

Considerations on the teaching and learning of relative clauses with respect to Turkish students at pre-intermediate level

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1.0] Teaching Context

1.1] In this essay I wish to examine the teaching and learning of relative clauses with a group of Turkish speakers in North Cyprus. The students are studying at the Preparatory School of the Eastern Mediterranean University (E.M.U.) and their ages range from sixteen to twenty one. They hope to enter the University where the degree courses are taught in English and to do this they must pass the school's English proficiency exam which is near Cambridge First Certificate Level. They have been learning English for twenty hours a week since October 1995 and are learning English in what Sorace (1985 p 239) describes as an "acquisition-poor environment". There are few opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom although there is access to English language music and films. Thus instruction is the main source of their language learning and the lock step system in operation means they are required to learn at a similar rate to other groups of students. They have completed **Headway Elementary** and are following **Headway Pre-Intermediate**. The course has been supplemented with additional reading, writing and speaking and listening practice. Any other language learning experience including that of the L1 Turkish would have included explicit instruction in grammar. When asked in a questionnaire if they knew Turkish grammar most answered very confidently "yes". In deed, for many of my students language learning is synonymous with grammar learning and they tend to want "rules" that are definite and unambiguous. As Sorace notes of institutional language learners, their metalinguistic language that is their formal knowledge of grammar rules generally exceeds their ability to use the language appropriately.

1.2] The gap between what is taught and what is learnt has been commented on by many teachers in the staffroom. Research into why it happens has focused on both parts of the process. However, often the research is not integrated and may deal with observing the classroom and classroom materials or the process of language learning according to the specialism of the author. In this essay I intend to draw on both sources. Starting with a grammatical description of the language to be taught, this essay will then examine what studies on language acquisition say about this topic. I plan to refer to the particular difficulties of Turkish speakers and ,finally, review a grammar practice book to see how far the needs of language learners in general and Turkish students in particular are addressed.

2.0] What to teach

2.1] Quirk et al (1985) includes the bulk of their description of relative clauses in Chapter 17 entitled **The Noun Phrase**. The section deals with both pre and post modification of the head noun. Relative clauses in English postmodify a noun phrase head by a finite clause. I propose to limit the explanation of relative clauses below to what Quirk terms restrictive and nonrestrictive adnominal clauses. Before this is done I wish to mention distinctions which will be outside the general scope of the study.

The first distinction is between relative clauses and appositive clauses. Section 17.9 of Quirk gives the examples;

*The news **that appeared in the papers this morning** was well received.* (1)

*The news **that the team had won** calls for a celebration.* (2)

The first example illustrates a relative clause. Here *that* is a relative pronoun used in place of *the news* and it can be replaced with *which*. It is the subject of the clause in bold. However, in the second example *that* is a conjunction and cannot be replaced by *which*.

Additional distinctions are made within the category of relative clauses. They are ;

***What surprises me** is that they are fond of snakes and lizards.* (3)

*They are fond of snakes and lizards, **which surprises me.*** (4)

Nominal relative clauses are shown in (3). These clauses are sometimes called noun clauses and can take similar positions to nouns in a sentence. The modification of a whole clause as opposed to a noun is shown in (4) by a sentential relative clause. While I am excluding the four types outlined above from my survey, as a teacher I need to be aware of these categories for several reasons even if I do not plan to teach them at this stage. For example, in producing my own examples of relative clauses I need to avoid producing appositive clauses. I also need to be able to deal with student questions on the examples they find that appear to behave differently from those being taught.

2.2] The division between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses is an important one. Restrictive clauses limit the head noun and help to identify it uniquely. Quirk states that this type is more frequent than non-restrictive clauses. Nonrestrictive clauses supply extra information and if omitted from the sentence would not affect our ability to identify the head noun. This type of clause is marked by commas at the beginning and end of the clause. A drop in pitch and brief pauses at the start and finish of the clause can be noticed in speech. The most significant difference between the two types lies in the options available in the relative pronoun used to introduce the clause. The choices are summarised in the table below

taken from Quirk.

	RESTRICTIVE		NONRESTRICTIVE	
	personal	nonpersonal	personal	nonpersonal
SUBJECTIVE CASE	<i>who</i> <i>that</i>	<i>which</i> <i>that</i>	<i>who</i>	<i>which</i>
OBJECTIVE CASE	<i>whom</i> <i>that</i> zero	<i>which</i> <i>that</i> zero	<i>whom</i>	<i>which</i>
GENITIVE CASE	<i>whose</i>			

The relative pronoun *that* differs from the *wh-* words in that it is not marked for gender nor does it have an objective form.

Quirk's description provides a source of examples but does not specify teaching goals and it is necessary to turn to other sources for that.

