

Investigating Students' Use of Adjective Phrases at University Level

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Abstract: " Adjective phrase " is one of the areas in grammar that may cause difficulties to learners. So, this study has been designed to investigate students' ability in dealing with "adjective phrase" and the difficulties that might face in using it. To achieve this goal, 65 undergraduate / second year students / Department of English / College of Basic Education / University of Mosul for the academic year 2022 – 2023 have been chosen randomly. The data are prepared in three procedures which have been planned in three forms: the test, the questionnaire, and the interview. The test includes fifteen sentences containing "adjective phrase" which have been designed by the researcher. The questionnaire includes Yes – No questions, whereas the last form is the interview which took twenty-six days to complete with the sample of study (sixty-five) students. In the light of the results, it has been found that most students at university level own satisfactory awareness of using" adjective phrases" as opposed to others who find difficulties in using them. Such difficulties are found in their inability to identify the adjective phrase in the sentence and put it in a meaningful one. The study is terminated by some recommendations that may enable the students to overcome their difficulty in using adjective phrase.

Keywords: Adjective phrase – Difficulties – Correct using – Students' ability

1. Introduction

Difference among languages is inevitable and still the core of linguistic studies. However, differences between English and Arabic are not apart from the above truth (Israa,2021:504). It has its vital effect on grammar especially the construction of sentences. Learners of English as a second language should be aware of the differences between their mother tongue grammatical constructions and the target (English) ones.

Words in a sentence are classified under certain labels, open system items and closed system items. In other words, any English sentence must contain "content

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words "and "function words" (Frank, 1972:109). Among open system items is the adjective whose main function is a modifier of the noun in the sentence. "Adjective phrase", however, is a phrase that has an adjective as a head. It is divided into attributive and predicative (Knap and Watkins, 2005:41).

2. Aims of the Study

The present study aims at investigating errors committed by students in using adjective phrase". It also aims at presenting some recommendations that may help to overcome the difficulties that might face in using it in the sentence.

3- Hypotheses of the Study

This study hypothesizes that:

1. Students can differentiate between "adjective" and "adjective phrase".
- 2- Students find difficulties in using "adjective phrase" properly because they are unable to recognize the grammatical functions of it in the context.
- 3- Some common errors are existed among students.

4- Definitions of Adjective Phrase:

Quirk et al (1973:115) define adjective phrase as a phrase in which the adjective is a head, for example

1. She was so very tired.

Praninska (1975: 24-97) argues that an adjective phrase is a phrase that contains a group of words performing the function of an adjective that is modifying a noun. In other words, it is a group of words that combined to work together as a unit to achieve a single function. She also adds that the selection of this group is not is arbitrary. It is done according to specific construction, for example:

2. Rose experienced a very interesting story. (ibid)

In (2), the adjective phrase has the adjective "interesting" as a head preceded by the adverb "very" and followed by the noun "story".

Knapp and Watkins (2005:41) state that an "adjective phrase" is a describing phrase that tend to be used in two ways: the first one is a pre-modifier when it comes before a noun and it is called 'attributive'. The second one is a "complement" of the subject or object in a clause when it occurs after a verb and it is called "predicative".

Frank (1972:371) emphasizes the fact that the adjective phrase functions as a modifier that has the grammatical property of comparison as in:

- 3.This tree is shorter than the ash tree.

Dixson (1982:102) defines adjective phrase from the perspective of its function in a sentence. He argues that the adjective which is the head of an adjective phrase performs five grammatical functions:

A. Head of adjective phrase:

4. My red bag.

B. Modifier of noun phrase:

5. He wanted to write new stories.

C. Subject complement:

6. The view here is stunning (the adjective is preceded by a linking verb)

D. Object complement:

7. They found her dead. (the adjective is preceded by a direct object)

E. Apposition:

8. London, remote and quiet, is not my favorite place.

Frank (ibid) argues that adjective phrase can be constructed by using participles for example,

8- Based on this rule, you can do the exercise. (starting with past participle)

It may even be introduced by a preposition (ibid)

9. Jessica, the girl with black hair, joined our class today.

In (9), the function of the adjective phrase is to add extra details to the preceding noun.

