RELATIVE MARKER OMISSION IN THAI: EVIDENCE FROM NATIVE SPEAKERS' ACCEPTABILITY JUDGMENTS AND LANGUAGE TRANSFER

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Abstract

Relative clauses are a well-studied phenomenon in linguistics, giving rise to discoveries about human language. In this study, we consider *thîi*-less relative clauses in Thai, in which a relative marker may be omitted under certain circumstances. The objectives of the study are to identify native speakers' conditions of *thîi* omission and to explore whether knowledge of the conditions is transferred to their relative marker omission in English. Two parallel acceptability judgment tasks in Thai and English were conducted: 437 students from various faculties at Kasetsart University judged the acceptability of *thîi*-less relative clauses while 233 non-English major students and 83 English major students at the same university judged the acceptability of English marker-less relative clauses. Results showed the most favorable condition for *thîi* omission is a subject relative clause that modifies a general head noun and contains a non-eventive predicate. Such a structure of a *thîi*-less relative clause resembles the basic construction of nominal modification, i.e., a noun modified by a phrase. Results also showed the transfer of the *thîi* omission pattern into English, particularly among students with lower English proficiency. With L1 and L2 supporting data, the study demonstrated that syntax and semantics are determinants of relative marker omission in Thai.

Keywords: Relative clause, Relative marker omission, Language transfer, Acceptability judgement

1. INTRODUCTION

A relative clause is a nominal modification used in many languages around the world. The basic idea is that a noun (referred to as a head noun) is modified by a clause, with this head noun being co-referential with some particular position or pronoun within the clause. For example, in (1a), the head noun (*the girl*) is modified by the clause in square brackets and is co-referential with the subject position of that clause. This is known as a subject relative clause (SRC). In (1b), on the other hand, the same head noun (*the girl*) is modified by a clause, but this time, the head noun is co-referential with the object position of the clause. This is called an object relative clause (ORC).

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(1) a. This is the girl [that _ admired the boy].
   b. This is the girl [that the boy admired _].

Thai exhibits both these patterns as well, exemplified in (2). As can be seen, the patterns are similar to those in English: (2a) shows an SRC and (2b) shows an ORC. Notice that in Thai, the relative clause is introduced by the word *thîi*, referred to as the relative marker.

(2) a. nîi pen kham-thǎam [thîi_ nâa-sǒncay]
      this be question   that interesting
      'This is the question that is interesting.'
   b. cíp cəə khruu [thîi fáa khít-thǔŋ _]
      Jip meet teacher that Fah miss
      'Jip met the teacher that Fah was missing.'

The focus of our study is a pattern that has been described in the literature as relative marker omission. Here, it has been shown that under some conditions, the relative marker in Thai may be omitted (3a). However, it is not always omissible (3b), a fact that has been explained in various ways.

(3) a. nîi pen kham-thǎam [nâa-sǒncay]
      this be question   interesting
      'This is the question (that) is interesting.'
   b. *cíp cəə khruu [fáa khít-thǔŋ]
      Jip meet teacher Fah miss
      'Jip met the teacher (that) Fah was missing.'

According to Hongthong (2018), an omission of a relative marker is impossible with an ORC as in (3b) above. Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom (2005) noted that a relative marker cannot be omitted in an ORC and also in an SRC describing a specific event, e.g., *khǎw pen nák-rian [maa hǎa aacaan mûa-cháw-níi]* 'He is the student (who) came to see the teacher this morning.' Savetamalya (1996) and Yaowapat and Prasithrathsint (2006) proposed that a relative marker omission is acceptable only under the condition that a relative clause is adjacent to the head noun and begins with a verb, i.e., the

structure of an SRC as shown in (3a). On the other hand, in their later work, Yaowapat and Prasithrathsint (2008) suggested that a relative marker is required when a verb in a relative clause co-occurs with an auxiliary or a tense-aspect marker, e.g., *chǎn yàak-dây nǎŋsǔɯ [cà cæ̀æk nay ŋaan-kasĭan aacaan]* 'I want to get a book (which) will be distributed in the teacher's retirement party.

In this study, we put forward a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon. We begin by noting that Thai is controversial in whether it exhibits relative clauses at all. According to Comrie (1996, 2002), Thai is a null-anaphor language, so there is no a priori reason to assume that sentences as in (2) contain a gap co-referential with the head noun, which is a specific characteristic of relative clauses in languages like English. Since there is no gap, there is no extraction from the subject or object position to form the structure of an SRC or ORC. Also, relative clauses in English are a distinct construction marked by various kinds of syntactic properties distinguishing them from other constructions (Comrie, 1996). For example, when an embedded clause with the overt complementizer *that* occurs with a relative clause, only an ORC, not an SRC, is acceptable, e.g., *the man [whom I believe that you saw]/*the man [who I believe that saw you]*. Unlike English, relative clauses in Thai seem to lack such syntactic constraints. Accordingly, Comrie (1996, 2002) suggested that relative clauses in Thai are in fact not relative clauses, but are a kind of nominal modification construction.

