

USE OF ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSES BY TURKISH LEARNERS: A STUDY OF ERRORS

Arş. Gör. Vacide ERDOĞAN
Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi
vacide@mersin.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

It is a fact that each language has its own system. That's why, it is inevitable to make mistakes while learning a foreign language. English relative clause structure is one of the most common obstacles that Turkish students face while learning the language as it differs from Turkish in many aspects. In this respect, the aim of this study is to reveal the most problematic points and to determine the possible reasons for those problems.

Key Words: Relative clauses, generalization, first language interference, error

ÖZET

Her dilin kendi sisteminin olduğu bir gerçektir. Bu nedenle yabancı bir dil öğrenirken hatalar yapmak kaçınılmazdır. Bir çok yönüyle Türkçe'den farklı olduğu için, İngilizce sıfat cümlecikleri, Türk öğrencilerinin bu dili öğrenirken karşılaştıkları en yaygın sorunlardan biridir. Bu bağlamda, bu araştırmanın amacı en sorunlu noktaları ortaya çıkarmak ve bu sorunların olası nedenlerini belirlemektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sıfat cümlecikleri, genelleme, birinci dil etkisi, yanlış

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a dynamic process which is influenced by many factors such as the structure of the target language, similarities and differences between the target language and the first language of the learner. With this respect, it is inevitable that all learners make mistakes and commit errors. However, that process can be impeded through realizing the errors and operating on them according to the feedback given.

According to Ellis (1997), there are three reasons for focusing on errors. First, they are conspicuous feature of learner language as they raise the important question of "Why do learners make errors?" Second, it is useful for teachers to know what errors learners make. Third, it is possible that making errors may help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors they make.

If the mistakes and errors of language learners in constructing the new language system are analyzed carefully, teaching procedures can be assessed in the light of what is expected to be accomplished in the classroom (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). While analyzing the errors, it is essential to ask for the sources of them. As each language has its own system, the sources of errors can be categorized within two domains: (i) interlingual transfer, which is caused by the learner's first language, and (ii) intralingual transfer, which results from faulty or partial learning of the target language (Ellis, 1997).

From this point of view, acquisition of relative clause structure has been one of the research points in many ways as languages vary in whether they have relative clauses or not. Some languages like English, Turkish and Arabic have them while other languages like

Chinese and Japanese do not. These linguistic and structural differences influence the ease with which learners are able to learn relative clauses. To illustrate, in languages like English, a relative clause can be attached to the end of a matrix clause:

The police have caught the man *who bombed the hotel*.

or they can be embedded in the main clause:

The man *who bombed the hotel* has been caught by the police.

When learners of English begin to acquire relative clauses, they typically begin with the first type (Ellis, 1997). As the structure of English influences the process of learning, many studies on this matter have been carried out in different countries. A study carried out in Hong Kong shows that learners of English as a second or foreign language produce a sequence in order to learn relative clauses due to its structural characteristics (Wong, 1990).

Another study carried out with the students of five language groups (Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and American) indicates that errors in the use and formation of English relative clauses are influenced by the similarities or differences between the target and the mother language (Fries, Grant and Spruiell, 1999). The case is the same with Turkish learners of English due to not only the differences between the structure of English and Turkish relative clause systems, but also some intralingual factors such as difficulties in the choice of the correct relative pronoun, placing the relative clause in a sentence, use of comma, functional and grammatical differences between defining and non-defining relative clauses, etc.

In this sense, the aim of this study is to see how Turkish students use relative clauses, and to find out whether they are able to cope with the problematic points of relative clauses: the

difference between defining and non-defining relative clauses; and what sort of factors cause them to have trouble in distinguishing between these two types.

METHOD

This study was carried out with twenty 9th-grade students of high school who completed a preparatory class. In choosing the participants, it was taken into consideration that students are the native speakers of Turkish and intermediate level learners of English as the use of relative clauses and distinguishing between defining and non-defining relative clauses require some background knowledge of English language structure. The level of the students was decided according to the classification of the school administration and the teachers of English Department. When this study was carried out, the students had already studied the grammar topic and they were supposed to be able to make use of it.

