

## English adverbial relative clauses: A new angle in the English as a foreign language classroom

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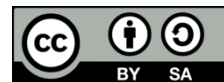
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### ABSTRACT

Intralingual comparison in language learning is an effective teaching method, which introduces a new learning from what students have mastered to what they are going to learn. The study is to investigate the effects of applying intralingual comparison on the teaching of English adverbial relative clauses to Chinese Senior high school students. Data was collected utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a mixed method design. Data was gathered via experimental research (n=103) and semi-structured interview (n=12). The experimental group's posttest scores improved statistically significantly after intervention. Research findings suggest that applying intralingual comparison in teaching could be considered as an effective teaching method in improving students' performance on learning English adverbial relative clauses. Besides, students would have more active and positive attitudes toward learning adverbial relative clauses than the traditional teaching method.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of language teaching, grammar is a crucial feature of language [1]. As an important component of English grammar, English relative clauses (ERCs) are intricate because of their unique syntactic characteristics and high frequency in daily oral and written English [2]. ERCs contain two kinds of clauses, namely, the relative pronoun clauses introduced by relative pronouns *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose* and the English adverbial relative clauses (EARCs) introduced by relative adverbs *when*, *where*, *why* or prepositions+ relative word *which*, e.g. *in which* [3]–[5].

ERCs have been considered problematic and intricate for most English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learners compared to other linguistic structures [6]–[8]. Besides, it is also a challenge for lecturers since the English learners have difficulties and have committed various errors in the process of producing ERCs even though they have learned ERCs in English textbooks of different levels for many years [6], [7], [9]

Some scholars have conducted research on EARCs; Phoocharoensil [9] found EFL learners experienced great difficulties using a relative adverb *where*. Rohdenburg [10] found that American English exhibits a lower overall proportion of formally marked relative adverbs than British English across all possible combinations. Suárez-Gómez [11] illustrated important similarities between the three investigated varieties of English and standardized versions of English regarding the distribution of adverbial relative clauses. Shin, Yoon, and Chung [12] discovered that input saliency was a necessary requirement for the general learning of preposition stranding in relative clauses.

Besides, there is some research concerned with the teaching of ERCs. However, the previous studies were more about the teaching of relative pronoun clauses and less about EARCs. Qimeng [13] found that implicit instruction had a better effect on learning English relative clauses than explicit instruction. Shan [14] discovered that Focus on Form was effective in the teaching of ERCs. Zhen [15] found that data-driven learning affected ERCs comprehension and production more effectively. Applying explicit instruction first in integrated grammar instruction is significantly more efficient than other teaching methods and could better arouse students' interest and improve their confidence [16].

In summary, ERCs are an intricate issue which attracted some scholars to do research on them. Several studies focused on the teaching of ERCs introduced by relative pronouns and relative adverbs. However, it is scarce to find studies concerned with the teaching of EARCs. Thus, there is a gap in the literature concerned with the teaching of EARCs. Such constructions have been expressly removed from previous studies [17], [18] typically on the basis that they comply with distinct constraints. Moreover, relative words such as the use of a relative adverb or a relative word *which* are chosen in a variety of ways in EARCs [2], [19], [20]. These features make the clauses difficult to learn for ESL or EFL learners. Since EARCs account for nearly one-fifth of all abdominal restrictive relative clauses [11], it is necessary to conduct a study on the teaching of EARCs.

The present study aims to investigate the teaching of EARCs with intralingual comparison. It answers two research questions: i) What are the effects of applying a comparison between prepositional phrases as adverbials and relative adverbs (prepositions+ *which*) on the teaching of EARCs?; ii) What are students' challenges involved in learning EARCs?

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This experimental study comprised quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis research methods. Quantitative data inform whether students in the experimental group (EG) have a significant performance compared to the control group (CG) after intervention. While qualitative data collected via semi-structured interviews investigates detailed information in understanding students' experiences of learning EARCs when participants cannot be directly observed [21].