In contrast, we claim that Thai relative clauses are indeed relative clauses, but we accept the inherent similarity between relative clauses and nominal modificational patterns which Comrie's theory was based upon. Specifically, we propose that relative marker omission is permissible only when the resultant construction is interpretable in some manner, and this interpretability comes from a resemblance to the nominal modification construction. In our analysis, this nominal modification construction is a non-clausal noun phrase structure which takes an

indefinite noun and modifies it with something non-eventive. In other words, this construction consists of a general head noun which is not specific in its reference, while its modifier must be either adjectival or stative in nature, as shown in (4).

(4) a. bâan   sǔay
       house   beautiful
       'a beautiful house'

    b. dèk   rák   thammáchâat sǎam khon
       child love nature   three Cls
       'three nature-loving children'

    c. *dèk   wîŋ khon nán
        child run Cls   that
        'that running child'

The examples in (4a) and (4b) are acceptable noun modification constructions since the general bare head noun is modified by something non-eventive (an adjectival verb and a stative verb, respectively). In fact, this non-clausal noun modification in Thai is considered very basic and is presumably acquired very early and easily by Thai learners. In contrast, the noun modification construction in (4c), in which the specific head noun with a demonstrative determiner is modified by an eventive verb, is ungrammatical.

Returning to relative clauses, most previous studies (e.g., Hongthong, 2018; Savetamalya, 1996; Yaowapat & Prasithrathsint, 2006) agreed that a relative marker is omissible in the structure of an SRC as in (3a) above, but not in an ORC as in (3b). We propose that this is the case because in (3a), when the relative marker is omitted, it resembles the nominal modification construction. That is, Thai native speakers can interpret this sentence as a simple modification of the noun, and not as a relative clause, so the omission of the relative marker provides an alternative construction that is (i) grammatical in Thai, and (ii) very basic and easy to understand. This provides favorable conditions for the interpretation of such sentences. Specifically, when an SRC occurs with a general head noun and contains a non-eventive verb, Thai speakers tend to allow the omission of the relative marker because the resulting construction is similar to the more basic construction of nominal modification.

To prove this assumption, two acceptability judgment tasks were conducted. The first task was designed to examine native speakers' judgements on the conditions for relative marker omission in Thai. The second supplementary task, which involved Thai learners' judgements on relative marker omission in English, was carried out to confirm the results of the first task and to investigate this phenomenon from a language transfer point of view. If such omission conditions exist in Thai, they should be evidently reflected through language transfer: Thai learners, particularly those with a low level of language proficiency, also tend to accept English relative clauses without markers under the same circumstances, i.e., an SRC with a general head noun and a non-eventive verb. Therefore, the objectives of the study were 1) to identify native speakers' conditions of relative marker omission in Thai and 2) to explore whether knowledge of such conditions is transferred to their omission patterns of relative markers in English.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into three parts. The first part deals with relative clauses in English. The second part describes relative clauses in Thai. The last part focuses on the concept of language transfer.

2.1 English Relative Clauses

English relative clauses are characterized by their specific position and form. In terms of position, relative clauses in English, a head-initial language, are post-nominal modifiers placed after the head noun they modify, yielding the "head noun + relative clause" structure. Moreover, relative clauses in English are formed by using the gap strategy: a relative clause must contain a gap (empty position) whose reference matches the

head noun. English is one of a few languages in which the gap can be related to all grammatical relations (Keenan & Comrie, 1977). For example, the relative clause in (5a) immediately follows the head noun (*the phone*), which is co-referential with the gap in the subject position of the clause, i.e., an SRC. The relative clause in (5b) modifies the preceding head noun (*the woman*), which is co-referential with the direct object position of the clause, i.e., an ORC.

(5) a. The phone [which _ has the most modern features] is very expensive.
   b. That's the woman [I invited _ to the party].

In addition, English relative clauses are introduced by seven *wh* markers which occur with different types of head nouns: *who/whom* for people, *which* for things and animals, *whose* for possession, *where* for places, *when* for times, and *why* for reasons (e.g., *I met the man who bought Jack's house*). In many contexts, *that* can be used to replace *wh* markers. The word *that* can appear with head nouns of animate and inanimate kinds; it is regarded as more informal than *wh* markers and is frequently used in informal styles (Biber et al., 1999; Carter et al., 2011) (e.g., *I met the man that bought Jack's house*).

Relative markers in English can generally be omitted, particularly in spoken language (Parrott, 2000). For example, the *wh* markers in the object relative clause in (6a) and the oblique relative clause in (6b) are optional.

(6) a. The novel [Ann was reading] had a complicated plot.
   b. The town [the couple live] is small and peaceful.