The subject of the study is directly related to the errors of the students in using relative clauses. In order to see these errors, the exam papers of the students which include questions related to use of relative clauses were collected and their answers were checked. There were eight questions related to the relative clauses in the midterm and four of them were answered by half of the class, and the other four questions were answered by the other half. The aim and the characteristics of the questions in both parts were the same.

Furthermore, a quiz prepared especially for the purpose of this study was distributed to the students. This quiz consisted of four parts: the first part included the fill-in-the blanks questions, of which aim was to find out whether the students were able to make use of relative clauses properly and which relative pronouns they would prefer commonly when there was more than one correct option.

In the second part, the students were asked to combine sentences using relative clauses. The aim of this part was to find out whether they were able to combine the sentences keeping in mind that defining and non-defining relative clauses have differences in terms of both their functions and punctuation.

In the third part, the students were asked to translate the sentences with relative clauses into Turkish. The purpose of this part was to show that Turkish grammar does not syntactically distinguish between defining and non-defining relative clauses.

In the fourth and the last part of the quiz, there were some sentences given without punctuation and with some incorrect relative pronouns. Students were asked to punctuate the sentences. Also, they were supposed to notice that the relative pronoun *that* has a special use in defining and non-defining relative clauses. Additionally, they had to indicate if the relative pronoun in the sentence could be omitted or not.

In general, the aims of the quiz and the data collected were to find out if the students were aware that defining and non-defining relative clauses function differently in a sentence and that their structures are different from each other. It was also aimed to reveal the possible reasons for mistakes within the study.

The data analysis of this study was made according to the framework presented by many grammarians (Baker 1978, Celce and Freeman 1983, Fowler 1971, Kolln 1982, Odlin 1989, Slobin and Aksu-Koc 1985, Slobin, and Zimmer 1986, Swan 1995, Tallerman 1998, Underhill, 1976). The focus of the data analysis was on finding out the reasons for errors in distinguishing between these two relative clauses and the effect of Turkish on those errors. In determining the errors, the errors that were out of the scope of this study were ignored.

The incorrect answers provided within the study reflect the common errors made by the majority of the class. Sentences were classified according to the type of the errors made. The majority was counted according to the frequency of the students who made the similar mistakes, and their percentages were calculated.

In conclusion, this study relies on the controlled written production of the students as the source for students' knowledge of the defining and non-defining relative clauses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Use of Comma in Relative Clauses

Some example errors by students related to the use of comma in distinguishing between defining and non-defining relative clauses and their frequencies and percentages are below:

1. *Aria which is the new GSM operator in Turkey has started to tempt the customers of Turkcell and Telsim. (midterm)
2. *Melaine C who is still a member of Spice Girls released her single "I turn to you" six months ago. (midterm)
3. *The car, which Sharon and Tom spent the night, was a big and comfortable Chevrolet, (midterm)
4. *Sharon who entered the house at four o'clock in the morning her father was angrily waiting for her there, (midterm)

5. *Van Damme whose movies are full of action and fantastic fighting scenes last starred in "Time Cop", (midterm)
6. *Madonna who is both a wonderful dancer and singer became famous with her album "Holiday", (midterm)
7. *Mrs Perkins who is a bit deaf could not hear the phone, (quiz)
8. *The geologist, who lectured at Brawninghall, last night predicted another earthquake, (quiz)

Table 1: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Use of Comma in Relative Clauses

Item*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
n*	10	10	10	10	10	10	20	20
f*	4	3	3	4	3	3	8	7
%*	40	30	30	40	30	30	40	35

