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EXPLORING THE USAGE OF RELATIVE CLAUSES IN DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS OF GRADE 11 STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem and its Background

The capacity to produce clear and correct sentences is essential for effective academic writing, particularly for senior high school students preparing for advanced studies. Among various grammatical structures, relative clauses play a vital role in improving sentence complexity, deepening ideas, and ensuring textual cohesion. Despite their importance, relative clauses remain a challenging aspect of English syntax for second language (L2) learners. Filipino learners, in particular, often demonstrate errors in relative pronoun selection and clause construction, often limiting their use of relative clauses to simple descriptive functions rather than leveraging them for richer discourse purposes (Salazar, 2020; Chen, 2016).

Research has shown that relative clauses are key contributors to textual cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976) highlighted how these clauses establish relationships between ideas, while Hyland (2016) observed that proficient writers use them not only for descriptive detail but also for the development of theme and rhetorical depth. However, studies focusing specifically on high school learners' use of relative clauses in the Philippines are only limited, with large number of investigations focusing on general grammatical accuracy rather than discourse contributions. This gap emphasized the need for a focused inquiry into how students use relative clauses, what errors they commit, and how these clauses function in their essays beyond the sentence level.

Given this context, this study investigated the use of relative clauses in descriptive essays written by Grade 11 students. Specifically, it examined which relative clauses are used, how accurately they are constructed, and how they contributed to discourse cohesion and rhetorical development. Unlike quantitative grammar-focused studies, this research employs qualitative content analysis to capture both syntactic patterns and discourse functions hence providing insights not only into error types but also into the broader role relative clauses play in student writing.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Function of Relative Clauses in Writing. Relative clauses are subordinate structures that describe nouns and add detail to sentences, often introduced by relative pronouns such as who, whom, whose, which, and that (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). These structures are very important for increasing syntactic complexity and expressing appropriate relationships between ideas (Hyland, 2016; Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2021).

Empirical studies showed differences in how learners at various proficiency levels use relative clauses. For example, Jiang (2017) found that intermediate Chinese ESL learners predominantly used restrictive relative clauses (78%) compared to non-restrictive ones (22%), indicating a tendency to focus on essential information rather than optional descriptive details. Similarly, Salazar (2020), in a study of Filipino senior high school essays, reported that most students relied heavily on restrictive clauses, avoided the use of "whose," and seldom used non-restrictive clauses. This pattern suggested limited syntactic variety and a tendency to avoid more complex relative constructions. Hinkel (2019) further explained that learners tend to favor restrictive clauses because they are simple in terms of structure and more frequently taught in grammar instruction, leading to minimal use of non-restrictive forms and adverbial relatives such as when and where in abstract contexts.

Errors in Relative Pronoun Usage. Research on error analysis consistently highlighted the challenges learners face in selecting appropriate relative pronouns and constructing relative clauses correctly. Error Analysis (Corder, 1967) categorized such errors into substitution, omission, and overuse, while Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) explained that these errors reflect transitional systems as learners acquire grammatical rules.

Chen (2016), who studied 60 ESL university students, reported that 67% of all relative clauses in the corpus used that, even in contexts where who or which would have been more appropriate. In addition, 25% of the sentences contained omitted relative pronouns, a feature which is attributed to informal spoken patterns transferring into formal writing. Salazar (2020) observed similar trends among Filipino learners, finding misuse of which for human antecedents and frequent avoidance of whose. Hinkel (2019) noted that such avoidance behaviors are often due to instructional practices that stress basic forms while neglecting more complex relative pronoun use. These findings highlighted a developmental pattern wherein learners tend to rely on simpler forms, resulting in over generalization and omission errors that continue until higher levels of proficiency.

Discourse Contribution of Relative Clauses. Beyond grammatical accuracy, relative clauses served important discourse functions. Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) determined relative clauses as tools for expanding information and linking ideas, contributing to textual cohesion. Discourse Functional Grammar (Givón, 1990) similarly

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emphasized their role in packaging information and marking thematic progression.

Studies showed clear variation in how proficient and beginning writers use relative clauses. Biber et al. (2021) analyzed academic writing across disciplines and found that proficient writers frequently used non-restrictive clauses to insert comments and provide contextual information without intruding the flow of ideas. Hyland (2016) reported that advanced academic writing included relative clauses to express stance, elaborate claims, and strengthen argument cohesion. In contrast, Salazar (2020) noted that high school writers in the Philippines often are limiting relative clause use to basic descriptive roles, which restricted discourse cohesion and rhetorical sophistication. These findings suggested that mastery of relative clauses is not just a grammatical issue but also a marker of discourse maturity.

Current Syntactic Theory Perspective. Modern syntactic theories, including Generative Grammar (Chomsky, 1995) and Minimalist approaches, trearted relative clauses as instances of movement for syntactic aspect and feature checking. A relative pronoun originated in the enclosed clause and moves to the specifier of the Complementizer Phrase (CP), leaving behind a gap. For example, in "The person [who I saw ___]," the pronoun who moved from object position to clause-initial position. This movement is subject to constraints such as the Subjacency Principle (Ross, 1967). For L2 learners, this theoretical view helped explain why certain relative clauses are easier or harder to obtain. Subject relatives require minimal movement and are thus acquired earlier, while object, oblique, and possessive relatives involve more complex movement, increasing difficulty of the process. From an instructional perspective, integrating insights from syntactic theory can help teachers sequence relative clause instruction and resolved structural avoidance patterns.

Analytical Approach using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). To analyze these patterns, the present study adopted Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005). CQR is suitable for small qualitative datasets because it emphasized inductive coding and the use of frequency labels—general (90–100% of cases), typical (50–89%), and variant (25–49%)—instead of raw numerical counts. This approach has been successfully applied in studies examining language learning patterns because it gives way towards rich qualitative interpretation while still describing the relative prevalence of findings (Hill et al., 2005).