3.0 Orders of Difficulty

3.1] Keenan and Comrie's work on language universals is quoted by Cook(1991 p.19) suggesting there is an accessibility hierarchy of 6 types of relative clauses. Based on the study of a range of languages, these types are arranged in order of difficulty with the first being the easiest.

1. Type 1. **subject clauses** " The man *who left* was John."
2. Type 2. **object clauses** "The car *that he crashed* was John's."
3. Type 3. **indirect object clauses** "The person *that he gave the cheque* was Tom.
4. Type 4. **object of preposition clauses** "The person *to whom he gave the cheque* was John."
5. Type 5. **possessive clauses** "The man *whose book I borrowed* was furious."
6. Type 6. **object of comparison clauses** "The man *than whom I taller* is John."

No information is given as to the frequency of these clauses. As Cook points out Type 6 although possible in English does not sound natural and I feel the point of teaching the structure would be questionable. Rutherford(1987) mentions that its occurrence is rare and reduces the number of types to 4 by combining 3 and 4.

3.2] When examining the order of learning Cook refers to Gass's study that proposed a slightly different sequence with **possessive clauses** being ranked second. However, while a logical response to the hierarchy might be to suppose teaching should start with the simplest structure this may not be the most efficient way. Cook reports Eckmann as teaching **object of preposition** relative clauses first with the result that there was a better understanding of types 1 to 3 in the hierarchy. A personal reading of Eckman's paper (1988) is that his conclusions are stronger than this and that he proposes as a general principle that learner generalisation be encouraged but from a truly representative sample of marked structures..

3.3] The question of difficulty is reviewed in more detail by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) using a transformational grammar approach demonstrating the value to the teacher of being familiar with different methods of analysis. They look at the position of the head noun whether it is in the subject or object of the sentence and whether the relative pronoun replaces the subject or object of the relative clause. Quirk's description of relative clauses attaches little importance to this whereas it is perhaps appropriate that a pedagogic grammar does as it seems to have a bearing on learning. They identify 4 main types based on this criteria.

SS The subject of the main clause is identical to the subject of the relative clause.

The girl who speaks Basque is my cousin.

OS The object of the main clause is identical to the subject of the relative clause.

I know the girl who speaks Basque.

SO The subject of the main clause is identical to the object of the relative clause.

The man who(m) you met is my teacher.

OO The object of the main clause is the object of the relative clause.

I know the place that you mentioned.

In examining how the sentences are created they list the following transformation as being necessary.

OS	+ Rel Pro Substitution - Rel Pro Fronting - Centre Embedding	OO	+ Rel Pro Substitution + Rel Pro Fronting - Centre Embedding ? Deletion
SS	+ Rel Pro Substitution - Rel Pro Fronting + Centre Embedding	SO	+ Rel Pro Substitution + Rel Pro Fronting + Centre Embedding ? Deletion

Thus with OS sentences in order to join the two clauses in the sentence the relative pronoun takes the place a noun phrase identical to the one that precedes it. With OO sentences not only must the relative pronoun take the place of a noun phrase the relative pronoun is moved from an object position to the front of the relative clause. In the case of SS sentences two operations are necessary. Relative pronoun substitution for the subject takes place but also the relative clause must move next to the noun phrase it modifies in the subject position of the main clause. In the last type all three operations take place. When a relative pronoun is an object pronoun the option of its deletion also arises.

3.4] They present figures from Stauble showing how often native speakers use relative clauses. The sample covered written and spoken sources.

Instances Percentage

OS	234	55
OO	108	25
SS	52	12
SO	<u>30</u>	7
Total	424	

They this order corresponds with the order of difficulty proposed by Kuno. So the frequency with which native speakers use certain types of relative clauses as well as complexity provides a possible explanation for the order of acquisition by second language learners.

4.0] Comparison with Turkish

4.1] Turkish is characterised as a SOV language, that is its typical sentence structure follows the pattern Subject, Object, Subject. Jacob (1995) generalises about SOV languages referring to Japanese and Turkish stating that adjectives, relatives clauses and other noun modifiers *precede* rather than follow their head noun (head-final position). In English, however, relative clauses follow the head noun (head-initial position). It has been suggested by Flynn (1989) that learning the direction of relative clause from the head noun presents an additional learning challenge. She found that Japanese learners were less successful than Spanish speakers of a similar level of language proficiency when tested in their production of relative clauses. However, the pattern of acquisition shown by Japanese speakers followed the order of development in English speakers from which she infers that they were trying to work out the properties of English rather than relying on translation. If, as she proposes, speakers of head-final languages have an additional learning task then this needs to be taken into account in course design. This might be in terms of devoting extra time or as Ellis(1993) suggests when discussing structural syllabuses restricting aims to recognition of relative clauses rather than requiring they be produced.