However, relative markers in English are not always optional. One important context in which a relative marker is obligatory is an SRC (Downing & Locke, 2006). That is, a relative clause with a gap in the subject position must begin with a relative marker, either a *wh* marker or the *that* substitute.

Omission of a relative marker in an SRC leads to an ungrammatical sentence, as in (7).

(7) *The man [lives next door] is an engineer.

As we will see in the next part, this SRC context of obligatory relative marker in English is in contrast to Thai, in which a relative marker is optional only in an SRC. Thus, it is interesting to compare relative marker omission in the two languages.

2.2 Thai Relative Clauses

Like English, Thai relative clauses function as post-nominal modifiers. As a right-branching language, relative clauses in Thai are placed after the head noun they modify. According to Yoawapat and Prasithrathsint (2005, 2008), relative clauses in Thai can be formed by two strategies, namely the gap strategy, which creates the relative clause structure with a gap, and the pronoun retention strategy, which fills the gap with a pronoun corresponding to the head noun, as illustrated in (8).

(8) chăn pen-hùaŋ mææw [thîi _ /man pùay]
   I   worry cat   that _/it sick
   'I am worried about the cat, that (it) is sick.'

In this study, we decided to focus only on relative clauses formed by a gap, which is the more basic and common strategy. Moreover, although relative clauses in Thai can be introduced by three markers (*thîi*, *sûŋ*, *ʔan*), we only pay attention to *thîi* relative clauses due to their frequent occurrences, while the others are usually found in formal or literary styles (Kullavanijaya, 2006).

One major controversy over relative clause analysis is the omission of the relative marker. In Thai, relative markers are allowed to be omitted in certain conditions. Kuno and Wongkhomthong (1981) and Kullavanijaya (2006) analyzed the *thîi*-less structure and recognized some particular constraints on the use of the marker *thîi*. According to their analysis, *thîi* cannot be omitted in an ORC as

in (3b) repeated here in (9), or in an SRC showing a specific event as shown in (10). In contrast, the marker *thîi* is optional when it introduces an SRC with a general description about a head noun, as illustrated in (11).

(9) *cíp   cǝǝ   khruu   [fáa khít-thǔŋ]
    Jip   meet teacher   Fah miss
    'Jip met the teacher (that) Fah was
     missing.'

(10) *mɔ̌ɔ   khɯɯ   phûu-chaay
     doctor   be   man
     [kamlaŋ   dɯ̀ɯm   náam-sôm]
     progressive   drink   orange juice
     'The doctor is the man (that) is drinking
      orange juice.'

(11) cíp pen dèk   [rák thammáchâat]
     Jip be child   love nature
     'Jip is a child (that) loves nature.'

Savetamalya (1989, 1996) claimed that relative marker omission in Thai is possible under two syntactic conditions. First, a relative marker may be omitted if it introduces a relative clause immediately following the head noun. Second, the relative clause in question must have a gap that is co-referential with the head noun. A *thîi*-less relative clause under the two conditions is shown in (12).

(12) khon   [_ rák   rót]
     people   love   car
     'people (that) love cars' (Savetamalya,
     1996, p.634)

Yaowaphat and Prasithrathsint (2006) compared "reduced relative clauses", or marker-less constructions, in Thai and Vietnamese. They found that relative clauses without relative markers in the two languages share three syntactic characteristics: first, they begin with a verb; second, they are adjacent to the head noun; lastly, they are not indirect object relative clauses. There is also one semantic characteristic of marker-less relative clauses in Thai and Vietnamese; the relative marker can be omitted when the relative clause modifies an indefinite or non-specific

head noun. Given these conditions, the relative marker in (13) is allowed to be omitted since the relative clause in which it occurs is marked by all these syntactic and semantic characteristics.

(13) ŋuu   pen sàt   [mii samɔ̌ɔŋ lék]
     Snake be animal have brain   small
     'Snakes are animals (that) have a small
     brain.' (Yaowapat & Prasithrathsint,
     2006, p.154)

The present study considers both syntactic and semantic parameters of omission. Syntactically, the analysis is based on many of the previous studies that have argued for relative marker omission in SRCs as described above. Semantically, it is assumed that *thîi*-less relative clauses – similar to the nominal modification construction – denote a general description about a certain entity. The semantics of *thîi*-less relative clauses is divided into two aspects, namely the specificity of head nouns and the semantic nature of predicates. Such syntactic and semantic conditions for relative marker omission will be described in detail in Section 3.

2.3 Language Transfer

Language transfer research in second language acquisition has a complicated history. Language transfer, according to Odlin (1989), refers to the impact of similarities and differences between a person's prior language(s) and his/her second language on the process of learning the latter. According to Gass (1984), it was initially regarded as a dominant force in L2 learning. However, cross-linguistic influence research indicates that language transfer can have both positive and negative effects on various language domains. Language transfer has recently gained much attention as one of the cognitive mechanisms underlying second language acquisition.

