



# IIT Madras

## BSc Degree

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## English – II (Advanced English)

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### **Whether and if clause in English Sentences**

Welcome to the class. Today we are going to look at two different types of complement clauses and these two clauses begin with two different complementizers, whether and if. We look at a sentence and when we work on accuracy in a sentence and when we want to use multiple types of sentences for impressive speaking and for the purpose of conveying a lot, we need to look at the embedded clauses and particularly the elements which require attention for accuracy in producing sentences.

In simple words, when we pay attention to the composition of a sentence with reference to how the computation of these sentences work in our subconscious, we equip ourselves better with better and impressive language. The computation also helps us know that a very complex looking sentence is also essentially just like a simple sentence. And the, they are, the difference between a simple sentence and a complex sentence is simply in terms of the kinds of information they convey. Structurally they look exactly alike.

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Sentence



- Sentence = [Subject + Predicate]
- Predicate = [Verb + Object(s) [adjuncts/adverbs]]

• Ramu likes Tamil movies.

• Raju sleeps on the floor.

*Int. adv.*



So, when we look at if and whether type of clauses, let us refresh our understanding of a sentence, that is sentence is a combination of a subject and predicate where the predicate has verbs within them. The two parts of a sentence, that is, subject and predicate are connected

with each other with certain visible and invisible functional elements like agreement. More specifically, person, number and gender. Also, we need tense. So, these are the invisible functional elements which combine the two parts together.

This happens to all sentences in English. Then, verbs have sometimes objects and sometimes they do not have. Likewise, we have adjuncts or we do not have adjuncts at times. So, when we say sentences like Raju likes Tamil movies, Tamil movies is the object of the verb, transitive verb 'like'. And Raju sleeps on the floor. 'Sleep' is an intransitive verb, but 'on the floor' is just an adverb and this sentence does not have an object in it.

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### Complex Sentences

Subject + Predicate [verbs (sentence)]

- I know what I am doing.
- Raju confirmed that he will be joining the discussion.

[S<sub>1</sub> + P<sub>1</sub>]

know [NP/S]  
 confirm [NP/S]  
 ask  
 understand [NP/S]

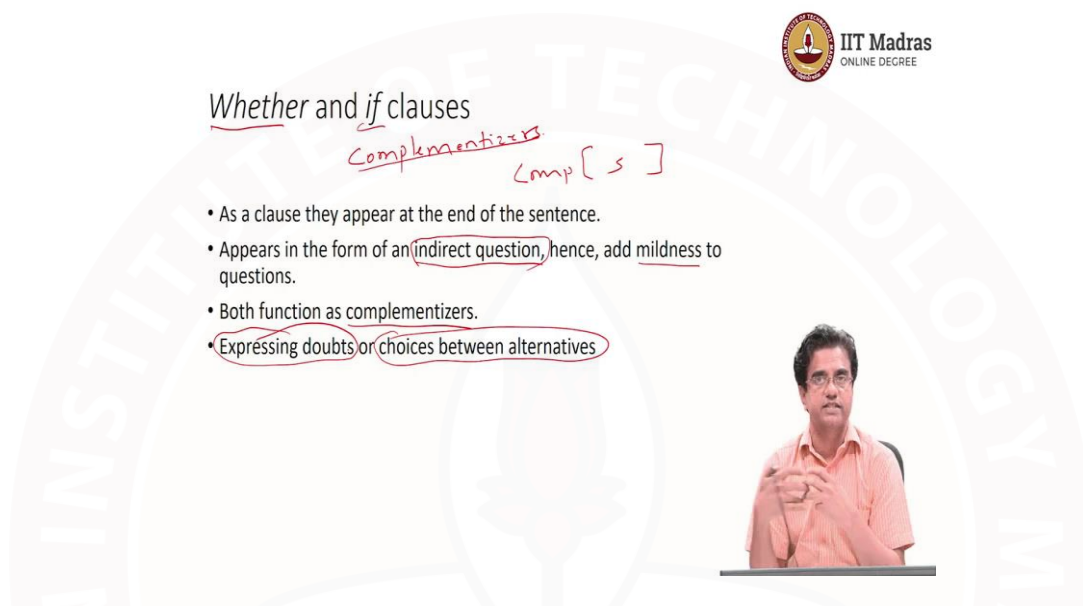


So, what happens is in a complex sentence we have a predicate and in which, in the predicate, we have a verb and instead of a noun phrase like Tamil movies as in object, we have a sentence as the object of that verb. A complement as an object of the verb that and that sentence is called complement clause, which is embedded within the predicate. I know what I am doing. This, in these types of sentences, what I am doing as a clause, as a sentence, is a complement object of the verb 'know'.

Raju confirmed that he will be joining the discussion. Here, the verb 'confirmed' is a type which can take a complement clause as its object. In this regard, we understand that though these sentences are called complex sentences, but essentially, they are also a combination of subject and predicate. And thus, we get to know that a complex sentence is also essentially a simple sentence.

