Identification of English Clauses in an EFL class

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the heuristic model based on location-based identification (LBI) approach of English Clauses, in coordination with the structure-based identification (SBI) approach, hoping to provide EFL instructors and learners an identification framework for three main distinct clauses (i.e., nominal, adjectival and adverbial clauses), hoping to facilitate EFL reading and writing when the three different clauses are involved. The paper seeks to answer the questions: Is there a quick access to identifying three different clauses? What are the shortcomings of LBI and SBI? Two perspectives have been considered in the course of identifying clauses: one is through the relative location (LBI mode) of each clause against the main structure (normally the main verb), the other is through judging the complete or incomplete structures (SBI) after the conjunction, the head of the clause. The study suggests that it should be through the consideration of both perspectives that one can accurately identify the three clauses. The present article starts with giving the definitions of each clause, its individual pattern development, relative position of each clause in a given sentence, and finally maps out the heuristic model of combining LBI and SBI identifying modes in the course of identification of clauses.

Keywords: clauses, nominal, adjectival, adverbial, relative position, location-based

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Introduction

Over the decades a huge amount of endeavors has been devoted to identifying the types of constituents (e.g., clauses) based on certain information or cues that enhance sentence comprehension. Recent studies in EFL sentence parsing along with many theories in psycholinguistics have been suggested help expedite the process of identifying difficult or confusing structures such as clauses. So far, a wide array of information sources has been indicated to affect sentence parsing, inclusive of vocabulary, transitional devices, syntactic and probabilistic information (Phillips & Lewis, 2013; Snedeker & Trueswell, 2004). However, the ever-intricate approaches where various constraints interact with each other during sentence processing have long been a frustration for both EFL instructors and learners. (For more information, see Fodor, 1998; Gibson, 1998; Trueswell, 1993; Brown, 2012) There is few relevant studies that focus on how the clausal structures can be elucidated and identified through instructional design, which helps both instructors and learners gain quick access to the distinct features of the three main clauses in a given sentence. To provide a framework or a model that meets the goal in the EFL classrooms is both significant and constructive.

While sentence parsing can be composed of a series of cognitive processes that helps shorten the gaps between word-level and discourse-level semantic processes, the present study is not meant to touch upon the interface processes that serve to build or recover dependencies between words, or other micro-scope ingredients, including frequently-occurring function morphemes (Phillips & Lewis, 2013), cross-sentential comparisons (Morgan, Meier, & Newport, 1989), transitional probabilities between syllables (Thompson and Newport, 2007), and semantics (Pinker, 1984), as these analyses may not be helpful at the earliest stages of acquisition, especially for EFL learners. (For further information, see Gibson, 1998, 2013; Gordon, etc., 2001; King & Just, 1991). Instead, this paper will focus on the locus of foci of each individual clause, and its relative position against the main structure, and through the relative position the individual clauses that appear in a given sentence can be easily identified and acquired.

Clauses

In English syntax, a **clause** is considered the smallest grammatical unit that can express a complete proposition. Specifically, a typical clause is made up of a subject (normally, a noun or nominal structure) and a predicate, where a verb phrase (a verb together with any objects and other modifiers). In imperative moods, the subject is, however, sometimes not expressed (or in null-subject sentences or non-finite clauses). Normally, a simple sentence is usually indicated as S(subject) + V(verb) + O (object) (e.g., The man likes the dog.) More complex sentences may consist of multiple clauses, which is indicated as "Conj.(conjunction+ S + V+ O" (Note that, there are cases where the verb is without any object or complement).   If the S and O in S+V+O are replaced by a clause, then they are nominal clauses.

By the same token if an clause serves as an adjective (placed behind the noun it modifies), then it is an adjective clause, so is the situation of an adverbial clause, which suggests a clause playing the role of an adverb.   Basically we have three different clauses; namely,

     a. Nominal Clause: (Conj.+S+V~)
     b. Adjectival clause: (Conj.+S+V~)
     c. Adverbial clause: (Conj.+S+V~)

Examples of each can be given as below:

1) **What begins well** ends badly.
2) Anything **that begins well ends badly.**
3) **If ambition doesn't hurt you,** you haven't got it**.**

As can be easily seen, sentence 1), 2), and 3) serves as nominal, adjectival, and adverbial clause respectively.