O'Dwyer (2000:108) defines adjective phrases as cohesive word groups which are, in some cases, a series of adjectives that used to modify nouns

10. I finally found a reliable, yet old book of grammar.

According to Nordquist (2018) "an adjective headword in the adjective phrase may be accompanied by determiners, and/or qualifiers (all of which are called dependents).

11. Sarah is my best friend. (the determiner "my")

12. Sarah is one of my two close friends. (the quantifier "two")

In short, adjective phrase is a group of words with an adjective as a head.

This adjective can function as a pre modifier or post modifier in other phrases, or as a subject of object complement in a clause or in a sentence. Structure of the typical adjective phrase can be in the following form:

(Pre – modifiers) (Adjectives) (Post – modifiers)

The following example summarizes the structure of a typical adjective phrase in its simple form (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002:67)

13- Hard → adjective

14- Very hard → pre modifier + adjective

15- Hard to do → adjective + post modifier

16- Very hard to do → pre-modifier + adjective + post modifier

5- Positions of Adjective Phrase:

There are three positions of adjective phrase: the first position is attributive, the second is predicative, and the last is appositive (Quirk et al, 1985:418).

A- Attributive position of adjective phrase:

The function of adjective phrase in attributive position is a modifier. Sometimes it can be pre modified or post modified by other constituents. (Bhat, 1994:98). Attributive adjective phrase as a modifier is illustrated in the following example:

17- a brave boy.

18- afraid to start new experience.

In (17), the adjective (brave) which becomes an attribute of the head noun (boy) gives detailed information about the noun (boy) through stating the information about the type. It is not a usual boy, but the extraordinary one who is brave and his braveness is one of his characteristics. In (18), the adjective (afraid) illustrates extra details about the noun phrase (to start new experience), (Dixon, 1982:110).

Attributive adjective phrase is pre modified by intensifiers and post modified by adverbs. (Dixon, 1982:78; Huddleston and Pullum 2002).as in:

19. very horrible accident. "horrible" is pre modified by the intensifier "very".

20. Too dark indeed. "dark" is post modified by the adverb "indeed".

B- Predictive position of adjective phrase:

Adjective phrase functions predictively as the complement of subject or object.

A subject complement can be a word, phrase or a clause that follows a copular, or a linking verb. It describes the subject of a clause, (Crystal, 1997:75), for example:

21- The milk tastes extremely sour.

In the example above, the phrase "extremely sour" is an adjective phrase which functions as subject complement.

An object complements like a subject complement in form, it can be a word, phrase, or clause which directly modifies the direct object, for example:

22- The court judged the defendant guilty.

In (22), the phrase "the defendant guilty" is an adjective phrase which functions as object complement.

C- Appositive position of adjective phrase

"Appositive" is a word, or phrase, or clause whose role is supportive (supporting another item in a sentence). This supporting role can be done by modifying or describing another item in a sentence, (Thomson, 1998: 47). The following examples show the position of adjective phrases as appositives:

23- A stranger, wealthy and kind, paid for my lunch.

The adjective phrase "wealthy and kind" provides additional, non-essential details to the noun "the stranger" and separated from other constituents of the sentence by commas. Its function is to emphasize the characteristics of the noun. (Biber et al,1999).

24- The novel, dull and sad, did not appeal to me.

The adjective phrase in (24) is "dull and sad" is appositive; it describes the novel that precedes (Dixson, 1998).

6- Research Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative approach. Consequently, the researcher planned three kinds of procedures in order to achieve the purposes of this study. These procedures have been planned in three forms. The first one is data collection from documentation, the second one is a questionnaire that has been distributed after the test, and the third procedure is an interview which has been conducted on April 2nd to 27th 2023. The calculated Mean and the Standard Deviation have been used to analyze the obtained data.

6-1 Documentation

The documentation represents the results of the test. It consists of fifteen sentences which have been given to the sample of the study whom have been chosen randomly. They are second - year students, sixty five in number of the academic year 2022 – 2023, second semester at the Department of English / College of Basic Education / University of Mosul.