While many studies have concentrated on the transfer of words (e.g., Pasquarella et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2010) and sounds (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Dickinson et al., 2004;

Durgunoğlu et al., 1993), some researchers have examined syntactic transfer in various grammatical aspects. For example, Siu and Ho (2015) found that syntactic skills, or "the recognition and ability to manipulate the grammatical structure of sentences in a language" (Gombert, 1992, cited in Siu & Ho, 2015, p.313), affect the reading comprehension of L1 Chinese and L2 English speakers differently across ages and predict L2 comprehension. In addition, Tang (2020) discovered that Chinese EFL students struggle with morphosyntactic transfer from their L1, leading to misuse of bare verbs in L2 English. As L2 proficiency increases, these mistakes in verb forms caused by the typological distinctions between Chinese and English become less common. More recently, using the Thai Learner Corpus, Rhekhalilit (2023) studied the use of self-forms by Thai learners of English, discovering that the intensive forms used by intermediate Thai English learners in this study showed syntactic differences. While professional writers place intensive self-forms next to their nominal antecedents as appositives (e.g., *I myself decorated the room*), intermediate students place them as oblique arguments, frequently after the preposition "by" due to the result of L1 transfer (e.g., *Some of that I brought by myself*).

Numerous studies have focused on relative clauses as subjects of language transfer among learners of different L1 backgrounds. Juffs (1998) investigated the ability of advanced university ESL speakers of different native languages to process complex English syntax, including relative clauses, in an online task. The findings suggested that (a) ESL speakers, like native speakers, are sensitive to the complex interaction of information sources when parsing a sentence, and (b) adult ESL learners are influenced by typological aspects of their L1s linked with L1 parsing techniques while processing ESL. Also, Izumi (2003) examined relative clause acquisition hypotheses to comprehend the processing and acquisition difficulties of L2 learners. The participants were native speakers of a variety of languages who

enrolled in ESL programs at two US universities. The results of the study supported Keenan and Comrie's (1977) Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy Hypothesis (NPAH) and Kuno's (1974) Perceptual Difficulty Hypothesis (PDH).

Some studies have examined the language transfer of particular L1 learners. Recruiting Hong Kong Chinese students, Chan (2004) demonstrated syntactic transfer from Chinese to English, with greater transfer for complex structures, particularly relative clauses. As predicted, transfer is more common among learners with lower English proficiency levels; similarities between L1 and the target language facilitate language acquisition whereas differences hinder it. Phoocharoensil (2014), using real language data from the Thai Learner English Corpus (TLEC), investigated the challenges faced by intermediate Thai EFL learners. The most problematic error, which is considered to be an interlingual one, is the use of "where" as a relative marker. Errors found in the learners' use of "where" relative clauses included a lack of commas in non-restrictive RCs, addition of redundant prepositions, inappropriate use of relative markers, and the non-adjacency of an RC to the head. Timyam's study (2021) found that Thai speakers prefer the relative marker *that*, in comparison to *wh* words, in the formal context of academic writing, possibly because *that* is an invariant marker that accepts different kinds of head nouns and is semantically equivalent to the marker *thîi* in Thai.

3. METHOD

The method section contains two parts: the materials and the participants of the study.

3.1 Materials

Two acceptability judgment tasks were constructed, Thai and English, each of which focused on SRCs with no relative marker. Four conditions, different in terms of the specificity of head nouns (specific vs. general) and the semantic nature of relative

clause predicates (eventive vs. non-eventive), were designed. A specific head noun has a specific referent that can be identified (e.g., *that man*) while a general head noun refers to an undefined entity whose reference cannot be clearly stated (e.g., *a man*). An eventive predicate contains an action verb (e.g., *to run*), while a non-eventive predicate is adjectival or stative in nature (e.g., *to love*).

Four sentences were constructed under these conditions, yielding a total of 16 test items. The test items in the English task were translated directly from those in Thai, e.g., *cíp pen dèk rák thammáchâat/ Jip is a girl loves nature.* Given that a relative marker in English cannot be omitted in an SRC, all the English test sentences are ungrammatical in standard English. To minimize any potential bias, the test items were created in various forms by taking into consideration several types of syntactic and semantic factors, i.e., the grammatical functions of head nouns in the main clauses (subject vs. complement), the animacy of head nouns (animate head vs. inanimate head), and the types of verbs in the main clauses (copula vs. action verb). Table 1 provides an outline of the task design.

In both tasks, there were 16 fillers which consisted of complex sentences (with one level of embedding) as well as some genuine adjectivally modified nouns. In total, participants were asked to judge (on a 5-point Likert scale) the acceptability of 32 sentences, presented to them randomly, 16 of which were filler sentences.