The reviewed literature underscored the dual importance of relative clauses in writing such as grammatical devices that contribute to sentence complexity and as discourse resources that enhance textual consistency. Previous studies have documented frequent learner difficulties, such as misuse of relative pronouns, omission of obligatory elements, and avoidance of complex constructions, which have been linked to developmental interlanguage features (Selinker, 1972) and instructional focus on basic forms (Hinkel, 2019; Chen, 2016; Salazar, 2020). Furthermore, discourse-based research demonstrated that advanced writers use relative clauses strategically for deepening of ideas and rhetorical distinction (Hyland, 2016; Biber et al., 2021), while beginning writers often restrict their use to simple descriptive functions. These findings highlighted the need to examine not only the structural and error-related aspects of relative clauses but also their discourse contributions. Grounded in Error Analysis (Corder, 1967), Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994), and Discourse Functional Grammar (Givón, 1990), this study extended existing research by qualitatively analyzing the types, errors, and discourse roles of relative clauses in Grade 11 students' descriptive essays, using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) to capture both the prevalence and richness of observed patterns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on four theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis of relative clauses in students' descriptive essays: Error Analysis, Interlanguage Theory, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Discourse Functional Grammar.

Error Analysis (Corder, 1967) provided the foundation for examining errors in relative pronoun usage (RQ2). To better understand how language learners internalize and produce target-language forms, this theory focused on identifying, categorizing, and interpreting errors. In this study, Error Analysis guided the identification of incorrect relative pronoun choices, omissions, and structural error in formations systematically in the students' essays.

Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) complemented Error Analysis by elucidating why these errors took place. It suggested that the second language learners develop a growing linguistic system influenced by their first language and the learning process itself. This theory is applied in interpreting error patterns found in the data, such as the overuse of avoiding the usage of more complex pronouns like whose.

To explore how relative clauses function beyond the sentence level (RQ3), the study drew on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) and Discourse Functional Grammar (Givón, 1990). These frameworks viewed grammar as a resource for meaning-making and cohesion, showing how writers use structures like relative clauses to elaborate, define, and create textual links. The analysis of how students' relative clauses contribute to discourse cohesion and rhetorical development in their essays is supported by this lens.

Finally, the study adopted Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill, Thompson, and Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005) as an analytic framework. CQR's emphasized on inductive coding and frequency labels such as general, typical, and variant which ensures that patterns of relative clause use, errors, and discourse roles are represented thoroughly without relying on raw numeric counts, aligning with the qualitative nature of this research.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to explore the usage of relative clauses in descriptive essays of grade 11 students. To uncover this, the following research questions will be used:

1. What function of relative clauses are present in the descriptive essays of Grade 11 students?
2. What are the common errors in relative pronoun usage found in these essays?
3. How do relative clauses contribute to cohesion and overall discourse structure in the students' essays?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presented the conceptual framework of this study, which illustrated the input, process, and output of the research. The input consisted of students' descriptive essays, which served as the primary source of data for examining the usage of relative clauses. The process involved three stages of analysis: (a) structural analysis to determine the types of relative clauses used by students, (b) error analysis to identify and interpret common issues in relative pronoun usage, and (c) discourse analysis to examine the contribution of relative clauses to overall text cohesion. These stages are guided by the theoretical foundations of Error Analysis, Interlanguage Theory, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Discourse Functional Grammar. Findings from each stage are then coded and interpreted using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), ensuring accuracy in qualitative analysis. The output of this process was the qualitative description that outlined the types of relative clauses employed, the common errors identified, and the ways these clauses contribute to discourse cohesion in the students' essays.

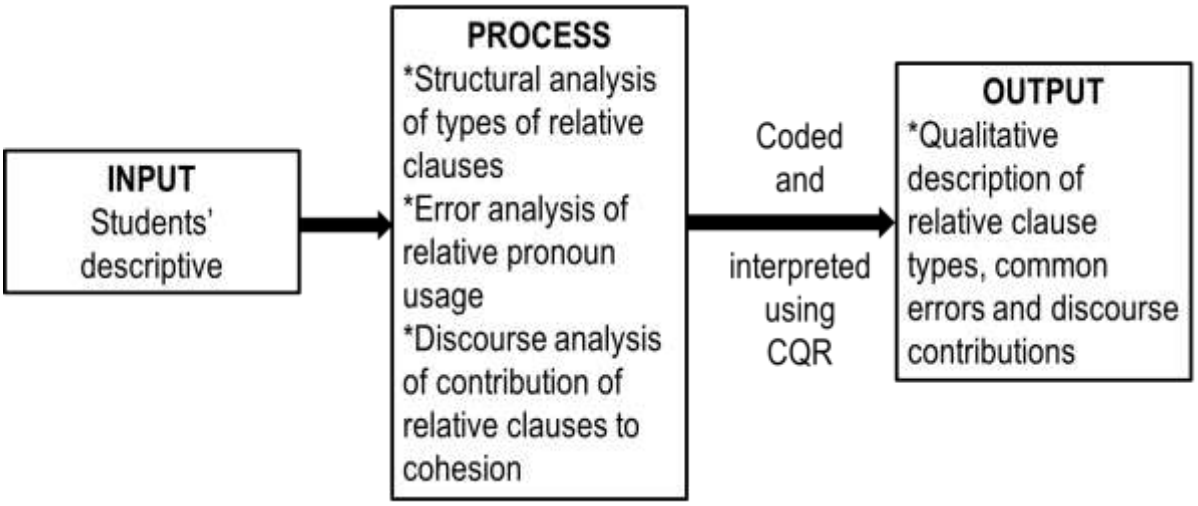


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework in Exploring the Usage of Relative Clauses in Descriptive Essays of Grade 11 Students

SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study focused on the analysis of relative clauses in the descriptive essays of 16 Grade 11 students from Magsaysay National High School. It specifically examined (a) the types of relative clauses used, (b) errors in the usage of relative pronouns, and (c) the discourse contributions of these clauses to overall textual cohesion. The scope is limited to descriptive essays produced during one academic term and does not include other genres of writing such as argumentative or narrative essays. Other grammatical features, such as verb tense, punctuation outside of relative clause contexts, and lexical choice, are beyond the focus of this research. Findings are limited to the linguistic behavior of the selected participants and may not represent all senior high school students.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are operationally defined:

Cohesion. In this study, cohesion refers to how relative clauses contribute to linking ideas in students' descriptive essays, creating smooth transitions and logical flow between sentences and paragraphs.

