Delving into the Morphosyntactic Choice of ELF Authors: A Case Study of Relative Clauses in Academic Writing

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Abstract

The objective of this research study was to analyze the use of relative clauses with regard to types and characteristics in the academic writing, i.e. research manuscripts, of ELF writers. The data was collected from international academic conference proceedings with papers published over a three-year period. Based on the types proposed by McCarthythe results revealed, the ELF writers' preference for defining clauses over non-defining relative clauses, with a significant usage frequency of the relativizer *that*. The characteristics of relative clauses used by ELF writers were analyzed according to the modified, ELF-based taxonomy. The analysis found the author' preference for the presence of a relativizer, use of the relativizer *that*, relativized subjects as pronouns, center-embedded relative clause position, and active voice construction. This study surveyed the morphosyntax system of a sample of ELF writers through their academic writing and illustrates the flexibility and fluidity of ELF speakers' language use.

***Keywords*:** Academic writing, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Morphosyntax, Relative clauses, Relativizers

INTRODUCTION

In today's world where English is integrated into a wide range of activities in numerous fields, people frequently use English as a means of communication to maintain global connections regardless of their status as non-native English speakers. This situation with non-native English speakers' use of the language has resulted in a significant increase in the number of such speakers. This phenomenon has meanwhile been mirrored by a slight decrease in the number of native English speakers (Floris & Renandya, 2020). Although this increase of English usage among non-native speakers is not unprecedented in this era of disruption, the rise of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been viewed by linguists as an interesting development in the evolution of English. Chen et al. (2020) suggest that ELF is significant as it allows changes in forms and shows situation-driven flexibility and fluidity. This allows its users to shape the way they conduct communication at their convenience with a lesser adherence to grammatical accuracy as normalized by native English speakers. However, it does not necessarily mean ELF speakers dismiss the rules entirely; instead, they employ their own strategies in tackling the communication challenges they are faced with as non-native speakers (Cavalheiro et al., 2021).

The continued increase of ELF speakers has become a linguistic phenomenon and is seen in a wider range of contexts; one of these is research publication. Research publication is a process by which individuals from particular areas of academic or scientific study outline their interests or expertise in a particular topic. This is done regularly through the publication of academic articles. Most research publishers welcome articles and papers written in English by authors of different native languages. Navarro et al. (2022) suggest that both the increasing number of so-called ELFers (ELF speakers) and the growth of ELF facilitates are leading to the emergence of an ELF community in academia. As such, ELF-written academic papers are seen with increased frequency in research related fields, including research writing classes, international research publishers, as well as international academic conferences.

Despite the flexibility of ELF, research writing remains constrained by the standard grammatical rules. Besides, academic writers are also required to produce work is clearly informative, academically sound, systematically organized, significantly relevant, logically and ethically conducted, reproducible, and generalizable. Therefore, authors develop their own strategies to write quality research, maximizing their writing techniques and proficiency for the best results. In conveying textual information within research contexts several linguistic features are utilized, often to modify written discourses for clarity. According to Timyam (2024), modification of lexical elements (e.g. noun phrases) is more likely to occur in written discourses such as academic writing, partially because "writers have limited space to communicate ideas about a discipline" and thus are "led to the preference for syntactic structures of denser textual information". This may prove to be daunting for ELF writers. Although noun phrases are viewed as a compact element, there are a large number of modifiers to which they can be attached: lexical, phrasal, and clausal modifiers, if syntactically categorized, each differing in usage and constraints (Biber et al., 1999).

Among the numerous modifiers employed in research writing, relative clauses are favored by non-native English authors as ELFers to elaborate on nominal elements in their research. Relative clauses can provide clear and precise information to the antecedents they serve, and thus are much easier than other types of modifiers for novice readers to comprehend and grasp when explicit ideas are being transmitted in written discourses (Markel & Holmes, 1994). Nonetheless, Huddleston and Pullum (2005) acknowledged that relative clauses can cause some problems to non-native English writers because of the complexity in the clauses structure. Relative clauses, though

considered more comprehensible than lexical modifiers, require writers to understand not only their functions but specific features of their usage (e.g. relativizer omissibility and stackability).

