideration as a key aspect to maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that finite dependent clauses were used in the writing of all the students. The students used all the different finite dependent clauses in their essays and they were used appropriately in the sentences. Figure 1 below is the demonstration of the observed finite dependent clauses and their frequency of occurrence.

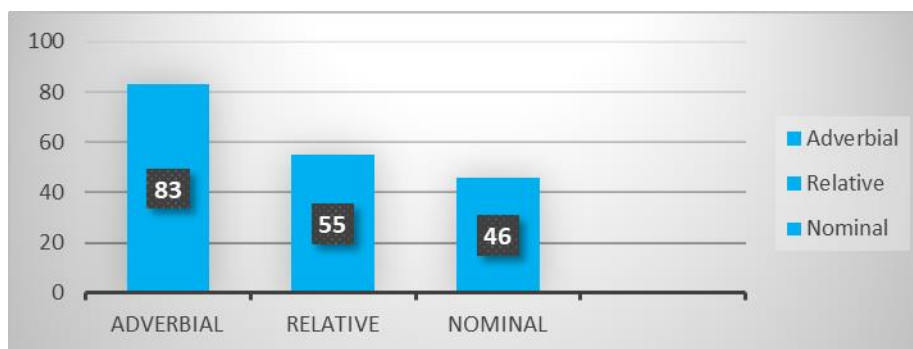


Figure 1. The demonstration of the observed finite dependent clauses

Figure 1: Demonstration of observed finite dependent clauses and their frequency of occurrence

The nominal clauses were the least used type, appearing only 46 (25.0%) times in all sample essays, followed by relative clauses with 55 (29.9%) appearances and the most used type of finite dependent clause was the adverbial clause which featured 83 (45.1%) times. The total number of occurrences was 184.

Nominal Clauses

The nominal clauses were recorded as the least used type of finite dependent clause with a frequency of 25 percent. This result is in sharp contrast to Rafajlovicova (2014) who, in his corpus study, states that nominal clauses are regarded as the most frequently used clauses comprising 39 percent of all subordinate clauses in his corpus. This subtype of finite clause is used, in the current study, as an object of the sentence, subject, subject compliment and prepositional complement as exemplified in (2)-(5).

- (1) *Many people believe that smartphones bring harmful things nowadays at school.*
- (2) *What happens if the teacher is absent?*
- (3) *My opinion is that every student is able to know his/her own background.*
- (4) *This helps a particular student to have a choice of whatever he wants to read at any given time.*

From the above observation, the sample students in the current study proved their adequate understanding on the use of nominal clauses as they managed to show the different syntactic functions of the nominal clauses and they were used correctly in their sentences. However, they did not show where it functions as an appositive. Additionally, they did not provide an incident where the nominal clauses were introduced by the Zero-markers which shows that they knew such sentences are ungrammatical.

As indicated by Sada (2021) that nominal clauses take the functions of a noun phrase and they can appear in three syntactic positions; initial, internal and final position. So, in

all the situations where they appear, they put an emphasis on the main verb. The implication drawn from the observed finding is that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students are not fully aware of the environmental functions of nominal clauses as their knowledge is limited within the sentence-initial and final positions only and are not aware of the internal position.

Relative Clauses

The relative clauses were ranked second in order of their frequency of existence and students used them as post-modifiers which is illustrated in example (6).

(5) *Nowadays students use smartphones in schools which makes them gain bad behaviour, so this affects students badly.*

The above example is a demonstration that the learners are aware of the syntactic functions of the relative clauses, especially the restrictive relative clauses or defining clauses where those clauses defined the head noun either a subject or an object. However, the sample students did not use non-restrictive relative clauses. The similar finding was observed on NUL students as Morato-Maleke and Mokhathi-Mbhele (2020) indicated that the sample students were not familiar with the non-restrictive relative clauses because they were not recorded in their writing. Additionally, Mahlabatheng High School students at Grade 11 level, are fully aware of the positioning of the relative clauses as they correctly placed them immediately after the nouns that they post-modify in their sentences.

Adverbial Clauses

The widely used type of finite dependent clauses is the adverbial clause with a 45 percent share of occurrence. This outcome shows that, students use adverbial clauses more frequently than any other finite clauses. Figure 2, below, is a presentation of all the subtypes of the adverbial clauses that were noticed in the research subjects' essays and their frequency of occurrence.

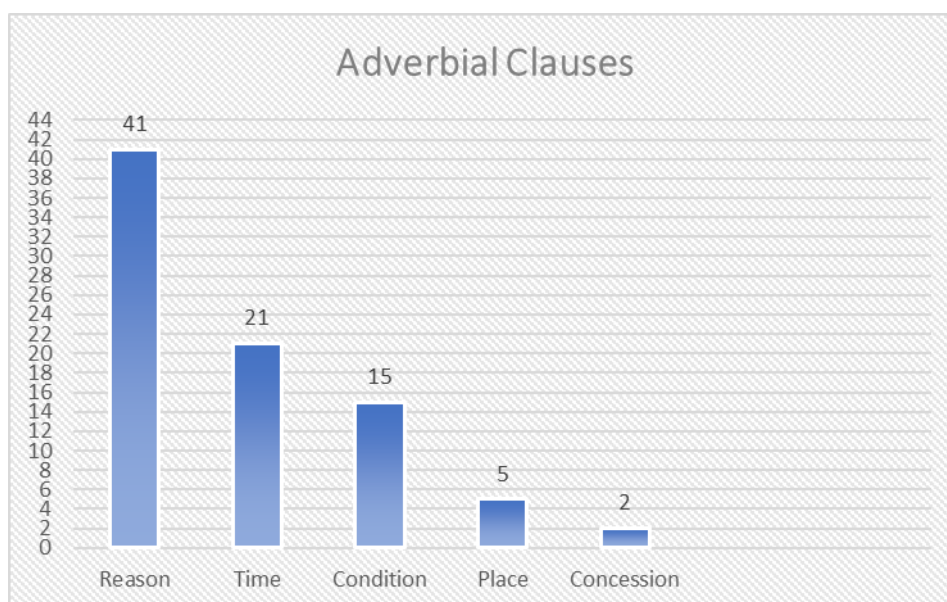


Figure 2. Subtypes of adverbial clauses that featured in the students' essays.