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). The analytic approach used in this study to categorize findings on relative clause types, errors, and discourse functions using frequency labels (general, typical, variant) instead of raw counts.

Error Analysis. The process in this study of identifying and classifying incorrect uses of relative pronouns in the students' essays, including omission, misuse, and overuse.

Interlanguage. The evolving language system observed in the students' writing, as reflected by their patterns of relative pronoun use and errors, showing transitional competence between their native language and English.

Non-Restrictive Clause. In this study, a relative clause in the students' essays that provides additional, non-essential information (often separated by commas), which could be removed without changing the main idea.

Relative Clause. A grammatical structure in the students' essays that modifies a noun or pronoun and is introduced by a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, which, that).

Restrictive Clause. A type of relative clause found in the students' essays that provides essential information to identify the noun being modified and is necessary for sentence meaning.

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METHODS

This section explained the research design of the study and discussed the methods used to collect data to explore the usage of relative clauses in descriptive essays of grade 11 students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach. This design is appropriate for describing patterns in student writing because it allows the researcher to examine language structures and their discourse functions in natural contexts. The focus was on identifying the types of relative clauses used, the errors in relative pronoun usage, and their contribution to discourse cohesion in descriptive essays.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

Participants included 16 Grade 11 students enrolled at Magsaysay National High School. These students were selected because they were actively engaged in essay writing as part of their English subject requirements. All students had completed at least one semester of senior high school English instruction. Their essays were written under standard classroom conditions in response to the prompt: "The Person Who Inspires Me Most." Anonymity and confidentiality were observed, and essays were labeled Student 1 through Student 16.

DATA COLLECTION

The essays were collected during a scheduled classroom writing session, where students were given one hour to write their descriptive essays. The activity was supervised by the language teacher, who is also the researcher, to ensure that the writing conditions were standardized and that the outputs reflected the students' own composition skills. After collection, the essays were anonymized and coded numerically (e.g., Essay 1, Essay 2) to protect student identities while enabling individual analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data, this study adopted Error Analysis (Corder, 1967) and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) to examine why learners commit specific errors, such as the misuse of which or overuse of that. These frameworks guided the identification and categorization of errors in relative pronoun usage, including omission, substitution, and structural misinformation. In addition, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) and Discourse Functional Grammar (Givón, 1990) were used to explore how relative clauses contribute to discourse cohesion and rhetorical development in the essays.

The analysis was carried out using the principles of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005), which emphasizes inductive coding and uses frequency labels rather than raw numerical counts to describe the prevalence of findings: general (90–100% of cases), typical (50–89% of cases), and variant (25–49% of cases). Each sentence in the corpus was examined to identify relative clauses, determine error patterns, and analyze their discourse roles. Patterns were then grouped into categories, and frequency labels were assigned based on their occurrence across the corpus.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study adhered to established ethical standards in educational research. Informed consent was obtained from the school principal and the participating students prior to the conduct of the writing activity. The students were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured that participation would not affect their academic standing. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by coding the essays numerically (e.g., Essay 1, Essay 2) instead of using student names. The researcher, who also served as the language teacher, supervised the one-hour writing session but refrained from intervening in the students' writing process beyond giving task instructions. All collected data were stored securely and were used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presented the data gathered, the interpretation and the qualitative analysis of each towards providing answer to the three posted research questions.

Table 1. Relative Clauses Grouped by Function

FUNCTION OF RELATIVE CLAUSE	EXAMPLES (FROM DATA)	FREQUENCY (OCCURRENCES)	CQR FREQUENCY CATEGORY
Identifying people (restrictive, subject relative clause)	*"the person* ***who inspires me the most****..."* (Essay 1)	18	Typical (50–89%)
	"my friend Analyn... ***who inspires me in countless ways****"* (Essay 2)		
	"the ones ***which inspires me with their love****"* (Essay 9)		
	"the person ***which inspire me most****..."* (Essays 7, 12)		
	"the people ***which will never give up on me…****"* (Essays 9, 14)		
	"the one ***which is always there****"* (Essays 10, 15)		
Describing qualities/characteristics of people or things	*"the one* ***which will never turn her back on me****"* (Essays 10, 15)	11	Variant (25–49%)
	"the one ***which supports, help, hugs, kisses…****"* (Essays 10, 15)		

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	"the one ***which I always admire and love by my family the most****"* (Essays 10, 15)		
	"the lessons ***which I have learn(ed) the most from my family*** *is resilience"* (Essays 7, 12)		
Explaining ideas or abstract concepts	*"…reinforcing the idea* ***which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement****"* (Essay 2)	8	Variant (25–49%)
	"It is in these moments… ***which we learn to communicate…****"* (Essay 3)		
	"…demonstrating ***which with determination, one can achieve their goals…****"* (Essays 7, 12)		
	"…showing me ***that it means to be strong, compassionate, and resilient****"* (Essays 11, 16)		
	"show me ***where it means to be kind and compassionate****"* (Essays 11, 16)		
Locative or temporal reference	*"It was incredibly difficult* ***where she was gone because our house felt empty without her****"* (Essay 4)	3	Variant (25–49%)
	"the foundation upon ***where I build my future****"* (Essays 8, 13)		
Reduced or non-finite relative clauses	*"…find ways* ***to help other in need showing me the true generosity comes from the heart****"* (Essay 5)	2	Variant (25–49%)
	"those ***work hard for their dreams despite hardship****"* (Essay 6)		