### 2.1. Participants and instruments

This study recruited 103 EFL learners who were first-year students from a senior high school in Dianbai County, Guangdong province, China. The students were about 18 years old, who passed the Senior high School Entrance Examination. The students were randomly divided into two classes according to their average scores of Entrance Examination. There were 26 female and 27 male students in Class 3 as CG and 25 female and 25 male students in Class 2 as EG. All of them were from Dianbai County without any studying experience in other countries. To ensure this study is conducted in a responsible and ethically accountable way, all participants were told the aims of the study and they all agreed with the first author to conduct this research.

The instruments consisted of pretest, posttest, and semi-structured interviews. The scores of each test were 120 and the time for the tests was 90 minutes, respectively. The tests contained two parts, namely, multiple choices, and sentence combination. These kinds of tests were extracted from previous studies [16], [22], [23] by utilizing SPSS 22.0 to analyze the data, it could know that the Cronbach's alpha of the posttest is 0.763 and the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.718. These values show that the tests meet the requirements for acceptable reliability and validity. Semi-structured interviews could help researchers to get rich and detailed information in understanding students' experiences of learning EARCs.

### 2.2. Procedure

The entire teaching was conducted by an expert English teacher in English language for 10 years in the senior high school. The entire teaching of EARCs lasted six weeks and there were two English lessons for each week. And the semi-structured interviews were carried out by the first author. Before the study, the first author has met the teacher six times and made sure that she could fully understand the authors' conception towards the teaching of EARCs.

The control design is to lecture students with the traditional teaching method, which was presentation, practice, and produce. Firstly, the teacher showed the rules of the relative adverbs *when*, *where*, *why*. Secondly, the teacher explained the rules of the relative word *which* as a complement after prepositions and explained how to select prepositions. Thirdly, the teacher asked students to translate two simple sentences into English. Fourthly, the teacher asked students to join two simple sentences to form a complex sentence introduced by prepositions+ *which*. Lastly, the teacher asked students to do exercises. The experimental design included two parts. The first part was to give a lecture on EARCs introduced by prepositions+ *which*. The second part was to give a lecture on EARCs introduced by relative adverbs.

Part one: firstly, the teacher explained the rules of the relative word *which* as a complement after prepositions, and compared and contrasted the relative word *which* with personal pronouns *it/they*, or nouns as objects. Secondly, the teacher explained how to select the correct prepositions. Thirdly, the teacher listed the sentences in pairs and asked students to think about how to combine them into a complex sentence by using prepositions + relative word *which*, such as: i) Do you remember the years? He lived in the countryside with his grandparents during the years; ii) Do you remember the years in which he lived in the countryside with his grandparents? Fourthly, the teacher showed how to transfer simple sentences into complex sentences with EARCs by replacing the prepositions + personal pronoun *it/they* or nouns as objects with prepositions+ relative word *which*, and then asked students to do exercises.

Part two: firstly, the teacher asked students to compare the sentences as: i) Do you remember the years? He lived in the countryside with his grandparents during the years; ii) Do you remember the years in which he lived in the countryside with his grandparents?; iii) Do you remember the years when he lived in the countryside with his grandparents? Secondly, the teacher asked students to compare the preposition phrase “during the years” and relative adverb “when”. Thirdly, the teacher drew a conclusion about the sentences and explained the rules of relative adverbs to students. Fourthly, the teacher listed the sentences in pairs and asked students to think about how to combine them into a complex sentence by using relative adverbs. Fifthly, the teacher showed how to transfer simple sentences into complex sentences with EARCs by replacing the prepositional phrases with relative adverbs, and then asked the students to do exercises.

After the posttest, the first author conducted the semi-structured interviews to investigate students’ experiences of learning EARCs. The questions of semi-structured interviews were adapted from the previous research of ERCS [24]–[27]. There were six voluntary students in each group recruited for the interviews. There were seven questions for EG and CG, respectively, among which six questions were same. The same questions were to interview students’ feelings about the importance of English adverbial relative clauses, whether students could understand the teaching of EARCs, how they have learned EARCs during the teaching process, the problems of learning EARCs, the suggestions on learning EARCs and the suggestions for their teacher on teaching EARCs. The question only for EG was to know students’ opinions on the new teaching method on EARCs, whereas the question only for CG was to know the students’ opinions about the traditional teaching method on EARCs.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Pretest results served as the foundation for the students’ understanding of EARCs before the intervention, while posttest results would show whether there was any improvement after the intervention. An independent sample t-test was used to determine whether the distinction in posttest scores between the two groups was statistically significant. Semi-structured interviews with voluntary students and authorization for recording sessions were carried out. To gain the trust of the interviewees, the aim of the study was explained, and the interviewers were assured of their confidentiality. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to reveal surfaced common and recurring themes among the interviewees.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Quantitative data