*Item: The incorrect answers given by the students

*n: The number of the students who answered the question

*f: The frequency of the students who made errors

*%: The percentage of the students who made errors

Table 1 shows that most of the students have problems in using comma in relative clauses. In the first sentence 40%, in the second one 30%, in the fourth one 40%, in the fifth one 30%, and in the sixth one 30% of them did not use a comma to show that there is extra information about the head noun. Students also did not consider the fact that the meaning of the sentence does not change when that clause is taken out of the sentence. On the other hand, as in the example of 3 (30%) and 8 (35%), they used comma where they should not have used. From these examples, we can interpret that it is difficult for students to distinguish between defining and non-defining relative clauses due to the first language interference. In Turkish, there is not such a distinction and that is why the students automatically tempted to see defining and non-defining relative clauses as the same structure. If we translate the sixth example into Turkish, we have "Mükemmel bir dansçı ve şarkıcı olan Madonna 'Holiday' isimli albümü ile ünlü oldu". As we can see, there are not any commas to separate the extra information about Madonna. The students tempted to compare it to Turkish and failed in using comma correctly. When we translate both the third and the eighth examples, we again see that there are not commas, either. Although the students know that comma has a function in relative clauses,

they are not aware of the distinction of the two clauses.

Use of Correct Relative Pronoun

It is important to choose the correct relative pronoun in making a relative clause. Below are some examples from the students.

1. *Steve waited for Lucy where at the airport when two ours until he gave up waiting which was ten miles away from his house.(midterm)
2. *Madonna became famous with her album 'Holiday' which is both a singer and a dancer, (midterm)
3. *Steve waited for Lucy at the airport for two hours until he gave up waiting where airport was ten miles from his house, (midterm)
4. *Steve whose house was ten miles from airport, where he waited for Lucy at the airport for two hours until he gave up waiting, (midterm)
5. *Natalie is the student who failed all her exams, the one which never did any studying, (quiz)
6. *It looks expensive, one of those places where charge very high prices, (quiz)
7. *St Michael whose Church dates from 14th century, is a fine building, (quiz)
8. * Jessica's mother paid for the bill, that was very kind of her. (quiz)

Table 2: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Use of Correct Relative Pronoun

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
N	10	10	10	10	20	20	20	20
F	7	5	8	7	5	8	3	14
%	70	50	80	70	25	40	15	70

It is seen in Table 2 that many students have some problems with the usage of the relative pronouns. Most of the students failed to choose the appropriate relative pronoun and the head noun in the questions 1 (70%), 3 (80%), and 4 (70%). They confused it in a way that they could not decide whether the head noun is Steve, the airport, or the house. Since each of them has a different counterpart, it is difficult for them to make the correct choice of the relative pronoun.

In the examples 2 (50%) and 5 (25%), we see that they used *which* instead of *who* to modify Madonna and Natalie. In addition, many students preferred *where* instead of *that* and *which* to modify a place. They made an overgeneralization and used *where* since it refers to place. We know that Turkish relative clause system does not have different kinds of relative pronouns for different head nouns. Instead, there are suffixes such as -En

and -Dik,. For example, for the second sentence, we say 'Hem şarkıcı, hem de dansçı olan Madonna 'Holiday' isimli albümü ile ünlü oldu.' For the sixth sentence, there is no different kind of relative pronouns to modify places. In Turkish we express it in this way: 'Çok yüksek fiyat isteyen pahalı yerlerden birine benziyor.' Since the students are not accustomed to such distinctions, it is difficult for them to decide the correct relative pronoun.

The 8th example is another problematic point for the students. It is one of the example sentences that have the special usage of *which* in non-defining relative clauses. However, 70% of the students were unable to do it correctly. They simply make generalization and put *that* where they see a relative clause. It is not only because they are unable to distinguish between the functions of the defining and the non-defining relative clauses, but also because Turkish does not have a similar structure.

If we make an interpretation about the use of the relative clauses, we observe that students mostly prefer to use *who* or *that* in relative clauses. They are usually successful in using *who* since they associate the relative clauses with *who* and they may associate it with the function of Turkish relative clause suffix -En.

Use of Prepositional Relative Clauses

Errors related to the use of the prepositional relative clauses are presented below. It was seen that students usually forgot to use the preposition when they used relative clauses.