Due to the complexity of relative clauses many scholars have investigated the use of English relative clauses used by non-native English authors in different settings (e.g. Koçak, 2020; Phuong, 2023; Tipparach et al., 2022). These studies identified the uses of English relative clauses in terms of their frequency, characteristics, and types. However, the majority of these studies examined them through the lens of speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), often in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings rather than in ELF ones. As the trend towards ELF use continues in an upward direction more scholars have begun addressing this topic in various ELF settings. For instance, Wu et al. (2020) sought to reveal the difference in how ELF research authors connected the meaning of textual information in research articles and found syntactic complexities in the use of coordinate phrases and complex nominal structures to improve clarity and explicitness. The growing interest in ELF research has allowed for analysis of a range of linguistic features such as sentence and clausal structure as well as phrasal and lexical units (Timyam, 2024).

In contrast, the use of relative clauses among ELF writers seems to be underrepresented in the research field with only a few studies undertaken. To try and address the imbalance, this study sought to identify relative clauses used by ELF research writers whose research articles were published in the proceedings of an international academic conference. Identifying the types and functions of relative clauses in ELF academic writing was believed to illustrate the morphosyntactic system of ELF in an empirical manner; this would also identify any deviation in clausal modifier usage among ELF speakers from standard native English speaker usage.

To accomplish these aims, this study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of relative clauses are used by ELF authors in research writing?
2. What are the characteristics of relative clauses found in research articles by ELF authors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Prototypical Properties of English Relative Clauses

In English, relative clauses, also known as adjective clauses, are clausal post-nominal modifiers mostly serving to offer either obligatory or additional information about their nominal antecedents. Despite the same function, relative (adjective) clauses are different from single-word adjectives. See the following.

1a) A [new] employee looks very smart.

1b) A new employee recently [hired] looks very smart.

1c) A new employee [that wears a pullover] looks very smart.

1d) *A [that wears a pullover] new employee looks very smart.

In 1a) and 1b), the adjectives “new” and “hired” are placed position-differently: the former is in the pre-nominal whereas the latter in the post-nominal, both of which are however grammatical. Meanwhile, 1c) and 1d) present a significant difference. When 1d) moves the relative clause “that wears a pullover” to the pre-nominal position, it becomes ungrammatical. These examples reflect that relative clauses must be placed in the rightmost position within a noun phrase following the head noun, whereas single-word adjectives can be more position-diverse (i.e. attributive, predicative, and postpositive) (Cinque, 2010).

To form an English relative clause, a relativizer must be used. According to McCarthy (2021), relativizers, usually placed in the clause-initial position, function to indicate the construction of a relative clause, including which, who, whom, whose, when, why, where, and that. Also, the use of the "gap strategy" is necessary as it makes relative clauses distinguishable from other types of clauses (Cinque, 2020). This strategy facilitates the construction of an English relative clause by leaving a gap where a noun phrase constituent within a sentence is co-referred to by and, simultaneously, cannot be replaced with any other item than a relativizer nor left empty. Consider the following.

2a) The students [who _ graduated last year] are holding a homecoming party.

2b) The students [that _ graduated last year] are holding a homecoming party.

2c) *The students [graduated last year] are holding a homecoming party.

2d) *The students [they graduated last year] are holding a homecoming party.

In the given sentences, brackets represent the appearance of relative clauses, and an underscore represents the gap created by the gap strategy. As in 2a) and 2b), the present relative clauses are placed after the head noun *students*; the relativizers *who* and *that* apply, both referring to the same preceding head noun. Meanwhile, 2c) and 2d) are considered ungrammatical because one lacks a relativizer and the other leaves no gap for a relativizer, respectively.

The gap strategy allows a relativizer to satisfy different functions in English relative clauses as long as a gap position is available. As Timyam (2015) suggests, relativizers can serve various functions: subject of clause, object of clause (direct and indirect), object of preposition, object of comparison, subject complement, genitive, adjunct of place, adjunct of time, and adjunct of reason.

Nevertheless, the gap strategy does not force the appearance of relativizers. In some cases, a relativizer is omitted, i.e. when it serves as an object in the clause and when it serves as an adjunct. An exception applies when the entire clause functions to provide additional information to the antecedent.