The pretest aimed to get to know to what extent students have known EARCs. Table 1 presents the group statistics of EG and CG in the pretest. It should be noted that the number of collected and valid papers of the pretest in EG and CG was 47 and 48, respectively.

Table 1. Group statistics of CC and EC in the pretest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	47	31.298	21.347	3.114
Control group	48	32.770	19.416	2.802

Table 1 demonstrates that the mean results of the two groups in the pretest are 31.298 and 32.770, respectively. CG performs a little better than EG. In addition, the average results of the two groups are close. In addition, an independent sample T-test is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between EG and CG, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Levene's test and t-test for equality of means in the pretest

	Levene's test		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% CID	
								Lower	Upper
Equal	0.264	0.608	-0.351	93	0.726	-1.473	4.185	-9.783	6.84
Unequal			-0.352	91.772	0.726	-1.473	4.186	-9.793	6.85

The Levene's test for equality of variances in Table 2 shows that the variances of the two groups of data are equal since the sig. value of the two groups of data ( $p$ -value) is 0.608. Moreover, the observed significance level (two-tailed) is 0.726 ( $p > 0.05$ ), which indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups before intervention. Thus, the groups could be subjects in the following experiment. After the entire teaching process is completed, the immediate posttest is carried out. The students' scores are analyzed with the independent sample T-test of SPSS 22.0 to see whether the difference between the two groups is statistically significant. The data are shown in Table 3 and Table 4. It should be noted that the number of collected and valid papers of the posttest in EG and CG was 43 and 42, respectively.

Table 3 presents the mean score of EG (65.130) and CG (51.893), which shows that EG has clearly achieved a better result than CG's. The next independent T-test sample is utilized to examine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Table 4 demonstrates the value of Sig. in Levene's test for equality of variance is 0.323, which is above 0.05. Thus, the two samples in the experiment have equal variances. In addition, the Sig. (2-tailed) value is 0.026 ( $P < 0.05$ ), which reveals that there is a statistically significant difference in the performance between EG ( $M=65.130$ ,  $SD=26.750$ ;  $t=2.263$ ,  $p=0.026$ , two-tailed) and CG ( $M=51.893$ ,  $SD=29.549$ ). The findings also suggest that EG performed better than CG in the posttest. Thus, the teaching of EARC's in EG presents an understanding of teaching focused on the comparison between prepositional phrases and relative adverbs and prepositions+ *which*. This form of teaching method could allow students to understand EARC's from several aspects.

Firstly, it enabled students to understand the similarities and differences between the relative word *which* and the corresponding personal pronouns gradually, including the similarities and differences between prepositions+ relative word *which* and relative adverbs. This form of teaching technique made students' learning from what they have already acquired to EARC's that they were going to learn. It correlated with the cognitive code approach, which claims that the process of learning should be a process of the assimilation of the former knowledge into a new one, where both knowledges act on each other mutually [28]–[32]. In addition, the teaching method made students focus on the forms of EARC's, which correlated with several researchers' views, who claimed that the principal focus of attention should be on the targeted form [14], [33]–[37]. Thus, students in EG could understand EARC's better and perform better.