Nominal Clauses

As specified previously, nominal clause can be simply defined as a clause as a noun, which can be a subject or an object. This can be expressed through the pattern below:

     (Conj.+S+V~) | **V** | **(Conj.+S+V~)**

4) **That English grammar is easy to learn is widely acknowledged.**
5) **Everybody accepts that English grammar is easy to learn.**
6) **That everyone learns English grammar** means **that it is easy and important.**

Note that the nominal clause is led by the conjunction "that" in all the sentences above, with sentence 4, nominal clause before the main verb, sentence 5, behind, and sentence 6, around. Also note that the structure behind the head (the conjunction) is complete, and independent both semantically and syntactically.

Adjectival Clauses

A relative clause, also called an adjective clause or an adjectival clause, begins with a relative adverb (e.g., *when, where,* or *why* in English) or a relative pronoun (e.g., *who, whom, whose, that,* or *which* in English). More often, the English relative pronoun may, however, be omitted and only implied if it plays the role of the object of the verb or object of a preposition in a restrictive clause. Specifically, a clause that serves as an adjective of the subject or an object (both are nouns) is called adjectival clause. As it is led by a relative pronoun, there are three cases to be considered: subjective, possessive and objective. It can be logically assumed that the structures behind the head (relative pronoun) is not complete; that is, in subjective pronoun case, the subject behind the relative pronoun does not exist, while in possessive pronoun case, a possessive word behind is missing, with the objective pronoun case, an object word behind missing. See the examples below:

7) He is the boy **who always comes on time.**   (subjective case)
8) He is the boy **whose father is a teacher**.   (possessive case)
9) He is the boy **(whom) I saw**.   (objective case)

The relative position of the adjective clause against the main verb can be specified as (two adjectival clauses around the main verb and behind the Nouns it modifies):

     N(Conj.+S+V~) | **V** | **N(Conj.+S+V~)**

It is noteworthy that the adjectival clauses are located behind the noun it modifies, and the structures behind the head (relative pronoun, or conjunction) is in complete, based on the nature of the verb in the clause; it can be either transitive or intransitive, complete, or incomplete. An example of the pattern above can be:

10) The student that majors in English likes the novels that are written by King Yung.

Adverbial Clause

An **adverbial clause, like nominal and adjectival clauses,** is a dependent clause that functions as an adverb; that is, the entire clause modifies a verb, or the main verb in the sentence. As with all clauses, it is composed of a subject and predicate, although the subject as well as the (predicate) verb may sometimes be omitted and implied (see below). Specifically, a clause that serves as an adverb of the main verb is called adverbial clause. As it is led by a conjunction (e.g., when, if, though, because), the structures behind the head (adverbial conjunctions) must be made complete. See the sentences below:

11) **When people are free to do as they please**, they usually imitate each other.
12) Things are easier said than done, **unless you are a stutter.**
13). **If you have a chance**, keep it, or you will lose it.

Like nominal and adjectival clauses, a pattern with adjectival clauses around the main sentence can be formed below:

     (Conj.+S+V~), N | **V** | **N, (Conj.+S+V~)**

14) Though life is short, we should cherish it, because it is precious.

It is worthy of note that the adverbial clauses can be located before, between and behind the main structure, and the structures behind the head (adverbial conjunctions) must also be made complete (based on the nature of the verb in the clause; it can be either transitive or intransitive, complete, or incomplete, like the situations in nominal and adjectival conjunctions).

Summary of the three clauses

It is important to give an account of the patterns of each of the three clauses (nominal, adjectival and adverbial) before the relative positions against the main structures can be clarified and consolidated. Here are the presentations of all the individual clauses, first in the individual pattern, then in a collective pattern.