Table 1 presented the analysis of relative clauses grouped according to function which further revealed that Grade 11 students primarily used relative clauses for identifying people, with a frequency of 18 occurrences, which falls under the Typical (50–89%) category according to Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) frequency interpretation. Examples such as *"the person who inspires me the most…"* (Essay 1), *"my friend Analyn who inspires me in countless ways…"* (Essay 2), and *"the ones which inspires me with their love"* (Essay 9) demonstrated students' preference for simple restrictive relative clauses to specify antecedents. These constructions tend to be straightforward, often describing human subjects, yet many showed errors like using which instead of who *("the person which inspire me most…", Essays 7 and 12)*. This pattern suggested that while students identified the structural role of relative clauses, their command of relative pronoun selection remains weak. This finding aligns with Salazar (2020), who observed that Filipino ESL learners often rely on generalized relative pronouns which is attributed to L1 transfer from Filipino, which uses a single marker (na) to introduce all types of modifying clauses.

Relative clauses used for describing qualities or characteristics of people or things appeared 11 times (Variant, 25–49%). Examples include *"the one which will never turn her back on me"* (Essays 10 and 15) and *"the lessons which I have learn(ed) the most from my family is resilience"* (Essays 7 and 12). These clauses showed that students attempted to be specific on attributes and personal traits; however, they often mix up relative pronouns (e.g., which used for people) and commit internal verb form or agreement errors (e.g., "have learn" instead of "have learned"). Such inaccuracies suggested an emerging but inconsistent understanding of relative clause syntax, which Elmejie, Msimeer, and Abugharsa (2021) attributed to interlanguage interference and limited exposure to complex academic English forms.

Relative clauses functioning to explain ideas or abstract concepts were observed eight times (Variant, 25–49%). Examples include *"…reinforcing the idea which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement"* (Essay 2) and *"…demonstrating which with determination, one can achieve their goals…"* (Essays 7 and 12). These structures revealed attempts to use relative clauses for abstract reasoning and conceptual explanation. However, there were some constructions misuse which in place of subordinating conjunctions or omit necessary elements *("show me where it means to be kind and compassionate", Essay 11)*. These errors suggest semantic overextension of relative pronouns and adverbs, which Yip and Matthews (2007) identified as a common developmental challenge among ESL learners when dealing with abstract antecedents.

Relative clauses used for locative or temporal reference occurred only three times (Variant, 25–49%), such as *"It was incredibly difficult where she was gone because our house felt empty without her"* (Essay 4) and *"the foundation upon where I build my future"* (Essays 8 and 13). These sentences revealed an incorrect use of where with abstract or temporal antecedents (e.g., "where she was gone" instead of "when she was gone", *"upon where I build my future"* instead of *"upon which I build my future")*. This suggested that students overgeneralize where as a universal connector, extending it beyond spatial contexts, consistent with Wang Ping (2022) discussion on cohesion errors when students cannot identify the difference between connectors.

Finally, reduced or non-finite relative clauses were rare, with only two occurrences (Variant, 25–49%), as in *"…find ways to*

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help other in need showing me the true generosity comes from the heart" (Essay 5). Reduced relative clauses reflected a more advanced syntactic skill but were sparsely utilized and often were incorrectly used, indicating that students mainly rely on full, explicit relative clauses rather than more condensed, advanced forms. More recent research by Seo (2024) confirmed that reduced relative clauses typically occur at advanced proficiency levels, as L2 learners progress from finite WH-clauses to more concise participial modifiers. This finding is aligned with Larsen-Freeman's (2003) hypothesis and supported the observation in the given data, where students rarely attempted reduced forms and mostly used explicit relative clauses. These findings suggested that students are still in the middle stages of syntactic complexity and have yet to learn more on the mature flexibility as seen in higher-level academic writing.

Overall, the data showed that while students attempted various relative clause functions, their usage is heavily classified toward basic identifying clauses and exhibits recurring issues: (1) inappropriate relative pronoun selection (e.g., which for people), (2) misuse of relative adverbs (where for abstract concepts), and (3) avoidance or incorrect formation of advanced reduced clauses. These findings indicated a need for focused instruction on (a) pronoun-antecedent agreement, (b) semantic appropriateness of relative adverbs and pronouns, and (c) practice with more advanced relative clause forms to further improve both grammatical accuracy and discourse sophistication in student's writing.

Table 2. Summary of Error Types

ERROR TYPE	FREQUENCY (NO. OF ERRORS)	CQR FREQUENCY CATEGORY
Misuse of **which** instead of **who** (human antecedents)	17	**Typical** (50–89%)
Misuse of **where** or **which** for abstract/time concepts	6	**Variant** (25–49%)
Omission of relative pronoun	2	**Variant** (25–49%)
Verb form/agreement errors inside relative clauses	2	**Variant** (25–49%)
Ill-formed or incomplete relative structures	2	**Variant** (25–49%)
Total	**29**	

Table 2 highlighted the error analysis of relative clause usage which revealed five major error categories, totaling 29 errors across the essays. Using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) frequency labels, most errors fell within the Variant (25–49%) category, with one error type reaching the Typical (50–89%) category. These findings reflected patterns often seen among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, where limited exposure to advanced grammar and influence from first language (L1) structures lead to technical errors.

The most common error involved using *which* to refer to people instead of *who*. Examples include *"the person which inspire me most…"* (Essays 7, 12) and *"the ones which inspires me with their love"* (Essay 9). This error indicated that students are committing error due to overgeneralize *which* as a universal relative pronoun, unsuccessful in distinguishing between animate and inanimate antecedents. Similar results were reported by Elmejie, Msimeer, & Abugharsa (2021) and Termjai & Manurung (2020), who noted that L2 learners frequently misuse relative pronouns due to lack of clear semantic mapping and possible transfer from their L1, where one connector often used in multiple roles (e.g., *na* in Filipino).