Below is the form of the test including the questions given to the students:

Pick out the adjective phrases in the following sentences:

- 1- An incredibly wonderful scenery is breathtaking.
- 2- A cat, covered in sticky and disgusting mud, makes a mess in a hall.
- 3- The wonderful performance has been introduced by the highly emotive actress (Rebecca).
- 4- The candidate was far too serious concerning his GPA.
- 5- A person smarter than William needs to figure that out.
- 6-The fashion's show by displayers was really exquisitely graceful.
- 7- The price of the house was quite extortionate affordable.
- 8- Her remarkable and talented son won a scholarship.
- 9- The high sound of music from next building was annoying.
- 10- The overly enthusiastic fans painted their faces and hands with the team's colors.
- 11- The best choice to nutrition of beef is grass – fed organic.
- 12- The woman, who was exhausted and overworked, took a well – deserved break.

- 13- Jessica seems extraordinary pleasant.
- 14- George is the chief pediatric surgeon in the hospital.
- 15- The little girl with the pink hat ate the pudding.

Table 1 below shows number and percentages of correct and incorrect answers of the students.

Table 1 Number and percentages of correct and incorrect answers

| No. of sentence Type of answer | Number of correct answers | Percentage | Number of incorrect answers | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| 1 | 60 | 92% | 5 | 8% |
| 2 | 25 | 38% | 40 | 62% |
| 3 | 45 | 69% | 20 | 31% |
| 4 | 48 | 74% | 17 | 26% |
| 5 | 62 | 95% | 3 | 5% |
| 6 | 35 | 54% | 30 | 46% |
| 7 | 36 | 55% | 29 | 45% |
| 8 | 50 | 77% | 15 | 22% |
| 9 | 60 | 92% | 5 | 8% |
| 10 | 62 | 95% | 3 | 5% |
| 11 | 35 | 54% | 30 | 46% |
| 12 | 40 | 61% | 25 | 39% |
| 13 | 55 | 85% | 10 | 15% |
| 14 | 32 | 49% | 33 | 51% |
| 15 | 15 | 23% | 50 | 77% |

Table one shows that students' answer in fifth sentence in the test "A person smarter than William needs to figure that out" has ranked first in order. It constitutes 95% among sentences. The tenth sentence "The overly enthusiastic fans painted their faces and hands with the team's colors" has the same percentage in rank as the first. The first sentence "An incredibly wonderful scenery is breathtaking" and the ninth sentence "The high sound of music from next building was annoying" are in the second rank. They constitute 92% among the correct answers. Sentence number thirteen "Jessica seems extraordinary pleasant" takes the third rank. It represents 85% among answers. In sequence, 77% of percentages which appears in students' answer of eighth sentence "Her remarkable and talented son won a scholarship". This percentage occupies the fourth rank. The

percentage decreases to be 74%, this appears in the fourth sentence "The candidate was far too serious concerning his GPA" which constitutes the fifth rank. Students' answer of the third sentence "The wonderful performance has been introduced by the highly emotive actress (Rebecca)" is in the sixth rank which represents 69%. The result of students' answer of the seventh sentence "The price of the house was quite extortionate affordable", is noticeably different. The rank is medium, it is 55%. On the same vein, two sentences in the test have the medium rank. They are the sixth sentence "Fashion's show by displays was really exquisitely graceful" and eleventh sentence "The best choice to nutrition of beef is grass-fed organic". Their percentage is 54%. Sentence number fourteen in the test has the eighth rank "George is the chief pediatric surgeon in the hospital", it represents 49% among answers. The lower percentage appears in the second sentence "A cat, covered in sticky and disgusting mud, makes a mess in a hall ". It constitutes 38% as percentage. The last and lowest percentage of correct answer can be noticed is in the last sentence in the test, it is sentence number fifteen "The little girl with the pink hat ate the pudding". Its percentage is 23%.

6-2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is a five - item questions. Table 2 below illustrates the items of the questionnaire and students' answers with their percentages:

Table 2 items of the questioner and answers

| No. of question | Question | Yes | No |
|-----------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | Do you think that there is a difference between adjectives and adjective phrases | 57 88% | 8 12% |
| 2 | Does the adjective consist of one word, whereas the adjective phrase consists of many words ? | 41 64% | 24 36% |
| 3 | Do you think that the position of adjectives adjective phrases is diverse? | 39 60% | 26 40% |
| 4 | Do you think that the grammatical functions of adjectives and adjective phrases are the same in number? | 55 85% | 10 15% |
| 5 | Does the adjective phrase have a higher degree than the adjective in describing the noun? | 50 77% | 15 23% |

The researcher asks the participants to choose either "Yes" or "No" for each item. Students' answers show that answering with "yes" has different percentages, they range between 38% - 88%. The same with answering with "no", there is also shows a variety of percentages, they range between 12% - 64%.