How, what this helps us achieve is the fact that we get to know that there are some verbs like know, confirm and many more... there are, there is a huge list of verbs like ask, understand, and many more which can take both- a noun phrase or a sentence as a complement. This is the crux of the matter that we need to know. And this also makes us know, helps us understand that not all verbs can take a sentence as a complement.

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Whether and if clauses  
 Complementizers  
 Comp[ S ]

- As a clause they appear at the end of the sentence.
- Appears in the form of an indirect question, hence, add mildness to questions.
- Both function as complementizers.
- Expressing doubts or choices between alternatives

So, now when we move further and we look at uses of whether and if and the kinds of sentences that we call whether clause or if clause, we know that they are complementizers. Complementizers simply mean elements in English which can introduce a complement. And essentially, this kind of clause is going to be embedded within the predicate. This is the important part to follow from the computation of elements of a sentence in human mind and when we, keeping these things in mind, when we work and practice with these sentences and examples, we get better hands-on experience, hands-on understanding of a complex sentence and types of verbs which take embedded clause as an object.

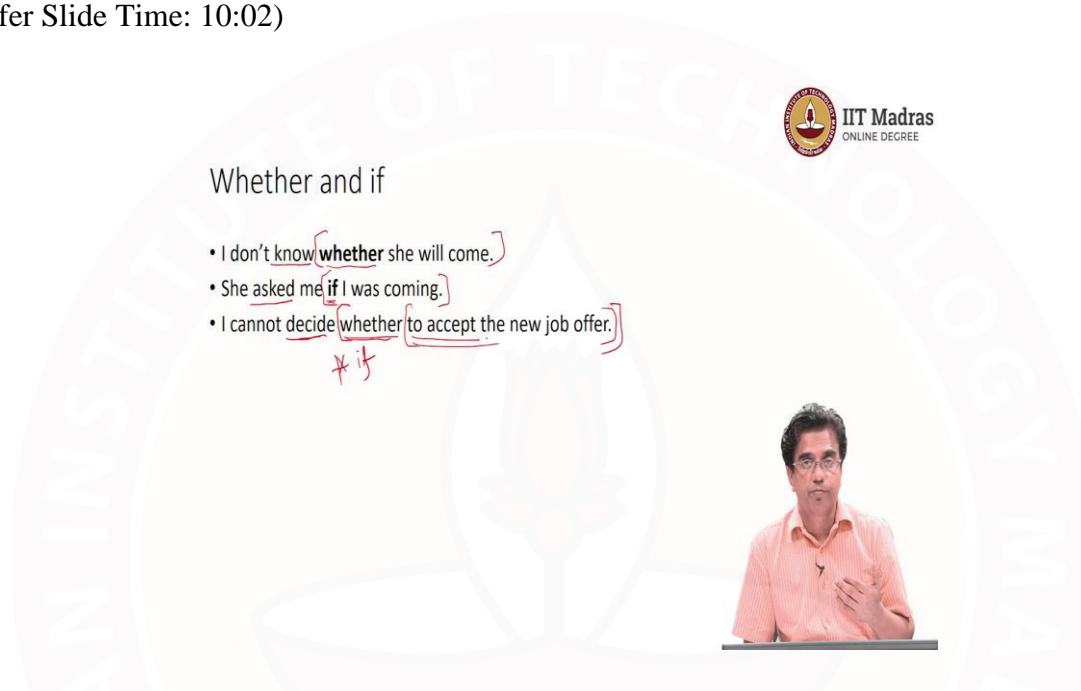
So, these are, so as a matter of fact, when we have these types of clauses, these clauses appear at the end of a sentence. All complements, heavy complements, all sentential complements are called heavy complements and they occur at the end of the sentence. They appear in the form of an indirect question. This is the function of this whether and if type of complement. Why do we use them after all?

One of the purpose of this type of complement is to ask an indirect question and therefore, it adds mildness and helps us soften our language. You will see lot of contexts when we, you do

not want to ask a very direct question to somebody. In such cases, these kinds of sentences become very handy. I discuss this with you, it, both of them work as complementizers and the other function of this is they are used for, sometimes they are used for expressing doubts or giving alternatives, offering alternatives.

So, either expressing doubts, offering alternatives, using them as indirect questions, these are the functions of whether and if type of clauses.

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The slide is titled "Whether and if". It contains three bullet points with handwritten annotations in red:

- I don't know whether she will come. (The word "whether" is underlined and bracketed.)
- She asked me if I was coming. (The word "if" is underlined and bracketed.)
- I cannot decide whether to accept the new job offer. (The word "whether" is underlined and bracketed. A handwritten red "x" is written over the word "if" in the original image, indicating it is incorrect in this context.)