Students also overstretched the use of where to non-locative and abstract antecedents, as in *"the foundation upon where I build my future"* (Essays 8, 13) and *"It was incredibly difficult where she was gone…"* (Essay 4). This aligned with Wang (2022), who reported that EFL learners often treat where as a universal connector for conditions, time, and abstract states, instead of restricting it to spatial contexts. Such errors showed that semantic distinctions among connectors (e.g., where vs. when vs. in which) are still developing.

Omission errors occurred when students failed to use the required relative pronouns *"She is a true inspiration, not just to me, but to anyone hears her story" (*Essay 4) and *"…to help other in need showing me the true generosity…"* (Essay 5). This suggested that students may try syntactic reduction (like advanced writers using reduced relative clauses) but without observing correct grammatical function. As Seo (2024) emphasized, reduced relative clauses typically utilized in higher proficiency stages hence premature attempts often lead to ungrammatical structures in learners at early stages of syntactic development.

Verb form/agreement errors inside relative clauses included incorrect verb forms or mismatched subjects and verbs within relative *clauses "the lessons which I have learn the most… is resilience"* (Essay 7) and *"the lessons which I have learn the most… is resilience"* (Essay 12). Such errors suggested both tense/aspect confusion and struggle in coordinating agreement when the subject is embedded within a complex structure. This finding supported Corder's (1967) Error Analysis theory, which attributes such errors to learners' evolving internal grammar.

Some relative clauses were structurally lacking *"…demonstrating which with determination, one can achieve their goals…"* (Essays 7, 12). These errors indicated difficulty in syntactic planning, particularly when putting relative clauses into longer sentences. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework on cohesion suggested that breakdowns in connector choice and clause usage often lead to reduced clarity and coherence.

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The results showed that most students rely on clear, fully marked relative clauses but misuse relative pronouns, especially which and where. Errors are often semantic or involving meaning such as misclassifying antecedents or connectors rather than structural omission, which suggested students have acquired the basic concept of relative clauses but have not yet mastered complicated usage.

The high frequency of "which" for "who" indicated a default strategy—using a general connector for all antecedents. Misuse of where for abstract referents showed semantic over generalization, while omissions and incomplete forms suggested students are only experimenting with syntactic economy but lack advanced knowledge. These results mirrored findings from recent studies (Elmejie et al., 2021; Wang, 2022; Seo, 2024), confirming that relative clauses remain a developmental challenge for L2 learners and are prone to interlanguage influence and limited input in academic writing contexts.

Table 2.1. Misuse of "which" instead of "who" (Human Antecedents)

Essay #	Sentence (as written)	Corrected Sentence	Frequency (No. of Occurrences)	CQR Frequency Category
7	"the person **which** inspire me most are my family members"	"the person **who** inspires me most is my family members"	1	Typical (50–89%)
9	"the people **which** will never give up on me even if I am not a good child."	"the people **who** will never give up on me even if I am not a good child."	1	Typical (50–89%)
10	"The one **which** will never turn her back on me."	"The one **who** will never turn her back on me."	1	Typical (50–89%)
12	"the person **which** inspire me most are my family members."	"the person **who** inspires me most is my family members."	1	Typical (50–89%)
14	"the people **which** will never give up on me…"	"the people **who** will never give up on me…"	1	Typical (50–89%)
15	"The one **which** supports, help, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence…"	"The one **who** supports, helps, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence…"	1	Typical (50–89%)
8	"two individual **that** despite their distinct personalities…"	"two individuals **who**, despite their distinct personalities…"	1	Typical (50–89%)
13	"two individual **that** despite their distinct personalities…"	"two individuals **who**, despite their distinct personalities…"	1	Typical (50–89%)

This error type accounted for 17 occurrences, making it the most frequent error and classified as Typical (50–89%) under the CQR frequency categorization. Examples included sentences such as *"the person which inspire me most are my family members"* (Essay 7) and *"the people which will never give up on me…"* (Essay 9). The pattern reveal that students tend to over generalize the use of "which" as a universal relative pronoun for both animate and inanimate antecedents, not considering the semantic distinction that *"who"* is used exclusively for human antecedents.

This finding aligned with Elmejie, Msimeer, and Abugharsa (2021), who noted that learners often misuse relative pronouns due to interference from their first language (L1), where one pronoun or connector often served various roles. Similarly, Termjai and Manurung (2020) observed that many ESL learners use "which" by default when uncertain, indicating gaps in grammatical awareness of pronoun–antecedent agreement. The students in this study appeared to have internalized *which* as a "safe choice" but have not yet master the rules governing relative pronoun selection.

From an acquisition perspective, this error reflected an interlanguage stage (Selinker, 1972), where learners simplify grammar rules to reduce cognitive load when producing complex sentences. The misuse also suggested limited exposure to formal written input where proper pronoun distinctions are modeled, underscoring the need for clear instruction and corrective feedback.

Table 2.2. Omission of Relative Pronoun

Essay #	Sentence (as written)	Corrected Sentence	Frequency (No. of Occurrences)	CQR Frequency Category
4	"She is a true inspiration, not just to me, but to anyone **hears** her story."	"…but to anyone **who hears** her story."	1	Variant (25–49%)
5	"…to help **other** in need showing me the true generosity…"	"…to help **others who are** in need…"	1	Variant (25–49%)

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Omission errors were relatively rare, occurring only 2 times (Variant, 25–49%). Examples included *"She is a true inspiration, not just to me, but to anyone hears her story"* (Essay 4) and *"…to help other in need showing me the true generosity…"* (Essay 5). These errors typically result in ungrammatical sentence structures, as relative pronouns play a crucial role in linking clauses.