1. *The car, which Sharon and Tom spent the night, was a big and comfortable Chevrolet, (midterm)
2. *Lucy will never forget the day which she made a terrible accident, (midterm)
3. *I can't remember the name of the hotel we stayed last summer, (quiz)

Table 3: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Use of Prepositional Relative Clauses

Item	1	2	3
n	10	10	20
f	5	4	6
	50	40	30

As seen in Table 3 and in the examples, the students simply omitted the preposition. For the first question 50%, for the second one 40%, and for the third one 30% of the students

made the same error. In Turkish, the word usually contains the case ending in itself. For example, for the second sentence we can say: "Lucy çok kötü bir şekilde kaza geçirdiği o günü asla unutmayacak.", or for the third one, we say "Geçen yaz kaldığımız otelin adını hatırlayamıyorum." As we can understand from the examples, there is no indication for the usage of the prepositions in the Turkish sentences. While answering such questions, the students usually tempted to translate it into Turkish, and then adapted it into English. Thus, they omitted the preposition directly, which can be explained as the first language interference, again.

Placing Relative Clause in a Sentence

When students were asked to combine sentences using relative clauses, they sometimes failed to place the relative clause in the sentence correctly.

1. *Van Damme, who starred in 'Time Cop' whose movies are full of action and fantastic fighting scenes.(midterm)
2. *Madonna, which famous album 'Holiday' who both a wonderful singer and dancer, (midterm)
3. *Madonna became famous with her album 'Holiday', which is both a wonderful singer and dancer, (midterm)
4. *Steve waited for Lucy at the airport for two hours until he gave up waiting where airport was ten miles from his house, (midterm)
5. *Steve who waited for Lucy at the airport which was ten miles from his house gave up waiting, (midterm)
6. *Mr. Perkin is a bit deaf who couldn't hear the phone, (quiz)
7. *St Michael's Church dates from the 14th century that is a fine building, (quiz)
8. *St Michael's Church is a fine building which dates from the 14th century.

Table 4: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning Placing the Relative Clause in a Sentence

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
n	10	10	10	10	20	20	20	20
f	7	4	3	3	2	5	6	3
%	70	40	30	30	10	25	30	15

Table 4 shows that the students have some problems in placing the relative clause in the sentence. In the question form of the first example, the sentence is given as "Van Damme last starred in 'Time Cop'. His movies are full of

action and fantastic fighting scenes." In this sentence, 70% of the students were unable to realize that the second part is to give extra information about Van Damme and they should give it in the sentence just after the head noun 'Van Damme'. The case is the same with the sentences 2 (40%), 3 (30%), 6 (25%), 7 (30%), and 8 (15%). Even if they decided which sentence would intervene correctly, they were unable to make it a relative clause. The concept of "combining" does not mean anything except for putting them together, omitting the full stop and adding a relative pronoun. They simply thought that relative clauses follow the head noun. This can be assumed as a natural development in the acquisition of English.

The examples of 4 (30%) and 5 (10%) are the answers of the same question. We see that their minds were confused about which part of the sentence to make a relative clause, and what is the head noun to be modified by a relative pronoun.

Omission of "that"

In the last part of the quiz, students were asked to decide whether the relative pronoun is omissible or not and there was only one sentence that they could omit the relative pronoun. However, most of them were unable to find the correct sentence and they said "not omissible" for *which* in the following sentence: *The rice, which we had for dinner last night, was very good.*

On the other hand, they said "ommissible" for the sentences like the following:

1. A river that is polluted is not safe for swimming.
2. Only people who speak Russian should apply for the job.

Table 5: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Omission of "that"

Item	1	2
n	20	20
f	11	8
	55	40

As indicated in Table 5, most (for the first item 55% and for the second item 40%) of the students were not aware of the fact that it is possible to omit the relative pronoun functioning as object of verb or preposition in a relative clause. The main cause of this mistake is the complexity of the subject. Here again, we see the first language interference. In Turkish relative clause system, we do not have such problems since we do not use relative pronouns

as in English. We have the suffix -Dik for this function. For example, we have nothing else to do with the sentence "Parkta gördüğüm adam benim arkadaşım değil." On the other hand, we can make the same sentence in two ways in English:

1. The man that I saw in the park is not a friend of mine.
2. The man I saw in the park is not a friend of mine.

That's why, the students mostly failed in determining whether the relative pronoun is omissible or not omissible.