Relative clauses, in English, are typically embedded in two positions. On the one hand, relative clauses that modify a subject are called "center-embedded relative clauses". On the other hand, relative clauses that modify constituents of a complement and are placed sentence-finally are called "right-embedded relative clauses". The examples are as follows, respectively.

3a) Everything [that you did] affected the progress of our project.

3b) Henry always visits the town [where he was born].

2. Types of English Relative Clauses

Relative clauses are typically classified according to their contribution to the antecedent. Linguists have applied different names to these types of relative clause despite referring to the same concept, for example, restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses (Biber et al., 1999); integrated and supplementary relative clauses (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005); and defining and non-defining relative clauses (McCarthy, 2021). In each paired classification, the former (restrictive, integrated, and defining) represents relative clauses that provide essential information to the antecedent without any separating punctuations inserted, and the latter (non-restrictive, supplementary, and non-defining) represents those that provide extra information with certain punctuations (e.g. comma, hyphen, and

parentheses) in-between. As for the present study, the terms "defining" and "non-defining" were used for analysis of relative clause types.

Considering the following sentences, 4a) exemplifies the use of a defining relative clause and 4b) a non-defining one.

4a) Passengers [who need help] can press the red button on the train.

4b) Netflix, [which is a famous streaming platform], has its own original content.

4c) *Netflix, [that is a famous streaming platform], has its own original content.

With respect to the use of relativizers in relative clauses, it can be noted that most of them are permitted with the exception of *that.* Despite its frequent interchangeability with *which*, *who,* and *whom*, it is generally not found in the non-defining relative clause construction, thus making the sentence ungrammatical as in 4c).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Collection of Data

Given that the present study aimed to analyze relative clauses in an academic ELF context, proceedings of an international academic conference hosted by two public universities in Bangkok, Thailand, were selected as the source of the data. The selected conference proceedings featured academic papers on diverse topics in the fields of languages, humanities, and social sciences, which were written by non-native English writers from different countries. These authors were identified as non-native according to their names and the affiliations which they provided in the manuscripts, indicating a cohort of Thais, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Malaysians. This could be considered representative of the diverse nationalities found in the academic ELF community in Asia. Articles were collected from a three-year period (2023–2025), with only English language peer-reviewed research manuscripts from the proceedings included in the study. Articles written in other languages were excluded; the total number was 50 papers (with 19 manuscripts published in 2023, 13 in 2024, and 18 in 2025, respectively).

2. Data Analysis

In order to answer Research Question 1, the researchers analyzed the types of relative clauses found in the selected academic papers. The analysis was based on the classification by McCarthy (2021), namely defining and non-defining relative clauses. All of the relative clauses found were analyzed regardless of their antecedents and positions and are described accordingly in the following section.

With regard to Research Question 2, the researchers adapted and modified the taxonomy of English relative clauses' characteristics presented by Timyam (2021). These include presence and absence of relativizers, use of "that", pronoun relativization, relativizer embedment position, and preference of active-passive voice construction. The characteristics of ELF writers' relative clauses described in the results section outlines the morphosyntactic system used by ELFers.

3. Verification of Data Analysis

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the reliability of data analysis can be verified by agreement among inter-coders of 80% or above. To accomplish this, the researchers had the preliminary data validated by three

English language instructors who had been teaching different English courses for more than 10 years. These instructors reanalyzed the data using the frameworks applied in this study: McCarthy's (2021) for the types of English relative clauses and Timyam's (2021) modified taxonomy for relative clauses characteristics.

4. Ethical Consideration

To ensure ethical good practice, the researchers carefully insured that no personal information regarding the article writers was revealed in this study, as it dealt only with linguistic content of the writers' work. Their personal information (i.e. names and affiliations) was considered only when the researchers were identifying whether they were native speakers of English or not.