4.2] Besides the head noun being in the head final position one further difference between a relative clause in English and in Turkish is the absence of relative pronouns in Turkish. All of the types in the Accessibility Hierarchy can be realised by participle constructions. One of the problems of comparing across languages is that you require categories that are applicable to both languages. This is discussed by Comrie specifically with reference to relative clauses and Turkish. He gives the example

[*Hasan-in Sinan-a ver-digi*] *patates-i* *yedim*
 Hasan of Sinan to give his potato Accusative I -ate
 = I ate the potato that Hasan gave to Sinan.

Although the verb in the clause (*verdigi*) is non-finite and has a nominalizing suffix (-*dig*), Comrie argues it serves the same function as an English relative clause. It modifies the noun *patates* restricting it to the one given by Hasan to Sinan. He states the requirement that subordination be carried out by means of a finite clause is a feature of English syntax

whereas in Turkish this is achieved with non-finite constructions. His solution is to redefine the characterisation of prototypical relative clauses. Thus for Comrie a relative clause consists of a head and a restricting clause. One consequence of this would be to extend the structures considered to include participle constructions and restrictive attributive adjectives. The examples given are *passengers leaving on flight 738 should proceed to the departure lounge* and *the good students all passed the examinations*. This definition would also narrow the range of structures and exclude non-restrictive relative clauses from consideration. Perhaps from a teacher's point of view the most important idea is in the notion of functional equivalence or what van Els (1984) describes as "translational equivalence" which has a part to play in a crosslingual teaching strategy (See Stern(1992p.296)). To be able to check by translation from the L2 to the L1 is useful for the teacher and can be reassuring to the student. It also raises the question of where participle constructions "fit" in the order of acquisition. Would it be easier for Turkish speakers to use participle constructions? According to James(1980) there is no conclusive support for teaching similar structures first. The answer to this question, however, lies outside the scope of this essay.

5.0] Student Errors

5.1] Rutherford suggests that some errors in relative clause constructions are due to interference from the student's L1. While in English the relative pronoun substitutes for the subject or object in the main clause some languages do not allow this and within the relative clause itself a marker for the subject or object must be left. Thus in the sentence;

*The child who (he) is riding a bike is John's cousin.

The L1 does not allow "who" to take the place of "the child" alone and requires that "he" is retained to mark the position of the subject in the relative clause. If this practice is carried over to English, the sentences produced would be wrong. Rutherford calls this a pronominal trace and also notes that it is a developmental problem.

5.2] From the description above of Turkish it should be clear that no pronominal traces are required in the equivalent Turkish construction. However, from results of an exercise my class completed (see Appendix 1) it does seem that the complete substitution of the relative pronoun for the subject or object is a difficulty. Section 1 concentrated on recognition problems and required the student mark the error and rewrite the sentence correctly. The data I collected suggests this is a problem both at the level of recognition and production. and a fairly typical student response is shown below.

1] A botanist is someone who he studies plants

Student Response; *A botanist is someone that he studies plants.*

The student failed to identify the unnecessary "he" after who and instead identified the problem as being with the relative pronoun used. The problem with the pronominal trace was a consistent problem for this student which can also be seen in her Section 2 answers that

focused on sentence combining. Question 1 involved making a SO construction.

1] a) The soup was too salty. b) I had it for lunch.
Student Response: * *The soup which I had it for lunch too salty.*

Although the student correctly places the clause in the mid-position indicating the correct identification of the head noun she left the object “it” in place. The sentence also illustrates the dropping of the copula “was” which is a problem of first language interference. Some problems were also experienced in identifying the head noun. This can be seen in the reply to 5, requiring a SO construction which is rated as more difficult to acquire .

5. a) The people live on Elm Street. b) Ann is visiting them.
Student Response; **The people live on Elm Street that Ann is visiting them.*

Looking at the sentence produced it superficially resembles a sentential relative clause construction. A more complete understanding of the error would require talking with the student to see whether it was a mistaken generalisation or a failure of identification.

Mistakes made by other students were very similar. Generally, the correct relative pronoun was used but there were problems with the position of the relative clause and a tendency to leave a pronominal trace. One striking difference was that two students answered all questions correctly. Discussion revealed they had been doing independent study which showed the impact on learning of both practice and time spent on study.

6.0] The Role of Grammar Instruction

6.1] In many parts of the world language teaching is no longer thought of as “grammar teaching” and the focus has shifted onto developing a student’s communicative competence of which grammatical competence is a part. However , how that grammatical competence is developed is problematic. Should grammar be taught? If it is taught, should it be done implicitly or explicitly?