Pattern 1:	[Conj.+s+v~]		V	N
Pattern 2:		N	V	[Conj.+s+v~]
Pattern 3:		N [Conj.+s+v~]	V	N
Pattern 4:		N	V	N [Conj.+s+v~]
Pattern 5:	[Conj.+s+v~],	N	V	N
Pattern 6:		N	V	N(,) [Conj.s+v~]

Then, Pattern 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 can be combined into one;

The collective pattern of clauses

[Conj.+S+V~], N [Conj.+S+V~]   V   N [Conj+S+V~], [Conj.+S+V~]
     [Conj.+S+V~]   [Conj.+S+V]
     5   1   3   2   4   6

As indicated, number 5 and 6 refer to adverbial clauses, 1 and 2 nominal clauses, and 3 and 4 adjectival clauses.

Location-based identification (LBI) of clauses

Learners may find it easy to identify the function of each clause if they can make use of the relative position of each clause against the main verb, the term of which can be coined as location based identification (LBI). Nominal clauses (1, and 2) above can be identified as they both are positioned around the main Verb, while adjectival clauses (3, and 4) are behind the nouns (either subject or object, or complement), with the condition that the Conjunction (relative pronoun) actually stands for the Noun (antecedent). Finally, for the adverbial clauses (5 and 6), clause number 5 has a ",' (comma) behind, while clause number 6 can either have or have not a comma. This may cause problems in identification, as clause number 2, and 4 (nominal, and adjectival, respectively) may be misidentified as adverbial if the main Verb is intransitive (with no object behind). For example, check the patterns below:

N   V   [Conj.+s+v~]

The clause above can either be a nominal clause (if the main Verb is transitive) or an adverbial clause (if the main Verb is intransitive). See the sentences below

15) The man studied hard **that he finally succeeded**.
16) The man realized **that he would finally succeed**.

The main verb in sentence 15 is intransitive (studied), so the clause "**that he finally succeeded**" serves as an adverb, while the main verb in sentence 16 is transitive (realized), so the clause "**that he would finally succeed"** is a nominal clause.

Problems of Such LBI may also occur when the main verb belongs to dative verb groups (such as, give, tell, assign, bring, write, .etc.), as indicated in the pattern below:

N   V   N [Conj.+s+v~]

The clause above can either be a nominal clause (if the main Verb is a member of dative verb group), or an adverbial clause (if the main Verb is transitive), or even an adjectival clause (if the conjunction represents the antecedent). See the sentences below

17) The man told the manager **when he would take the work.**
18) The man had done the work **when the manager called him**.

The main verb in sentence 17 is a dative verb which requires two nouns as objects, so "**when he would take the work"** serves as the second object, and thus it is a nominal clause. As to sentence 18, the object "the work" is not what "when" represents, so it is not adjectival by nature, but adverbial, since the clause **"when the manager called him"** serves as an adverb, and therefore it is an adverbial clause.

Another identification problem comes from the "appositive," as always positioned behind the noun, which case is most often confused with an adjectival clause (positioned behind the noun it modifies). See the patterns and the corresponding sentences below:

N   V   N [Conj.+s+v~]   →   Nominal clause (N = Conj.+s+v~)
N   V   N [Conj.+s+v~]   →   Adjectival   (N = Conj. only)

19) The man spread the news **that oil price will rise.**
20) The man spread the news **that is shocking**.

In sentence 19, "the news" is equivalent with "**that oil price will rise",** the latter of which is therefore an appositive of the noun, and is identified as nominal clause. By contrast, in sentence 20, "the news" is the antecedent of the conjunction "that", so "the news" is equivalent with "**that" only, and so "that is shocking "**should be an adjectival clause.

As discussed above, LBI is not flawless, and so it is anything but a perfect approach in accurately identifying different clause functions. What follows is the introduction of another identification approach, which is based on the judgment of clausal structures (in terms of complete or incomplete). Such an approach is basically a structure-based identification (SBI), which seeks to compensate for the shortcomings of LBI.

Structure based (SB) clause identification

It is essential to realize the different structures led by conjunctions before the function of each clause can be accurately identified. Let's compare the structures below, and try to induce the general guideline of SBI.