RESULTS

1. Research Question 1: What types of relative clauses are used by ELF authors in research writing?

Based on McCarthy's (2021) types of relative clauses, the researchers scrutinized a total of 1,039 relative clauses found in the selected research manuscripts. These relative clauses are categorized into two types; defining clauses and non-defining clauses. The number of defining clauses was higher than non-defining clauses. (596 and 443 clauses, respectively). According to the analysis, most of the ELF research authors employed defining relative clauses to modify noun antecedents in different sections of their writings (e.g. introduction, methodology, and discussion). In the case of defining clauses, each clause was found to be initiated by different relativizers, namely that, which, who, where, when, whom, and whose. It was also found that some defining relative clauses were employed without using a relativizer. See Table 1 for their usage frequency.

Table 1: Relativizers in defining clauses found in the manuscripts

Relativizers	Times of occurrence		Examples
	Unit	%	
that	161	27.01	"... the innovation [*that* was previously created]"
which*	122	20.47	"A hypothesis [*which* the author mentioned above] ..."
who	98	16.44	"Only the students [*who* scored lower than 40] ..."
NONE	67	11.24	"The inter-raters [[Ø] the researchers invited] ..."
where	49	8.22	"... the institute [*where* they conducted research]"
when	39	6.54	"... on the date [*when* the samples were available]"
whom*	32	5.37	"All lecturers [*whom* the researchers invited to an interview] ..."
whose	28	4.70	"Some economists [*whose* educational backgrounds have remained unidentified] ..."
Total	596	100.00	-

Note: the use of "preposition+which/whom" was included.

As illustrated in Table 1, the relativizer *that* showed the highest usage frequency with 27.01% in defining relative clauses, followed by *which* (20.47%), *who* (16.44%), *where* (8.22%), and *whom* (6.54%), while the genitive *whose* was least used at 4.70%. Among these relativizers, the omission of relative clauses in object-patterned clauses was also observed (11.24%).

This usage frequency value revealed that most of the ELF authors surveyed in this study preferred the use of *that* over the other relativizers, potentially due to the flexibility of usage and interchangeability with the rest, except *whose* and the non-standard *which* and *whom* (preposition+which/whom).

Another notable feature is the more frequent association of defining relative clauses with non-human antecedents (for example, "assumption", "analysis", and "study/studies") than with human ones (for example, "researcher", "participant", and "informant"); the ratio was 364:232. Taking a closer look at the use of relativizers, it was found that the relativizer "that" still showed the highest frequency with both types of antecedents. The significance of these findings in relation to *that* shall be further discussed later.

Regarding non-defining relative clauses, due to the constraints discussed above, the relativizer *that* was not found in the surveyed manuscripts. The relativizers used by the ELF writers included *which* (including those in the non-stranded construction), *who*, *where*, *whom* (including the non-stranded), *when*, and *whose*, respectively. See Table 2 for their usage frequency.

Table 2: Relativizers in non-defining clauses found in the manuscripts

Relativizers	**Times of occurrence**		**Examples**
	Unit	**%**	
which*	192	43.34	"The information, [*which* was interpreted by the system] …"
who	104	23.48	"None of the students in the control group, [*who* were previously informed about the rules], …"
where	67	15.12	"… was assigned to monitor the changes in the room, [*where* the researcher conducted a second experiment]"
when	44	9.93	"Some participants were absent the following day, [*when* the class was mainly about opinion exchange] …"
whom*	19	4.29	"… the group of students, [to *whom* an exercise was given]"
whose	17	3.84	"… to represent their school, [*whose* principal was a member of the association]"
Total	443	100.00	-

Note: the use of "preposition+which/whom" was included.

Table 2 shows a significantly higher usage frequency for most of the relativizers when compared with the results for defining clauses and taking into consideration the non-permissibility of relativizer omission and without the interchangeable counterpart "that". In non-defining clauses, *which* showed the highest frequency (43.34%), followed by *who* (23.48%), *where* (15.12%), and *when* (9.93%). The remaining relativizers showed slightly lower usage frequency: *whom* (4.29%), and *whose* (3.84%).

It was partly an additional function of *which* as a clausal antecedent modifier that caused its greater usage frequency in the ELF manuscripts. Specifically, the relativizer *which* could serve as only a nominal (noun) antecedent modifier when used in a defining relative clause, while in a non-defining one, it could hold two different functions: nominal antecedent modifier and clausal antecedent modifier (for example, "The assignment with corrective feedback was returned to the students one by one, [which took approximately two hours of the final session]".) This usage was observed 81 times out of the total of 192 non-defining clauses that used *which* as a modifier.