The first item of the questionnaire, shows that students distinguish between "adjectives" and "adjective phrases". This distinction appears in the high percentage of "yes" i.e. 88% as opposed to the low one of "no" (12%). Concerning the second item, the answers show that the students' knowledge of the form of "adjectives" and "adjective phrases" is acceptable. They recognize that the adjective may constitute one component of the adjective phrase. According to the results, the high percentage of students' answers (64%) goes to "yes" whereas 36% to "no". The high percentage of the third item has been given to "yes" (60%) which denotes students' recognition of the different positions of adjectives in general and adjective phrases in particular. Most of them know the attributive, predictive and positions of adjective phrases. Knowing these positions of adjective phrase is in deep relationship of understanding the different grammatical functions of it. Therefore, the students are able to answer the fourth item concerning the grammatical functions of adjective phrase and the percentage of the "yes" answer is 85% whereas "no" has got 15% which is the lowest percentage among all. The last item of the questionnaire reveals the students' recognition of the constituents of adjective phrase and the its effect, as one unit, on modifying and describing the noun which is higher in degree than an adjective. Consequently, the high percentage has been given to "yes", which is 77%, as opposed to "no" which is 23%.

6-3 Interview

The interview session has been conducted on April 2nd to 27th 2023 respectively. Each student has been asked three questions by the researcher. These questions are:

- 1- Define the terms "adjective" and "adjective phrase" in your own words.
- 2- Give an example of each one.
- 3- On what bases do you differentiate between these terms? Give examples.

The interview is important to get more accurate impression about students' self-knowledge. More precisely, it helps the researcher to know students' understanding of the test and the questionnaire, as well as their creativity in handling with the topic. Sixty five students answered the first question correctly using their own expressions. So, it has been predicted that the students are able to distinguish between "adjective" and "adjective phrase". Most of them answered the first question by saying that "the adjective is composed of one word, whereas the adjective phrase is composed of more than one word." However, students encountered difficulties in answering the second question. They were unable to give an example of adjective phrase which might be due to confusion. Concerning the third question, the students concentrated on their answer on "one - word

distinction" between adjective and adjective phrase regardless of the meaning conveyed in the text.

7- Discussion

The results that have been deduced confirm strongly the first hypothesis of the research that "students can distinguish between "adjective" and "adjective phrase". This confirmation has been achieved through students' answers to the questions of the questionnaire and the interview. In other words, the high percentages show that students' knowledge on the topic under the study is satisfactory.

Based on the results of the test, the questionnaire and the interview, students committed errors in using adjective phrase, i.e. they were unable, in most cases, to identify it in the sentence and to put it in a meaningful one. These errors can be classified according to Brown (1980:86) as intra – lingual. Such errors exist when the learners overgeneralize the rule as well as their ignorance of rule restrictions. As a result, the second and third hypotheses of the study have been confirmed that "Students face difficulties in handling with adjective phrase" which is due to their inability to use them in context. That is why, they were unable to give examples of adjective phrases correctly. The highest percentage of errors is 77% in sentence fifteen and 62% in the second sentence. Students have failed in identifying the right adjective phrase, they ignore the contextual meaning of adjective phrase and its grammatical function.

Percentages of errors decrease to reach 51% in sentence number fourteen and 46% in sentences number eleven and six. Thus, percentages of wrong answer decrease to reach the lowest before the last is 8% in sentences number one and nine. The lowest percentage of errors is 5% in fifth and tenth sentences "A person smarter than William needs to figure that out "and" The overly enthusiastic fans painted their faces and hands with the team's colors".

The reason behind Students' failure in identifying adjective phrase is the context itself. Students are sometimes unable to understand the context. They failed to detect the meaning of the whole sentence and consequently the meaning of its constituents including adjective phrase. In the interview, students tend to provide simple instances containing familiar adjectives. They in fact avoided using adjective phrases which is due to their fear of using unfamiliar difficult constructions that might make them commit errors. Lack of practice and ignorance of the components and functions of adjective phrases could be other reasons.