3.2 Participants

By adopting voluntary sampling techniques, we recruited two groups of participants to complete the acceptability judgment tasks in the Thai and English versions. All participants were native speakers of Thai, aged 18-24 years old, who were studying at the undergraduate level at Kasetsart University. The first group comprised of 437 students from various faculties; these participants were assigned to judge the acceptability of the sentences in the Thai version. The second group included 233 non-English major students and 83 English major students; both subgroups were instructed to judge the acceptability of the sentences in the English version. The non-English major students represented elementary and lower-intermediate English learners while the English major students represented upper-intermediate learners. Before doing the task, all participants were asked to self-evaluate their English proficiency level on a 1-5 point scale. On average, the non-English major students evaluated themselves on writing and grammar skills at level 2, while the English major students evaluated themselves on these skills at level 3.

The participants were asked to rate the acceptability of each item in the task on their own via a Google form. Once they had submitted their responses, they could not revise or resubmit the form. This ensured that their judgment was mainly based on their own intuition or impression. In both Thai and English versions, most of the participants finished the task within 15 minutes.

4. RESULTS

The results section is divided into two parts: the participants' acceptability judgments on relative marker omission in Thai and their acceptability judgments on relative marker omission in English.

Table 1 Outline of the Task Design

Condition	Head Noun Type	Predicate Type
1	General	Non-eventive
2	General	Eventive
3	Specific	Non-eventive
4	Specific	Eventive

4.1 Relative Marker Omission in Thai

Although the overall results indicate that all conditions were generally accepted by the participants with an average score of 3, some differences are apparent in the acceptability levels shown in Table 2. Specifically, among the four types of *thîi*-less SRCs, those with general head nouns and non-eventive predicates received the highest scores of acceptability (3.90) while those with specific head nouns and eventive predicates received the lowest scores (3.07). Moreover, the specificity of head nouns played a more significant role than the semantic nature of predicates in the pattern of *thîi* omission, as reflected by the higher scores of Conditions 1 and 2 than those of the other two conditions.

4.2 Relative Marker Omission in English

Table 3 compares the acceptability levels of *wh* marker-less SRCs between the two groups of Thai English learners. The average scores of the non-English major students were noticeably higher than those of the English major students across the four conditions. Since all the test items are ungrammatical in standard English, the higher acceptability ratings of the non-English major students imply the transfer of the pattern of Thai relative marker omission into English among

elementary and lower-intermediate English learners.

An examination of the individual test items demonstrates a preference for transfer in the first condition, in which there was an obvious discrepancy in the acceptability scores between the two groups of students. For example, for the test item No. 1: "*Nan is a girl loves nature*", the majority of English major students (50.6%) rated it as less acceptable (1-2), while the greatest proportion of non-English major students (48.5%) rated it as more acceptable (4-5) (see Figure 1). The corresponding test item in the Thai version was also rated at a high level (4-5) by 87.4% of respondents (see Figure 2).

Test item No. 4: "*Questions are too difficult confuse students*" showed a similar pattern of acceptability. As presented in Figure 3, a higher proportion of English major students (67.5%) rated this item as unacceptable (1-2) in comparison to non-English major students (37.8%). On the other hand, approximately one-third of the non-English major students (31.8%) rated it as acceptable (4-5). The corresponding test item in the Thai version was also rated at a high level (4-5) by 81.3% of respondents (see Figure 4).

Therefore, based on the scores of the four conditions and the scores of the two individual test items above, the higher acceptability ratings of English marker-less SRCs among

Table 2 Acceptability Judgements on *thîi*-less SRCs

Condition	Average Score
1. General HN/Non-eventive RC	3.90
2. General HN/Eventive RC	3.63
3. Specific HN/Non-eventive RC	3.28
4. Specific HN/Eventive RC	3.07