The total number of all the adverbial clauses, featuring in the twenty-five (25) essays was 84. The Reason clauses were the most frequent adverbial clause type with a total number of 41 (48.8 percent), followed by time clauses with a total of 21 (25.0 percent).

The conditional clause ranked third, with a frequency of 15 (17.9 percent), the place clauses ranked fourth with a frequency of 5 (5.9 percent), and the concession clauses were the least used type, featuring only twice (2.4 percent) and they were used by two students. Purpose clauses did not feature at all.

Mahlabatheng high school Grade 11 students proved their knowledge of using different types of the adverbial clauses which were grammatical and correctly used and positioned in their essays, Sentences (7) – (11) below are given as examples.

- (6) *Other students will steal it because they might like it, so phones should not be allowed at schools.* (reason adverbial)
- (7) *When downloading information into students' smart phones there has to be data usage.* (time adverbial clauses)
- (8) *Most of the people find a lot of information on internet if the teacher was not clear in the class.* (Conditional adverbial)
- (9) *Secondly, they use phones to play games at schools with other students like minim notion game where they play together.* (Place adverbials)
- (10) *Even though the purchase of smart phones is costly, not all families can afford the expensive material like that due to the level of wealth or the state of being poor.* (Concession adverbial)

The present paper uncovered that the reason clauses are the most used type of adverbial clauses relative to others. They mostly used this clause to support their arguments given the nature of the topic which they had to write essays on. However, the reason clauses were observed mainly with the subordinating conjunction, because, at the sentence-internal position. The finding is supported by Leech and Svartvik (2002) that reason clauses are introduced by *because* as it is observed in the students' essays. However, learners were only able to use the clauses at the internal position which reflected their limitation.

With regard to the adverbial clause of time, students were able to use them at the sentence-initial position and the positioning occurs because when the adverbial clause of time initiates the sentence, they start with subordinating conjunctions. This view is in support of Kies' (1999) explanation that the adverbial clauses of time are placed at the beginning of sentences to stress the importance of the time when the action in the main clause took place. Students were able to use the time adverbial clauses at the sentence-final position and this effect is supported by Leech and Svartvik's (2002) study that the adverbial clause of time is used to denote the time at which the action in the main clause took place and they are normally introduced by *when, while, during, before* and *after*. The current paper adopts the same view that adverbial clause of time denotes time.

The adverbial clauses of condition were observed in one position which is at the sentence-final. This outcome contradicts Morato-Maleke's (2019) finding that she recorded the use of conditional clause at the beginning of the sentence from four faculties and some of the sentences had two conditional clauses in one sentence; sentence initial position and the other at sentence-final position. This indicates that her research subjects' level of writing was more advanced compared to current paper where none of the students used two conditional clauses in one sentence and at the sentence initial position.

The place adverbial clauses also occurred at the sentence-final position. From example (10), it is noted that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 learners are not exposed to other syntactic environments where adverbial clauses of place can occur. The place adverbials that are positioned at the end of a sentence are meant to give extra information about the verb in the main clause, whereas as they are meant to give background information when they are placed at the beginning of a sentence (Biber, 1988). Morato-Maleke (2019) makes a similar observation and states that the place adverbials are mobile, they can be placed at

the sentence-initial and final. In the case of her study, her findings reflected that the students only used them at the beginning and the end of the sentence. This reflection affirmed that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students are not fully aware of the other environmental functions of the place adverbials as they placed it at the final position only. They failed to use such clauses at the beginning of the sentence.

The adverbial clauses of concession were also observed in the data at the sentence-initial position only. This contradicts Kies (1999), who highlighted that concessive clauses can only occur at the initial position or final position of a sentence. Kies (1999) argues that in the case where it occurs at the beginning, the speaker introduces the background of the topic they are discussing and for framing purposes. With regard to the situation where the concessive clause is used at the end of the sentence, it is because the speaker admits their problems. This reflection of the results indicates that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 students are not fully aware of the other syntactic position where concessive clause is placed at the sentence-final position.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 learners have an adequate understanding of the finite dependent clauses as they proved their ability to use them and where they reflected, they have been used appropriately. Therefore, the paper has achieved its proposed objective because the first research question was to find out whether Mahlabatheng High School Grade 11 are able to use finite dependent clauses. The assumption was that students are not able to use finite dependent clauses in their writing. The second assumption was that learners are not able to use different types of finite dependent clauses. The two assumptions are proven wrong. The students have a reasonable understanding of finite dependent clauses and they were able to use different types of such clauses. However, they are not fully aware of some of the syntactic and environmental functions of some of the finite dependent clauses. Therefore, the recommendation is that more focus should be put on the functions of nominal clauses and different environmental functions of the adverbial clauses.

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