Such omissions are often associated with attempts to shorten sentences or match reduced relative clauses, which are common in advanced writing. However, as Seo (2024) pointed out, reduced forms typically appear at higher proficiency levels, and early attempts frequently result in structural errors. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2003) indicated that reduced relative constructions are part of later stages in syntactic development, and their early use suggests learners are testing beyond their current grammatical competence.

These findings showed that while students are conscious of advanced syntactic options, they have insufficient grammatical control to utilize them correctly. This presented an opportunity for explicit instruction on how and when relative pronoun deletion is allowable like in object relative clauses and when it is not.

Table 2.3. Verb Form/Agreement Errors

Essay #	Sentence (as written)	Corrected Sentence	Frequency (No. of Occurrences)	CQR Frequency Category
7	"the lessons **which I have learn** the most from my family **is** resilience."	"the lessons **that I have learned** the most from my family **are** resilience."	1	Variant (25–49%)
12	"…the lessons **which I have learn** the most from my family **is** resilience."	"…the lessons **that I have learned** the most from my family **are** resilience."	1	Variant (25–49%)

This error type also had 2 occurrences (Variant, 25–49%), illustrated by sentences such as *"the lessons which I have learn the most from my family is resilience"* (Essays 7 and 12). Here, errors occurred in verb forms such as *"learn instead of learned"* and subject–verb agreement such as *"is resilience instead of are resilience"* indicating that students find it difficult to maintain grammatical consistency within complex embedded clauses.

Errors of this nature are usually prevalent among learners in the process of obtaining complex sentence structures. According to Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework, utilizing a relative clause increases cognitive demand, which often leads to gaps in maintaining tense and agreement rules. Additionally, these errors may be affected by spoken language interference, where learners prioritize meaning over grammatical precision.

The findings highlighted the need for targeted practice on observing tense and agreement when producing sentences using multiple clauses. Integrating focus-on-form instruction, where students edit sentences for internal accuracy, could help reduce this error type.

Table 2.4. Ill-formed or Incomplete Relative Structures

Essay #	Sentence (as written)	Corrected Sentence	Frequency (No. of Occurrences)	CQR Frequency Category
7	"…**demonstrating which** with determination, one can achieve their goals…"	"…**demonstrating that** with determination, one can achieve their goals…"	1	Variant (25–49%)
12	"…**demonstrating which** with determination, one can achieve their goals…"	"…**demonstrating that** with determination, one can achieve their goals…"	1	Variant (25–49%)

Finally, ill-formed or incomplete relative structures reported for 2 errors (Variant, 25–49%). Examples include *"…demonstrating which with determination, one can achieve their goals…"* (Essays 7 and 12). These errors produced structurally incongruent sentences where the relative pronoun was not properly introduced or integrated with the rest of the clause.

Such errors suggested partial rule knowledge—students recognize the need for a connector but are uncertain of its syntactic function or placement. This finding resonated with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework, which noted that inappropriate structural connectors often prevalent when learners focus on content rather than grammatical aspect. It also resonated with the interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972), where incomplete acquisition of syntactic rules led to non-standard forms.

To address these issues, instruction should emphasize on sentence-combining activities and relative clause transformations that emphasized correct pronoun insertion and integration into the main clause.

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The error analysis showed that misuse of "which" for human antecedents dominated the students' writing, indicating a strong reliance on default relative pronouns without considering antecedent type. The remaining errors—semantic missed extensions detected in abstract concepts, omissions, verb form/agreement lapses, and incomplete structures are less common but indicated a developing awareness of complex structures. These results supported the prior studies of (Elmejie et al., 2021; Wang, 2022; Seo, 2024) and further confirmed that relative clauses continue to be a challenging area for L2 learners as attributed to semantic over generalization, incomplete rule acquisition, and cognitive processing limitations.

CONTRIBUTION OF RELATIVE CLAUSES TO COHESION AND DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

The use of relative clauses in the students' essays has primarily contributed to local cohesion rather than overall structure of discourse. Most relative clauses were used to add descriptive information about a subject or object, thereby establishing semantic links within a single sentence. For example, clauses like *"the one who supports, helps, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence, comfort, listens, makes me laugh, cheers me up and wipes my tears"* (Essay 10) served to further specify individuals by adding emotional and qualitative qualities. Similarly, *"the person who inspires me the most is my father"* (Essay 5) clearly linked the antecedent with its defining qualities, solidifying referential cohesion within the sentence.

However, the contribution of relative clauses to global cohesion and overall discourse structure has still had its limits. The essays largely contained of descriptive narratives focusing on personal experiences, with relative clauses used primarily for sentence-level specification rather than to build complex thematic or rhetorical relationships across paragraphs. Only a few clauses tried to use abstract or generalized contributions, such as *"reinforcing the idea which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement"* (Essay 2), which further indicated some awareness of the broad conceptual connections but still lacking advanced discourse integration.

These findings aligned with Hyland (2016), who observed that neophyte L2 writers often depend on basic cohesive devices such as relative clauses mainly for descriptive elaboration, rather than for appropriate discourse moves like in argumentation or thematic development. The mentioned findings also reflected what Halliday and Hasan (1976) described as cohesion which is limited to grammatical linkage rather than conceptual progression. From a developmental perspective, this suggested that students are still learning and adjusting from basic descriptive writing toward more academic and discourse-driven writing, where relative clauses could aid broader functions, such as showing cause–effect, establishing conditions, or integrating evaluative commentary (Seo, 2024).