In comparison with defining clauses, the usage of non-defining clauses was found more frequently with non-human antecedents than with human ones at the ratio of 292:151.

2. Research Question 2: What are the characteristics of relative clauses found in research articles of ELF authors?

Following the identification of types of relative clauses, the researchers proceeded with the analysis of their characteristics based on the taxonomy of English relative clauses' characteristics outlined by Timyam (2021), as described below.

2.1 Presence and Absence of Relativizers: In the analysis of relative clauses in the manuscripts, the presence and absence of relativizers revealed notable patterns. Out of 1,039 relative clauses, 67 showed the absence of explicit relativizers compared with 972 clauses found with an explicit relativizer present. Among the relativizers used, "which" had the highest usage frequency, occurring in 314 clauses, indicating its significant role in structuring relative clauses as well as its popularity with the ELF authors surveyed in this study. The absence of relativizers was most commonly observed with "which" and "that," particularly in object-patterned clauses, where omission is permissible in defining clauses. Examples of such omissions include the following:

5a) The session [[Ø] they joined was purposely selected].

5b) The methods [[Ø] the researcher employed were innovative].

2.2 Use of "that": In this study, most of the ELF authors showed a notable preference for the relativizer *that* over other options such as *which*, *who*, and *whom*. This tendency is likely due to the syntactic flexibility and interchangeability offered by *that*. This relativizer is widely recognized for its ability to function in a variety of relative clause constructions, regardless of the preceding noun or pronoun. As noted by Biber et al. (1999), this feature is particularly useful in spoken and informal registers of English. However, the frequent inclusion of *that* observed in the present study contradicts the connection with spoken and informal usage, as *that* was shown to have quite a high usage frequency (161 times) in academic manuscripts written by ELF authors, whose priority is clarity and ease of communication.

This interchangeability was not absolute, despite being used by ELF authors. There are, according to the grammatical conventions, exceptions in which "that" cannot replace other relativizers. For example, *whose* is a possessive relativizer which cannot be replaced by *that*; for instance, *"The interrater [that teaching experience was recognized]" is ungrammatical. Additionally, *which* and *whom* prevent *that* from functioning, especially in non-stranded relative clauses with prepositions such as "the informants [with whom the researcher spoke]".

2.3 Pronoun Relativization: The analysis revealed that the ELF authors in this study used relative clauses with *which to* relativize subjects more often than to relativize objects, with the ratio of 507:221 (excluding 311 clauses with *whose*, *where*, and *when* because they were marked as adjuncts, not subjects or objects of relative clauses). It was further noted that the authors used relativized subjects in non-defining clauses (119 out of 215 clauses, or 55.35%, excluding those with the genitive and adjuncts) more often than in defining ones (171 out of 413 clauses, or 41.40%). This was most likely because ELF speakers, as well as writers, seem to be more familiar with filling in the gap of the subject, which can be seen easily in the clause-initial position, than that of the object, which is in the clause-final position and might be less easily noticed (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

2.4 Relativizer Embedment Position: It was interesting to observe that most of the relative clauses employed by the ELF authors in their manuscripts were center-embedded, i.e. being placed inside of the sentences of which the antecedents were being modified. While 232 relative clauses (22.32%) were right-embedded (placed in the rightmost position of each sentence), the majority with 807 relative clauses were center-embedded (77.67%). The following are examples, with 6a) and 6b) illustrating center-embedded relative clauses and 6c) and 6d) right-embedded.

6a) The purposive sampling, [which allowed the researcher to select participants at convenience], was employed to have a total of 122 students for a group interview.

6b) The data [that was retrieved from the sites] was reanalyzed.

6c) It is appropriate to consult experts [who have experience in teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP)].

6d) Because of the limited data, the researchers were not successful in gathering more data [that was expected from the beginning].