Table 3. Group statistics of CC and EC in the posttest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Experimental group	43	65.130	26.750	3.944
Control group	42	51.893	29.549	4.310

Table 4. Levene's test and t-test for equality of means in the posttest

	Levene's test		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% CID	
								Lower	Upper
Equal	0.989	0.323	2.263	91	0.026	13.237	5.849	1.619	24.854
Unequal			2.266	90.456	0.026	13.237	5.842	1.631	24.843

### 3.1.1. Research findings in the multiple choices of posttest

The data shown in Table 5 is the accuracy of the tested relative adverbs and prepositions+ relative pronoun *which* of the multiple choices in the two groups. From Table 5, it could know that EG performs better than CG in the relative adverbs in the multiple choices except Question 3 (S+*where*). There are several aspects. Firstly, as for the relative adverb *when*, students in the two groups all perform it well, however, according to different questions, their accuracy are different. Secondly, as for the relative adverb *where*, students in the two groups all performed badly except Question 4, in which EG performed well, while in CG, only 36.17% of students have done it correctly. Thirdly, as for the prepositions+*which*, the accuracy of the ERC pattern S+ prepositions+ *which* are higher than the accuracy of the ERC pattern O+prepositions+ *which* in the two groups.

Table 5. The accuracy of relative adverbs in multiple choices of the posttest

Questions	Pattern of EARCs	Relativizes	Accuracy in experimental group	Accuracy in control group
2	O+ when	when	64.44%	61.70%
8	S+ when	when	48.89%	46.81%
10	O+ when (NF)	when	77.78%	53.19%
3	S+ where	where	6.67%	12.77%
4	O+ where	where	62.22%	36.17%
5	O+ where (NF)	where	13.33%	2.13%
7	O+ on which	on which	53.19%	40.00%
11	S+ on which	on which	75.56%	51.06%
1	O+ in which	in which	53.33%	34.04%
6	S+ in which	in which	55.56%	36.17%
12	O+ at which	at which	26.67%	21.28%
9	S+ at which	at which	44.44%	40.43%

O/S stands for object/subject in the main clause.

NF means nonrestrictive adverbial relative clause.

### 3.1.2. Research findings in the sentence combination of the posttest

The data shown in Table 6 is the accuracy of the tested relative adverbs of the sentence combination in the two groups. From Table 6, it could know that the accuracy of relative adverbs in the EG is much higher than the CG's, especially the Question 2 (O+ *where*), which is exceeding 39.67% than CG's. Besides, the accuracy of ERC pattern O+ relative adverbs is also higher than the accuracy of ERC pattern S+ relative adverbs in both groups.

Table 6. The accuracy of relative adverbs in sentence combination of posttest

Questions	Pattern of EARCs	Accuracy in experimental group	Accuracy in control group	Comparison of the rates
1	O+ when	64.44%	46.81%	17.64%
2	O+ where	82.22%	42.55%	39.67%
3	S+ where	33.33%	21.28%	12.05%
4	S+ when	57.78%	42.55%	15.22%
5	O+ why	28.89%	21.28%	7.61%
6	S+ why	24.44%	19.15%	5.29%

### 3.2. Research findings and discussions on qualitative data

The qualitative data was collected via the semi-structured interviews. It was conducted on July 7th, 2021. This main theme encapsulates 12 participants' feelings in learning EARCs with two different teaching methods. The following is the analysis of data in the two groups.

The data analysis shows that CG could understand what their teacher had taught and were satisfied with their teacher's teaching. Although students have discussed EARCs with their teacher and classmates and read reference books or surfed information from internet, students still faced difficulties when using EARCs in English. There are various reasons. First of all, EARCs are intricate with various prepositions and relative adverbs. Besides, students had little chance to practice EARCs outside of their classrooms. From students' advice for learning EARCs, it could find that the suggestions from the students were superficial, which showed that students' understanding of EARCs in CG were still specious. Same as the students in CG, the students could also understand their teacher's lectures while learning EARCs. They also face challenges in learning EARCs like new words, long sentences, and nouns in sentences that they mistook as a head noun. However, based on the understanding of learning EARCs from prepositional phrases to prepositions+ *which* and relative adverbs, the students in EG considered EARCs were not difficult. Moreover, the students were more active and had a better understanding in the process of learning EARCs.

In summary, while comparing and contrasting the thematic analysis of the semi-structure interviews in the two groups, it was found that both interviewed groups considered EARCs important. Furthermore, they expressed similar views that they could understand most of EARCs that their teacher had taught. Besides, they all liked the way that their teacher lectured. However, they all felt that they needed to memorize lots of rules to learn EARCs. On the other hand, the interviewed students in CG thought EARCs were hard to learn, while the interviewed students in EG thought EARCs were not difficult to learn. As for the suggestions for learning EARCs, CG advised that learners should be interested in EARCs, focus on lessons and practice more exercises, while EG suggested that learners should first understand EARCs and then practice them. And as for the suggestions for their teachers, CG advised that their teacher should help students build confidence in learning EARCs, while EG advised that their teacher should give them more chances to practice oral English with EARCs.