Overgeneralization could be also a reason behind students' failure in identifying and using adjective phrases. Overgeneralization exists when the learner doesn't know the precise rule and will therefore apply the rule of his

mother tongue language in order to understand the target language. That is why most of students' errors have been found in choosing the indefinite article with noun that follows as "adjective phrase". Others chose all the constructions after the verb in a sentence as adjective phrase". These common errors confirmed the third hypothesis of this study that "Some common errors are existed among students". The difference between students' native language and target language as well as the complexity of some adjective phrases, especially those whose function is appositive, could be the main reasons.

8. Conclusions

Based on data of this study, the researcher concludes the following points:

- 1- The majority of students recognize and differentiate between "adjective" and "adjective phrase". This recognition, which appears in students' answers of the questions of the interview, is satisfactory to some extent.
- 2- One of the main reasons behind some students' failure in distinguishing between "adjective" and "adjective phrase" is linguistics overlapping between Arabic (the mother language of the majority of the students) and English (their target language).
- 3- Students' awareness of English vocabulary in general and the meanings of an adjective in particular and how it combines with other words to form an adjective phrase is important in helping students to identify the right order and form of adjective phrase.
- 4- Students tend to use adjective phrase rudimentary by giving simple examples which include an adjective pragmatically used in everyday situations. In addition, some students encountered difficulty in choosing the right adjective phrase in all fifteen sentences in the test.
- 5- It has been noted that students got confused when a sentence contains more than two adjectives. The difficulty is due to students' misunderstanding of the context.
- 6- Most of the students are aware of the positions of adjective phrase. They recognize the attributive and predicative positions of adjectives.
- 7- Students' errors are restricted in using adjective phrase in the context.

9- Recommendations

The following points are recommended by the researcher:

- 1- Extensive course on the meaning of "adjective" and "adjective phrase" beside the grammatical functions of adjectives can be given to students to add more precise information on such items to avoid confusion in the recognition of adjective phrase.

- 2- Teachers of English grammar can refer to "adjective phrase" and explain the difference between it and an "adjective" in any text he presented to his students. They, definitely, teach in the light of certain curriculums. These curriculums include syllabuses of grammar, comprehension, composition and so on.

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دراسة استخدام الطلاب لعبارات الصفة على مستوى الجامعة

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المستخلص: تعتبر العبارة الوصفية واحدة من المواضيع في علم النحو التي يواجه فيها المتعلمين عدة صعوبات. لدراسة كيفية تعامل الطلاب مع العبارة الوصفية، تم تصميم و تنفيذ هذه الدراسة والتي تهتم في بحث الصعوبات في استخدام تلك العبارات من قبل الطلاب على مستوى الجامعة. تم اختيار 65 طالب بصورة عشوائية من طلاب المرحلة الثانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية التربية الاساسية / جامعة الموصل للعام الدراسي 2022 – 2023. تتألف بيانات الدراسة من ثلاث إجراءات و التي وضعت في ثلاث اشكال: الاختبار- الاستبانة - و المقابلة. يتضمن الاختبار خمس عشرة جملة تحتوي كل منها على العبارة الوصفية والمصممة من قبل الباحث. تتضمن الاستبانة اسئلة "نعم" و "كلا", بينما يتضمن الشكل الاخير من الاجراءات المقابلة و التي استغرقت مدة "ست وعشرين يوما". في ضوء النتائج, تم التوصل الى ان معظم الطلاب يمتلكون دراية مقنعة و مرضية في استخدام العبارة الوصفية على النقيض من البعض الاخر الذين يواجهون صعوبات في استخدام العبارة الوصفية. تظهر هذه الصعوبات في عدم قدرة الطلبة على تمييز العبارة الوصفية في الجملة وكذلك وضعها في جملة مفيدة مكتملة المعنى. تنتهي الدراسة ببعض التوصيات التي يمكن ان تساهم في مساعدة الطلبة علي تخطي تلك الصعوبات في استخدام العبارة الوصفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عبارة الصفة، الصعوبات، الاستخدام الصحيح، مقدرة الطلبة

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