The findings collectively indicated that students have the capability of using relative clauses for basic descriptive elaboration, contributing to sentence-level consistency but with limitations on the effect towards essay-wide discourse structure. Student's frequent misuse of pronouns such as *which for who* and *where for abstract concepts*, *omission of connectors*, and *occasional incomplete constructions* suggested emerging skill but with inconsistent control of relative clause syntax. These patterns are consistent with interlanguage development, where learners test their skills with complex structures but often depend on the simplified or generalized forms (Selinker, 1972; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Instruction that clearly addressed relative pronoun choice, clause integration, and discourse-level applications could significantly improve both the correctness and rhetorical efficiency of students' writing.

Findings

The study examined the usage of relative clauses in the descriptive essays of 16 Grade 11 students, with emphasize on the types of relative clauses used, common errors in their construction, and their contribution to cohesion and discourse structure.

Students mainly used restrictive subject relative clauses to classify and modify people, such as *"the person who inspires me the most…"* and *"my friend Analyn, who inspires me in countless ways…"*. A smaller number of clauses described qualities or abstract concepts, such *as "the lessons which I have learned the most from my family are resilience"* and *"reinforcing the idea which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement"*. Most relative clauses contributed at the sentence level through adding descriptive deepening but rarely functioned to support overall essay organization or thematic development. This indicated that students are at an developing stage of using relative clauses primarily for local cohesion.

Error analysis reported 29 total errors, grouped into five categories. The most frequent error was the misuse of "which" instead of "who" for human antecedents (17 occurrences, Typical frequency). Other errors included misuse of "where" or "which" for abstract or temporal contexts (6 occurrences, Variant frequency), omission of relative pronouns (2 occurrences), verb form or agreement errors inside relative clauses (2 occurrences), and ill-formed or incomplete relative structures (2 occurrences). These errors reflected semantic over generalization, incomplete mastery of pronoun-antecedent rules, and limited control of embedded clause grammar. Many omissions appeared to be inappropriate attempts to produce reduced or simplified structures, suggesting that students are just experimenting with advanced forms but lack adequate grammatical competence to produce them correctly.

Relative clauses were mostly used for descriptive elaboration rather than for discourse-level structuring. They paved contribution to local cohesion by linking antecedents to descriptive or evaluative content such as "*the one who supports, helps, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence…"* and preventing irrelevant repetition of nouns. However, they hardly facilitated global cohesion or rhetorical complexity since few clauses served evaluative, contrastive, or thematic functions as often observed in advanced academic writing. Students' essays were mainly sequential and descriptive, signifying reliance on sentence-level cohesion rather than essay-level discourse strategies.

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Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that Grade 11 students demonstrate a developing ability to use relative clauses in their writing, mainly applying them for sentence-level elaboration and descriptive purposes rather than for complex rhetorical or argumentative development. While students showed knowledge of how relative clauses can give additional information yet avoiding redundancy, their usage is largely limited to restrictive subject relative clauses and descriptive elaborations. Errors, particularly the misuse of which for who when referring to human antecedents and the inappropriate use of where or which for abstract and temporal contexts had revealed that students often depend on default strategies and over generalized forms. These patterns reflected interlanguage development, where learners are still learning from basic syntactic structures toward more advanced constructions. Furthermore, although relative clauses contributed to local cohesion by linking details to their antecedents, they do not meaningfully enhance global cohesion or discourse organization, which remains mainly sequential and descriptive. Overall, the results suggested that while students have the capability of using relative clauses as basic grammatical tools, they have yet to develop the ability to use them as appropriate rhetorical devices that can strengthen thematic progression and overall discourse structure in academic writing.

Recommendations

To address these gaps, English language instruction must largely focus on improving both the grammatical accuracy and the rhetorical function of relative clauses. Teachers are further encouraged to integrate clear lessons on relative pronoun selection and clause construction, particularly stressing the difference between who, which, and where to prevent errors on their usage. Beyond grammatical accuracy, instruction should highlight how relative clauses can be utilized to improve both local and global cohesion, encouraging students to use them not only to add descriptive details but also to provide comments, establish cause-and-effect relationships, and link themes across paragraphs. Writing workshops which incorporate feedback loops, including peer review and teacher feedback, are recommended to help students recognize and correct their errors while experimenting with more advanced syntactic structures. Additionally, exposure to model academic texts and corpus-based examples can aid students to understand authentic usage patterns of relative clauses and their rhetorical effects. Finally, it is recommended that future research study relative clause usage across various writing genres to assess students' progress and inform curriculum planning aimed at fostering advanced syntactic competence and discourse-level writing skills.