The similarities and differences show that students in EG have a better understanding and are active in learning EARC, which would have a good influence on students' self-regulation and good motivation in the learning [16], [38]–[40]. In addition, they hope to get more chances to break through EARC by practicing oral English. While in CG, the students are still thinking about how to build up confidence in learning. Moreover, while asked to practice oral EARC by having them to introduce their partners, students in EG had a better performance than the students in CG.

### 3.3. Research findings and discussions on the research questions

To determine the answer to the research question 1, the effects of applying a comparison between prepositional phrases as adverbials and relative adverbs and prepositions+ *which* on the teaching of EARC, the results of EG students' performance on learning EARC in the pretest and posttest were compared. The accuracy of relative adverbs in the multiple choices and sentence combination during the pretest at the onset of the current research were compared to those in the posttest, which was conducted after six-week treatment with the teaching of the intralingual comparison in EG and traditional teaching method in CG. An independent sample T-test was utilized to ascertain the statistically significant differences in the pretest scores compared to those in the posttest. There were significant differences (i.e.,  $p=0.026$ ,  $P<0.05$ ) between the scores in the pretest and the posttest in EG. Besides, from the thematic analysis of the data, it could also know that students in the experimental have a better performance, which consolidated the findings from the quantitative data analysis. Hence, the answer to the research question 1 was provided. And the effectiveness of the intralingual comparison between prepositional phrases and relative adverbs and prepositions+ *which* on the learning of EARC was validated by empirical evidence. The students in EG performed better in understanding and using EARC in the posttest scores compared to the students in CG.

As for the research question 2, the students' challenges involved in learning EARC, the thematic analysis of the interviews shows that the students in CG have two kinds of challenges to learn EARC. Firstly, students feel difficult to memorize EARC and are easy to forget the rules of EARC because various types of prepositions, the word order of EARC and the translations of EARC. Secondly, some of students are not interested in EARC and feel it is boring to learn them. Moreover, it is too far from students' lives so that students have little chance to practice EARC in their daily lives. As for the students in EG, the thematic analysis of the interviews shows that there are three challenges for them to learn EARC. Firstly, they also have to memorize lots of things since EARC include much information. Secondly, they feel they are lack of words while doing exercises. Thirdly, same as CG, they considered they had little chance to practice EARC in their classroom and seldom practiced outside of the classroom since the clauses are too far from their daily lives. In addition, from the analysis of the students' posttest, it could find that students in the two groups have challenges at S+*where* and O+*where* (NF)/*at which* in multiple choices. Moreover, students have difficulties in doing sentence combinations at S+*where*, S/O+*where*.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of applying intralingual comparison on the teaching of English adverbial relative clauses to Chinese senior high school students. This study reveals that the teaching method for English adverbial relative clauses with intralingual comparison is more effective than the traditional teaching method since it provides a more in-depth comprehension of EARC for students, which is proved by the quantitative data and qualitative data. This kind of teaching method can allow students' learning from what they have already acquired to what they were going to learn, which makes both former and new knowledge act on each other mutually. In addition, the teaching method encouraged students to focus on the forms of English adverbial relative clauses primarily. Furthermore, students in the new teaching method had more active and positive attitudes in learning English adverbial relative clauses under the new teaching method than the students of control group had.

This study has shown some significant findings by carrying out the experiment and analyzing the data. It could provide English teachers some inspiration for teaching EARC from a new angle. However, there are also several deficiencies. Firstly, the participants in this study are limited. There are only 103 students participating in the experiment. The sample size is small to make generalizations. Secondly, the time in the experiment is also limited. It lasted only six weeks. Thus, if there are more data and analysis which could trace students' EARC learning for a longer time, it would be more convincing and reliable. However, this study has provided some insights into the teaching of EARC through a new angle, which could lead to more research on the use of intralingual comparison methods in teaching.




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