21)   The teacher suggested **that we should be diligent**.
22)   The teacher gave a suggestion **that we should be diligent**.
23)   The teacher gave a suggestion **that we should follow**.
24)   The students followed the teacher's suggestion **that they all passed the test**.

Obviously, the clause in sentence 21 is nominal (as it serves as the object of the verb), and so is the clause in sentence 22 (as the whole clause is equivalent with the noun "suggestion"). By contrast, in sentence 23, the clause is to modify its antecedent, thus adjectival, while in sentence 24, the clause does not serve as an object (thus, not nominal), nor does it have a noun as antecedent before it (thus not adjectival), and so it must be adverbial as there are only three types of clauses, which are mutually exclusive. What should be noted is that there are structural differences among these three types of clauses. A comparison table can be used below for our convenience. Note that "being complete" or "being incomplete" will be used when comparing the structures between the Main one and the Subordinate ones (i.e., three clauses) by using sentences 21, 22, 23, and 24 as the data for analyses.

Table 1: A comparison of main and subordinate structures (complete or incomplete)

Involving clauses	Main Structure (with Verb)	conjunction	Subordinate Structure
Nominal	incomplete	that	complete
Adjectival	complete	that	incomplete
Adverbial	complete	that	complete

To elaborate and elucidate, the main structure in the sentence with nominal clause, as can be seen, is incomplete by nature (as in sentence 21, "the teacher suggested" is not complete; an object is needed), while in the subordinate nominal clause of sentence 21, "we should be diligent" is complete.

However, in sentence 21, what should be noted is the difference between "appositive" and "adjectival pronoun led clause." Clearly, the adjectival clause (excluding "that") is incomplete (as in sentence 23), and while the nominal clause (as appositive), as in sentence 22, is also complete though the main structure is complete. In the similar vein, the adjectival clause (excluding "that") in sentence 24 is complete ("**they all passed the test**", so is the main structure "The students followed the teacher's suggestion." There seems to be a hidden rule behind the distinction of the three clauses as well as their main structures. However, like LBI, SBI is without flaws in that learners will still have to judge the nature of the verbs (transitive or intransitive) to decide the structures of being complete or incomplete. For this problem, this paper suggests the combination of both LBI and SBI to reduce the probability of misidentification to the minimum.

Combination of LBI and SBI

The combination of both LBI and SBI is, as this paper suggest, is contributive to the accurate identification of different clauses. Learners may start from LBI to tentatively judge the function of the target clauses, and then to further affirm the function, adopt SBI, which may further consolidate the function. In fact, if learners start with SBI and then LBI, effective identification can also be expected. There seems to be individual differences with reference to the order of application. For the convenience of demonstration, the combination of these two modes can be expressed through the patterns below:

The combination of LBI and SBI for clauses (C: complete; IC-incomplete)

	[Conj.+C]			**[Conj.+C]**		
[Conj.+ C],	**N** **[Conj.+ICe]**	**V**	**N**	**[Conj+ IC],**	**[Conj.+C]**	
	[Conj.+C]			**[Conj.+C]**		
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	

Note that the Arabic numbers are different from the previous one for the convenience of interpretation. Also note that in the location of Arabic number 3 and 5, two clauses are juxtaposed, with the upper one "appositive" as nominal clause (complete structure), and the lower one "adjectival" clause (with incomplete structure).

Conclusion

It is of prime importance for both EFL instructor and learners to master, or at least, to have good sense of distinguishing different clausal structures. However, the existing literature lacks systematic discussion of the problems caused by confusion of such structures. Learners with no good sense of identifying clausal structure are not able to apply them in their reading and writing, thus failing to grapple with the rhetoric of English syntax. The aim of this paper is to help both instructors and learners firstly understand the rationale behind the constructions of the three clauses, and second to develop and present the LBI, and then followed by SBI, and lastly suggesting the combination of both, in the hope that whoever interested in the clausal structures may gain insight, and further benefit in their reading and writing. Future studies of relevant topics may consider the perspectives of semantics, or the combination of syntax and semantics to help reduce the error of misidentifying clausal structures to the minimum.

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