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APPENDIX A

Sentences Using Relative Clauses Across All Participants

PARTICIPANT #	SENTENCE #	SENTENCE USING RELATIVE CLAUSE
1	1	*The person **who inspires me the most** is my family as a whole.*
1	2	*Each member of my family **contributes, something unique to my life, teaching me valuable lessons and shaping my character.***
2	1	*My friend Analyn is a remarkable individual **who inspires me in countless ways from the moment we met.***
2	8	*Her perseverance motivates me to push through my own difficulties, reinforcing the idea **which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement.***
3	13	*It is in these moments of conflict and reconciliation **which we learn to communicate, compromise, and appreciate each other's perspectives.***
4	4	*It was incredibly difficult **where she was gone because our house felt empty without her.***
4	33	*She is a true inspiration, not just to me, but to anyone **hears her story.***
5	1	*The person **who inspires me the most** is my father.*
5	14	*Despite having little, he would still find ways **to help other in need showing me the true generosity comes from the heart.***
6	24	*In short, my heroes aren't those **which succeeded easily** but those **work hard for their dreams despite hardship.***
7	1	*In my life, the person **which inspire me most** are my family members.*
7	14	*I admire their ability to balance work and family life, demonstrating **which with determination, one can achieve their goals while caring relationships.***
7	26	*In every aspect of my life, the lessons **which I have learn the most from my family** is resilience.*
8	1	*…two individual **that despite their distinct personalities, share a profound commitment to family, hard work, and unwavering positivity.***
8	29	*Their love and guidance are the foundation upon **where I build my future.***
9	3	*They are the people **which will never give up on me even if I am not a good child.***
9	11	*So, I give back to them **which they have given me so they can be proud of me when the time comes.***
9	19	*Once I graduate, it will be my turn to take care of them because they are the ones **which inspires me with their love.***
10	33	*My mom is the one **which is always there.***
10	35	*The one **which will never turn her back on me.***
10	36	*The one **which supports, help, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence, comfort, listens, makes me laugh, cheers me up and wipes my tears.***
10	39	*She will definitely be the one **which I always admire and love by my family the most.***
11	2	*Ever since I was a child, my mother has been the guiding light in my life, **showing me that it means to be strong compassionate and resilient.***
11	7	*But beyond her work ethic, my mother has also show me **where it means to be kind and compassionate.***
12	1	*In my life, the person **which inspire me most** are my family members.*
12	14	*I admire their ability to balance work and family life, demonstrating **which with determination, one can achieve their goals while caring relationships.***
12	26	*In every aspect of my life, the lessons **which I have learn the most from my family** is resilience.*
13	1	*…two individual **that despite their distinct personalities, share a profound commitment to family, hard work, and unwavering positivity.***
13	29	*Their love and guidance are the foundation upon **where I build my future.***
14	3	*They are the people **which will never give up on me even if I am not a good child.***
14	11	*So, I give back to them **which they have given me so they can be proud of me when the time comes.***

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14	19	*Once I graduate, it will be my turn to take care of them because they are the ones* ***which inspires me with their love.***
15	33	*My mom is the one* ***which is always there.***
15	35	*The one* ***which will never turn her back on me.***
15	36	*The one* ***which supports, help, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence, comfort, listens, makes me laugh, cheers me up and wipes my tears.***
15	39	*She will definitely be the one* ***which I always admire and love by my family the most.***
16	2	*Ever since I was a child, my mother has been the guiding light in my life,* ***showing me that it means to be strong compassionate and resilient.***
16	7	*But beyond her work ethic, my mother has also show me* ***where it means to be kind and compassionate.***

APPENDIX B

Participant #	Sentence #	Sentence (as written)	Error Description
2	8	*reinforcing the idea* ***which hard work and dedication can lead to meaningful achievement***	Misuse of **which** as subject (should be *that* or restructured)
3	13	*It is in these moments of conflict and reconciliation* ***which we learn to communicate, compromise, and appreciate each other's perspectives.***	Misuse of **which** instead of *when* or *where* (semantic mismatch)
4	4	*It was incredibly difficult* ***where she was gone because our house felt empty without her.***	Incorrect use of **where** (intended meaning is temporal/conditional, not spatial)
4	33	*She is a true inspiration, not just to me, but to anyone* ***hears her story.***	Omitted relative pronoun **who** (*anyone* ***who*** *hears her story*)
5	14	*…find ways* ***to help other in need showing me the true generosity comes from the heart.***	Missing **who are** (should be *others* ***who are*** *in need*); clause incorrectly reduced
6	24	*my heroes aren't those* ***which succeeded easily*** *but those* ***work hard for their dreams despite hardship.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who** for people; second clause missing relative pronoun (*those* ***who*** *work hard*)
7	1	*the person* ***which inspire me most*** *are my family members.*	Misuse of **which** instead of **who** (human antecedent)
7	14	*…demonstrating* ***which with determination, one can achieve their goals while caring relationships.***	Incomplete and awkward use of **which** (structure ill-formed)
7	26	*the lessons* ***which I have learn the most from my family*** *is resilience.*	Wrong verb form (*learn* → *learned*) and awkward clause placement
8	1	*two individual* ***that despite their distinct personalities, share a profound commitment…***	Incorrect use of **that** instead of **who** for human antecedents
8	29	*the foundation upon* ***where I build my future.***	Misuse of **where** for abstract referent (*upon which* or *on which*)
9	3	*the people* ***which will never give up on me even if I am not a good child.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who** for people
9	11	*I give back to them* ***which they have given me so they can be proud of me when the time comes.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **what** or restructuring needed
9	19	*the ones* ***which inspires me with their love.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**; verb agreement error (*inspire*)
10	33	*the one* ***which is always there.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who** (human antecedent)
10	35	*The one* ***which will never turn her back on me.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**

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10	36	*The one* ***which supports, help, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence…***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**; parallel verb form errors
10	39	*the one* ***which I always admire and love by my family the most.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**; awkward passive structure
11	7	*my mother has also show me* ***where it means to be kind and compassionate.***	Misuse of **where** instead of **what** (*show me* ***what*** *it means…*)
12	1	*the person* ***which inspire me most*** *are my family members.*	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**
12	14	*…demonstrating* ***which with determination, one can achieve their goals while caring relationships.***	Incomplete/ill-formed relative clause
12	26	*the lessons* ***which I have learn the most from my family*** *is resilience.*	Verb form error (*learn* → *learned*); awkward clause
13	1	*two individual* ***that despite their distinct personalities, share a profound commitment…***	Use of **that** instead of **who** for people
13	29	*the foundation upon* ***where I build my future.***	Misuse of **where** for abstract referent
14	3	*the people* ***which will never give up on me even if I am not a good child.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**
14	11	*I give back to them* ***which they have given me so they can be proud of me when the time comes.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **what**
14	19	*the ones* ***which inspires me with their love.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**; verb agreement error
15	33	*the one* ***which is always there.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**
15	35	*The one* ***which will never turn her back on me.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**
15	36	*The one* ***which supports, help, hugs, kisses, gives me confidence…***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**; parallel verb form errors
15	39	*the one* ***which I always admire and love by my family the most.***	Misuse of **which** instead of **who**
16	7	*my mother has also show me* ***where it means to be kind and compassionate.***	Misuse of **where** instead of **what**