In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset of a man in an orange shirt speaking.

Let us look at some examples. I don't know whether she will come. So, look at this, 'know' is another type, is one type of verb which can take a sentential complement and the purpose of this sentential complement is to express uncertainty, doubt. This simply says I, this person, is not sure. She asked me if I was coming. This is, if this is another type of complement clause which begins with if, ask is another verb which takes a sentential complement.

And this is here, the function is 'to check', to make sure. I cannot decide whether to accept the new job offer. Look at this clause. This is again a clause with whether complementizer, but here, this clause is only an infinitival clause. So, in this case, where you have an infinitive, we only use whether. In this case, we cannot, in such situations we cannot use 'if'. That is, decide as a verb can take if complement, but if complement if does not function as a complementizer to an infinitival clause.

So, these are the little intricate details about the embedded clause that we need to know at just to elevate our understanding of complement clauses at a different position.

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## Differences between whether and if



- We use *whether*, not *if*, before a to-infinitive.
  - I'm not sure whether to get a new laptop.
- After a preposition, we use **whether** not **if**.
  - There are doubts about whether the decision was fair.
- **Whether** can be followed by 'or not', but **If** does not occur in such cases.
  - The question is whether or not we have the right to interfere.



Now, this is just the beginning of the differences between if and whether type of clauses. Whether and if type of clauses. So, we use whether and not if before an infinitive, to-infinitive. Just saw the example. I am not sure whether to get a new laptop. This is an infinitival clause; to get a new laptop, we can only use whether here, not if as you have seen in the previous sentence, cannot decide whether to accept the new job offer.

After a preposition, we use whether and not if. Another context where we cannot use if. There are doubts about whether the decision was fair. Now, this is a specific clause which is the complement clause of this noun 'doubt' and in this case, we cannot use 'if' in this place whether. And the other context where we can use if, whether we can use, other context where we can use whether and not if is these type of sentences like; the question is whether or not we have the right, we have the right to interfere.

In this kind of situation whether or not, we can say if or not. So, these are few cases, few contexts in which one can be used, but not the other. That is, if and whether are both complementizers, but only one of them can be used, and not the other.



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- Both **whether** and **if** are possible when 'or' occurs later in the sentence; however, **whether** is preferable.
- It is not clear **whether** the source of information is reliable or not. (Formal)
- It is not clear if the source of information is reliable **or not**. (Very informal)



However, we do find contexts in which both are possible. When 'or' occurs later in the sentence. Like these contexts, it is not clear whether the source of information is reliable or not. We can stop here too, we do not need to say 'or not', but this is just making it formal and just making the sentence complete. It is not clear whether the source of information is reliable. If you stop here, the sentence is fully grammatical, but in a more formal context, we say it is not clear whether the source of information is reliable or not.

In this context, we can also use 'if'. It is not clear if the source of information is reliable. But the use of 'if' makes the context informal and the use of 'whether' keeps it formal, keeps the level of formality maintained.

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Nature of predicate

- She asked if I liked dosa.
- I can't tell whether she likes me or not.
- I was unsure whether my husband would actually come with me.



So, the other point to elaborate is to keep in mind that only certain types of verbs like ask, tell, unsure, understand can take any kind of complement and particularly if type of complement. Not every verb that takes a complement clause can take whether or if type of complement clause.

So, I am just giving you few points to keep them in mind and to practice them and figure out the patterns which work as constraint for functioning of these structures. And the striking fact, point, is these are intuitively clear to the speakers, those who acquire the language intuitively, but if they become... they require lot of practice for those who want to learn these things after 15 years of age.

However, it is possible to get these structures right if we look at the patterns the way we, the way speakers of English acquire these things as a child. If we understand those... that process, if we pay attention to that process and find the pattern through which certain types of structures are possible and certain things are not possible, then we get very close to the native intuition.

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#### Things to notice ...

- Whether and if can be complementizers.
- They introduce a clause.
- They start embedded clauses.
- There are more functions of these two elements in English.



So, basically what we need to keep in mind about whether or if type of... whether and if type of clauses is they are complementizers. They introduce a complement. But they can, there are more contexts in which they can be different types of complement, they do not have to be a complement of the predicate all the time. Because we just explained it to you, not every verb that requires a complement, that can take a complement clause, will take whether type of complement clause.



They start an embedded clause for sure. Everywhere we use them, they start an embedded clause and they and that is how they introduce a clause as well. So, and we need to pay attention to both structural patterns as intricacies of a structure and functional purposes, that is, the context in which these can be used for us to be able to use them appropriately.

Keeping these few things in mind, we can reach close to the competence that native speakers of any language, in this case, English or though we, the better way to put it is those who acquired English as their first language, we can reach their competence by paying attention to the understanding patterns very quickly. Thank you, look forward to a discussion on these complements, these types of complement clauses. Until then thank you.