2.5 Preference of Active and Passive Voice Construction: It can be seen from the 1,039 relative clauses surveyed in this study that the ELF authors demonstrated a preference for active voice construction as opposed to a passive voice construction in the relative clauses they used. The total number of (finite) verb phrases was 1,511, with some clauses having more than one verb attached; the majority (994 verb phrases or 65.78%) were constructed in the active voice, and the remaining 517 verb phrases (34.22%) were constructed in the passive voice. It was further noticed that nearly half of the active verbs (476 phrases or 47.89%) served to modify the human-antecedents, for example “The participants [that spent less than the allocated time] left the room early”.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It can be argued that language users in ELF contexts have developed a flexible and fluid approach to English usage with various language features being altered by simplification and regularization of certain verb forms (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). The alteration of linguistic features in ELF contexts has been increasingly recognized and analyzed for some time in a series of studies leading to the present study, which focused on the use of relative clauses in academic writing.

Based on the researchers’ observation of this trend this study was undertaken into relative clauses. This was due to the complexity of relative clauses, which, despite the ability to provide more information can cause problems for non-native English speakers, certainly including ELFers. It was observed that the majority of ELFers in an academic context, i.e. research authors, used defining relative clauses more than non-defining ones. This is potentially due to the fewer constraints (e.g. a wider range of usable relativizers and unassigned punctuations) in the usage of defining clauses. Among the clauses surveyed, *that* was found to be the relativizer that appeared in use more often than other relativizers. This is probably because it is deemed to be one of the most versatile and least constrained options in constructing relative clauses. Although the study discovered that the relativizer *which* had the highest numerical usage, the use of *that* seemed more significant when considered in terms of its usage in non-defining relative clauses. The significant frequency of the usage of *that* among the ELF writers is not a surprise and supports Seidlhofer (2013), who suggests that ELF speakers usually simplify their output to facilitate

understanding by their audience and are rarely concerned about the norms of usage or structural complexity; the main aim of the writers' work in English is to communicate successfully and comprehensibly.

As for the overall characteristics of how ELF writers used relative clauses, aside from the use of *that*, the majority included relativizers in their manuscripts, preferring the presence of relativizers more than their absence, again, most probably because ELFers prefer simple constructions and usage in English. Relativized subjects and active voice construction, both of which are less complex, were significantly more represented in the authors' manuscripts.

Another interesting feature was the significant frequency of center-embedded relative clauses among the ELF writers' work in this study. This is noteworthy because it contradicts the belief of some native English speakers that center-embedded relative clauses are more problematic and more difficult to use than right-embedded relative clauses because the former "typically results in longer reading times" (Marjanovič & Manouilidou, 2022). This supports the arguments of Mauranen (2012) and Seidlhofer (2013), who state that the role of ELF in global communication today is not based on native-like proficiency but instead focused on adaptability and functional use among users of the language.

Overall, this study delineates the understanding of morphosyntactic dynamics within ELF interactions by illustrating how ELF users tackle the complexities of relative clauses in academic writing. In this respect, Luczaj et al. (2022) emphasize that the success of ELF communication lies in its functional adaptability rather than conformity to native speaker norms. By surveying these patterns, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the interplay between simplification, flexibility, fluidity, and strategic complexity in ELF communication, reaffirming the evolving and user-driven nature of English as a global lingua franca.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

English as a Lingua Franca is known as a flexible approach to language, the study of which can provide the academic community with numerous insights into the features of its use by speakers and writers. Despite the two-fold analysis, the present study focused only on the morphosyntactic system of relative clause constructions and excluded how they interacted with readers from a semantic and pragmatic perspective. This made the study unable to examine the underlying meanings and pragmatic functions associated with relative clauses as used by ELF writers and what they might have wished to convey through their academic writings.

The linguistic features of English as a Lingua Franca are known for their diversity and less dependence on native speaker norms. Such features can include but are not limited to phonological, lexicogrammatical, and pragmatic usage. The present study, however, merely analyzed the morphosyntax system through the inclusion of relative clauses. It is thus recommended that further studies analyze different features of ELF speakers' usage to gain more insights into the nature of ELF communication. Additionally, analysis of the semantic and pragmatic functions of relative clauses can yield a more comprehensive insight into ELF speakers' language use.

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