Table 3 Acceptability Judgements on *wh* marker-less SRCs

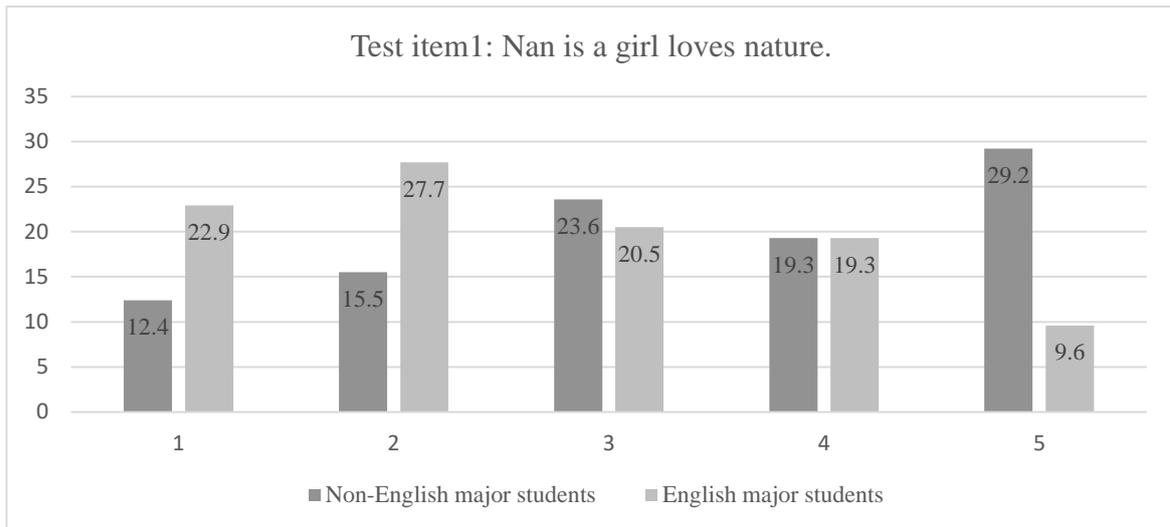| Condition	Average Score	
	Non-major Students	Major Students
1. General HN/Non-eventive RC	3.16	2.66
2. General HN/Eventive RC	3.12	2.79
3. Specific HN/Non-eventive RC	3.04	2.56
4. Specific HN/Eventive RC	3.15	2.76

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Figure 1 Judgements of the Two Groups of Students Regarding English Test Item 1
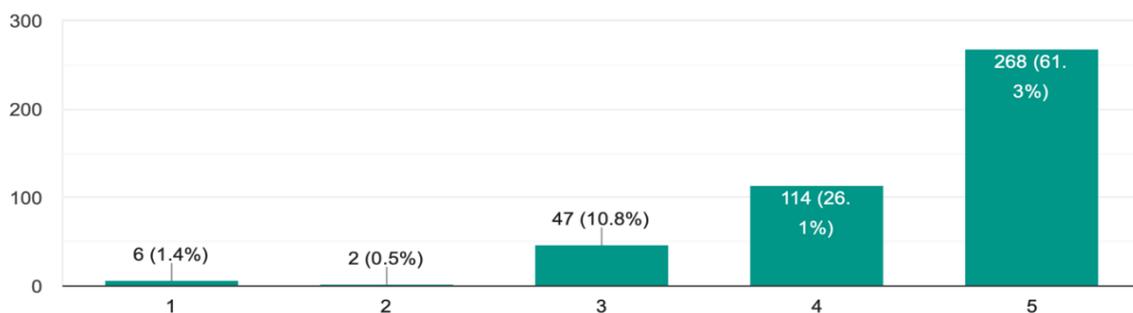

Figure 2 Native Speakers' Judgements Regarding Thai Test Item 1
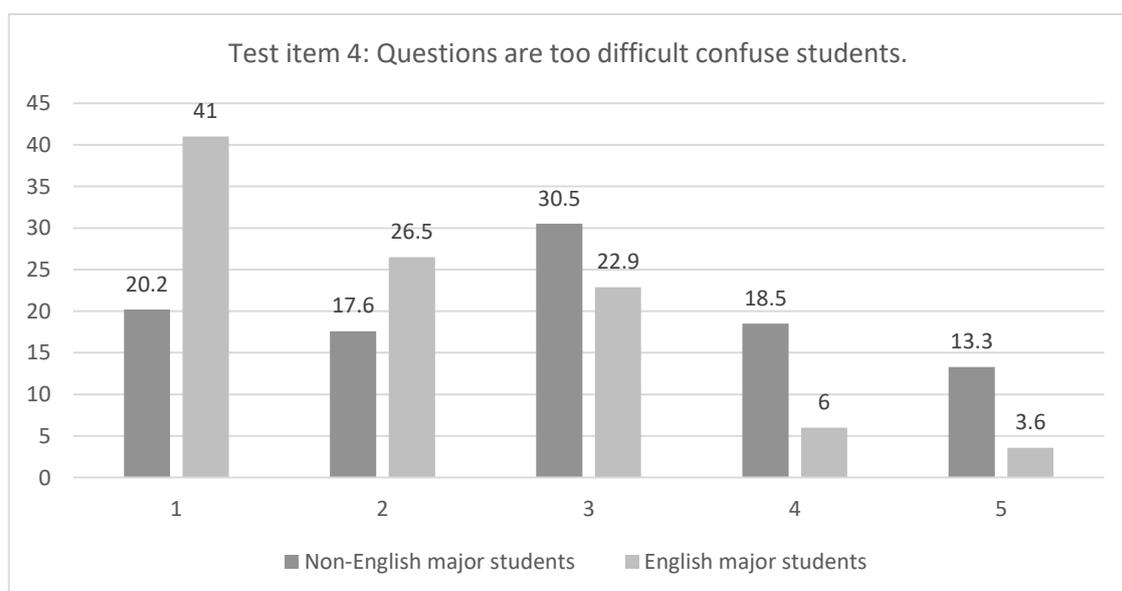