6.2] Johnson(1994) calls knowledge about grammar declarative knowledge(DK) and knowledge how to use grammar is procedural knowledge(PK). He indicates these terms relate to “learning” and “acquisition” associated with Krashen’s work. There is a dispute whether learning can lead to acquisition or rather whether language instruction can help students use the language in an automatic way. Mohammed (1995) suggests that how explicit knowledge becomes implicit has not been shown and favours concentrating on receptive skills such as listening and reading. Instruction in grammar would have the role of developing and checking the learner’s understanding of the language. Johnson basing his ideas on how skills in general are acquired is more optimistic about the possibility of explicit knowledge becoming automatic. An important point he makes is

“While DK may have little part to play in spontaneous conversation, for example, it will be

crucial in many writing tasks, where having a DK data base of rules to refer to and manipulate will be an advantage.” (p.122)

For my students, who plan to study in English, writing will be the main way that their academic performance will be assessed. They have few opportunities to speak English outside of the class. I feel that having a declarative knowledge will benefit them as Johnson suggests. In terms of encouraging learner independence and autonomy, a certain amount of terminology has to be taught in order for them to make full use of dictionaries and reference books.

7.0] Materials Survey

7.1] Materials used in teaching a particular grammar point embody the writer's decisions about grammar and language learning (see Allwright (1990)). While some decisions may be explicit and mentioned in information accompanying the book or exercise, others may have to be inferred from the text. Evaluating materials is a continuous process in teaching and can sometimes only be finalised after use in the classroom if then. One factor is missing from exercises and that is an aim. The materials cannot give the teacher an aim, but it is in relation to a given aim that a decision to use the materials with a group of students can finally be made. Practical constraints mean that materials deficient in comprehensiveness and clarity may be used because of time and availability of alternatives. Supplementing the material may also be an option rather than complete rejection..

7.2] The book I wish to refer to is by Betty Azar(1992). She describes relative clauses in some detail in a chapter eighteen page long and the exercises are aimed at intermediate students. Her book claims to offer a variety of written and oral exercises with lively and realistic contexts. One difference is immediately noticeable in the chapter title. She calls relative clauses “adjective clauses” and her introduction to the chapter builds on the student's knowledge of adjectives to illustrate the function of relative clauses. Normally, in my class I use the term relative clause but also give the term adjective clause as an alternative. It is important that students understand the some basic terminology as each subsection of the chapter is preceded by clear examples which she explains using terms such as subject, verb, object and preposition. These terms would be understandable to my students and Azar's marking of clauses would help sensitise them to word order changes and movements.

The presentation structure can be questioned regarding how it facilitates learning. She does not provide an overview which might allow the student to generalise as Eckhard suggests but presents different types of clause in order. While it could be argued that introducing different structures together would be confusing, an example of how this might be done is provided in Shepherd et al (1984). Even if it is accepted that the structures should be dealt with in isolation as was seen in section 3 of this essay, an order of OS, OO, SS, and finally SO may be easier to learn. However, the first relative clauses dealt with are SS and SO structures introducing the relative pronouns “who” and “whom”. Then an OS structure is practised in exercises 2 and 3 with SO structures in exercise 4.. So although the problem of the position of the relative clause is addressed perhaps the ordering could be better. A further comment is

that at no time is the student invited to comment on or contrast structures which could lead to more awareness of the differences. Personally, I would question the priority given to “whom” as I feel it would lead my students to sound overly formal and I would only require they recognise the structure. The main relative pronouns concerning defining relative clauses identified in Section 2 are explained and where there are options these are explored. Prepositions and relative clauses are explained and, finally, “whose”. One omission is any distinction between defining and non defining relative clauses with all the exercises relating to defining clauses. These are dealt with in Azar (1989). So while the coverage is accurate for teaching purposes, it is not comprehensive.

The exercise types include sentence combining, sentence completion, matching exercises and word substitution. The oral exercises seem to be written exercises that are spoken and are contextless. While the vocabulary would be accessible to intermediate students, all the exercises are at sentence level and none make use of longer texts that would give a written setting for relative clauses. Dialogues could also provide the basis for longer more authentic exercise types.. I would describe the exercises as being mechanical and none deal with the issue of pronominal trace which I think could be dealt with through a “find the mistake” type of exercise. From a teaching point of view I find the book dull but I think my students might like it for the extended practice it gives. As a self study text I think it would be useful to have in a Self Access centre.

8.0] Conclusion

It is clear that descriptive grammars while a source of examples are not enough when considering the teaching and learning of particular structures. While in the area that I have discussed descriptive grammar identifies and explains which relative pronouns are used, other sources must be used to deal with issues such as the order of acquisition and learning difficulty. Had Azar’s book taken these sources into account then I feel there would have been significant changes both in the organisation of the chapter on relative clauses and in the type of exercises used. Her book meets the needs of some of my students for practice material but does not address the particular difficulties they have and this would need supplementing.

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