Figure 3 Judgements of the Two Groups of Students Regarding English Test Item 4

คำถามยากเกินไปทำให้เด็ก ๆ สับสน
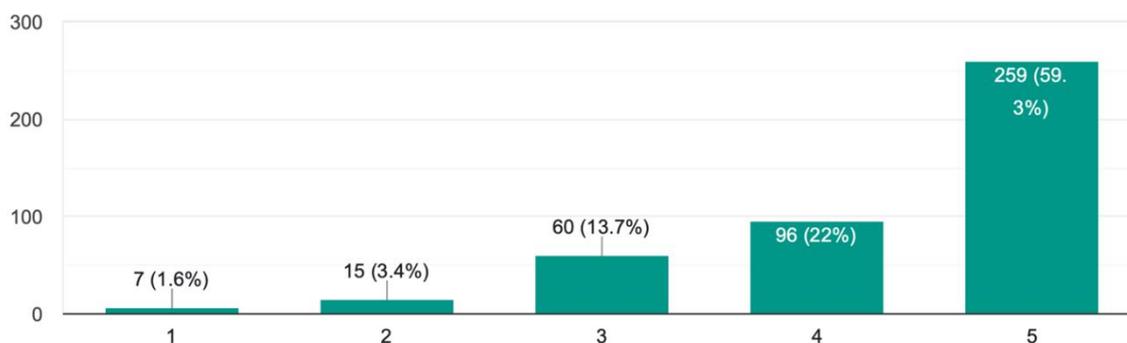437 responses

Figure 4 Native Speakers' Judgements Regarding Thai Test Item 4

the non-English major students, who represent elementary and lower-intermediate English learners, indicate the existence of L1 transfer, particularly in the first condition, which is the most favorable condition of *thîi* omission in Thai.

5. DISCUSSION

First, the results show that the most favorable condition for the omission of a relative marker in Thai is an SRC expressing a general description, which occurs with a general head noun and has a non-eventive predicate. These results support the assumption that only relative clauses marked by these syntactic and semantic characteristics are ambiguous. Without an overt relative marker, the resulting structure of these clauses resembles the nominal modification construction.

When the marker *thîi* is present in a relative clause, there is no ambiguity as to what the syntax of the sentence involves: it involves a head noun modified by a relative clause. In this case, Thai speakers who encounter the structure immediately make the relative clause analysis and anticipate the component following the head noun to be a relative clause. This "head noun + relative clause" structure is a grammatical pattern in their native language, and thus they have no difficulty with this.

However, when the relative marker is absent, there is a temporary ambiguity as to

what the syntax of the sentence is. There are at least two patterns: a head noun modified by a marker-less relative clause, or a head noun modified by a non-eventive phrase, i.e., the nominal modification construction. When Thai speakers are presented with this ambiguity, because of the overwhelming preference for a simple noun phrase structure, they are likely to adopt the analysis of the nominal modification, which is the more basic pattern in the language. In other words, when Thai speakers encounter a nominal, they invoke a "head noun + modifier" structure in their minds, anticipating that the speaker will be adding information to the referent of that head noun. They could invoke a relative clause pattern, but that is computationally more complex, and in the absence of any evidence for a relative clause (i.e., a relative marker), the nominal modification construction is the preferred pattern.

In the case of SRCs with a general description (a general noun modified by a non-eventive verb), this analysis holds. Accordingly, the participants rated the acceptability of the test sentences in this condition as in (14) with the highest average score (3.90). However, SRCs with a specific description (a specific noun modified by an eventive verb) are incompatible with the basic tenets of the nominal modification construction. Such a mismatch between the expected structure (nominal modification) and the actual structure (a *thîi*-less relative clause) caused

confusion to the participants (since they had to reanalyze the structure of the sentence). Accordingly, they rated the acceptability of the test sentences in this condition as in (15) with the lowest average score (3.07).

(14) cíp pen dèk   [rák thammáchâat]
     Jip be   child   love nature
     'Jip is a child (that) loves nature.'

(15) mɛ̂ɛ   plɔ̀ɔp lûuk   khon
     mother   comfort child   Cls
     lék   [rɔ́ɔŋhây   sĭaŋ-daŋ]
     young   cry   loudly
     'The mother comforted the youngest child (that) cried loudly.'

Such an analysis can also account for the obligatory presence of *thîi* in ORCs. This is because with the missing relative marker in an ORC, the very next element after the head noun is another noun, and this is incompatible with the nominal modification construction.

Second, the results of the study show that the average scores of the test sentences containing general head nouns in Condition 1 (general nouns modified by non-eventive predicates) and Condition 2 (general nouns modified by eventive predicates) were higher than those of the test sentences containing specific head nouns in the other two conditions. These results indicate that the specificity of head nouns (general vs. specific) is a more important determinant for relative marker omission than the semantic nature of predicates (non-eventive vs. eventive). One possible reason involves the syntax and semantics of a head in a phrase structure. Since the head noun is regarded as the most important element that carries the core meaning of a noun phrase (Tallerman, 2020), the presence of a head noun that is non-specific in reference provides the structure with which it occurs with an overall interpretation of a general description about a certain entity, which is the basic meaning that allows relative marker omission in Thai.

Third, the study reveals some differences between English and Thai relative clauses. English relative clauses are marked by several kinds of syntactic constraints (Comrie, 1996, 2002), and the omission of a relative marker in English depends largely on syntactic factors. For example, a relative marker cannot be omitted when a relative clause is preceded by a preposition (e.g., *the person [with John negotiated] was the manager*) and when it has a gap in the subject position (e.g., *I know the man [_ is talking]*) (Downing & Locke, 2006). In contrast, relative marker omission in Thai is determined by both syntactic and semantic factors. In terms of syntax, several previous studies have claimed that a relative marker in Thai can be absent only in SRCs (e.g., Kullavanijaya, 2006; Kuno & Wongkhomthong, 1981; Savetamalya, 1989, 1996). The results of the present study suggest more specific characteristics of *thîi*-less SRCs regarding their semantics. SRCs whose markers can be omitted denote a general description about a certain entity. Specifically, they occur with a general head noun with an indefinite or non-specific referent and contain a non-eventive predicate, either an adjectival verb or a stative verb.

In addition, the study shows that differences in native speakers' judgments on *thîi*-less SRCs across the four test conditions are not very robust. In fact, the participants' judgments on the test sentences under all the four conditions appeared on a continuum of acceptability. Compared to the other conditions, the test items in Condition 1, which was the most favorable context for relative marker omission (a general head noun and a non-eventive predicate), did not receive a particularly high average score. On the other hand, the test items in Condition 4, which was the least favorable context for relative marker omission (a specific head noun and an eventive predicate), did not receive a much lower average score than those in the other conditions. These results are not surprising given that semantics plays a vital role in relative marker omission in Thai. In English, omission of a relative marker is largely based on syntactic constraints, so it is assumed that English native speakers can make clear-cut judgments on acceptable and unacceptable marker-less relative clauses according to the

grammatical rules in the language. This is not the case in Thai, in which *thîi*-less relative clauses are determined by syntactic and also semantic factors, and so Thai native speakers make acceptability judgments based largely on the possible interpretations of relative clauses. These findings support Comrie (1996), who noted that acceptability of relative clauses in English clearly involves a syntactic difference, whereas acceptability of relative clauses in several Asian languages, including Thai, depends on semantic and pragmatic considerations, i.e., whether a clause is understandable given the specific context in which it occurs.

Finally, the examination of acceptability judgments among Thai learners at two different proficiency levels suggests the presence of syntactic transfer from Thai, their first language (L1), to English, their second language (L2). The rating discrepancy was particularly distinct in the first condition, where both elementary and lower-intermediate learners demonstrated the acceptability of English and Thai test items at similar levels. This stands in contrast to the results observed among upper-intermediate learners, who tended to evaluate the English test items as unacceptable due to the ungrammaticality of marker-less SRCs in English. Thus, the results show that syntactic transfer regarding the omission of a relative marker is more noticeable among English learners with lower levels of proficiency. This finding corresponds to other previous studies such as those of Phoocharoensil (2014) and Rhekhalilit (2023), in which lower proficiency students showed a greater tendency for L1 transfer.

6. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

Based on many previous studies on Thai relative clauses, the relative marker *thîi* can surely be omitted in an SRC denoting a general description. The present study is intended to provide a detailed analysis on the specific conditions of the absence of the relative marker *thîi* in Thai SRCs. By conducting the acceptability judgment tasks,

this study has determined the different levels of acceptability among the four semantic conditions. That is, a *thîi*-less SRC with a general head noun and a non-eventive predicate is the most acceptable condition, while that with a specific head noun and an eventive predicate is the least acceptable. It has also been found that the semantic property of the head noun (general or specific) is a more important factor of *thîi* omission than the semantic type of the relative clause predicate (eventive or non-eventive). In addition, by comparing the acceptability judgments on marker-less English SRCs among Thai learners with lower and higher proficiencies, it has been confirmed that L1 transfer is more evident among elementary and lower-intermediate learners.

Given that this study relies only on acceptability judgements, future studies utilizing other kinds of empirical instruments should be conducted to strengthen the results. For example, a self-paced reading task is suggested to measure the reaction time for each part of a test sentence, particularly the critical area after the head noun. Moreover, in-depth interviews are also recommended in order to gain a greater understanding of participants' acceptability judgements.

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