Use of Interchangeable Relative Pronoun

In English, *that*, *who(m)*, and *which* are freely used in defining relative clauses. On the contrary, it is not possible to use *that* in a non-defining relative clause. In the quiz, students were asked to change the relative pronoun to *that* if possible. However, the results show that they made mistakes regarding this point. Some of the examples from the quiz are as below:

1. *Mathew, that speaks Russian applied for the job.
2. *I have found memories of my hometown, that is situated in a valley.
3. *The Mississippi river, that flows south from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico is the major commercial river in the United States.

Table 6: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Use of Interchangeable Relative Pronoun

Item	1	2	3
n	20	20	20
f	8	7	9
%	40	35	45

Table 6 shows the rates of errors regarding this point. One of the reasons for errors in the items 1 (40%), 2 (35%) and 3 (45%) might be that the students generalized the use of *that* and thought that they could use it in all sentences with relative clauses. Furthermore, the influence of Turkish is another factor. In Turkish, there is no such discrimination. Thus, this becomes a problematic point for the students to decide on the suitable relative pronoun. We have seen that they already have problems with the choice of the correct relative pronoun.

Omission of a Pronoun in a Sentence to Make a Relative Clause

As a consequence of the first language interference in learning English, students usually make mistakes in omitting a pronoun in a sentence to make a relative clause. Below are some examples by students.

1. *The car that Sharon and Tom spent the night in it was a big and comfortable Chevrolet, (midterm)
2. *Lucy, who made a terrible accident she will never forget the day. (midterm)
3. *I found the letter that I was looking for it. (quiz)
4. *I can't remember the name of the hotel which we stayed at the hotel last summer, (quiz)
5. *The detective lost the man whom he was following him. (quiz)

Table 7: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Omission of a Pronoun in a Sentence to Make a Relative Clause

Item	1	2	3	4	5
n	10	10	20	20	20
f	3	5	7	5	4
%	30	50	35	25	20

As seen in Table 7, many students had problems in omitting the pronouns such as *him*, *it*, etc. We can interpret that while making a clause, they felt as if they were making a new sentence and they forgot about the other reference of that word in the sentence. In other words, they were not totally aware of the function of the relative pronoun in the sentence. As in the examples 1 (30%), 2 (50%), 3 (35%), 4 (25%) and 5 (20%) most of the students used both the relative pronoun, and another pronoun to refer to the same word. The cause of this problem is, in accordance with what has been pointed out previously, the presence and absence of a pronominal reflex along languages with respect to relative clause formation is one of the dimensions about the relative pronoun and the head noun.

Translation of English Relative Clause into Turkish

In the quiz, students were asked to translate some English relative clauses into Turkish in order to see that Turkish and English relative clauses do not have the same structural pattern. Sentences to be translated were as in the following:

1. The woman who tackled the gunman was shut in the leg.
2. Mrs. Debbie Clark, who tackled the gunman, was shot in the leg.

The wrong answers given by students were as in the following:

1. a. *Tetikçi mücadele ettiği kadını ayağından vurdu.
- b.*Kadm bacağından vurulan silahlı adamla mücadele etti.

c.*Kadın ayağını vuran tetikçiye karşı mücadele verdi.

2. a. *Debbie Clark mücadele ettiği tetikçiyi ayağından vurdu.

b. *Debbie Clark'm mücadele ettiği adam bacağından vuruldu.

Table 8: Statistical Findings Related to the Errors Concerning the Translation of English Relative Clause into Turkish

Item	1			2	
	a	b	c	a	b
n	20	20	20	20	20
f	6	3	5	8	9
%	30	15	25	40	45
%	70			85	

Table 8 indicates that students could not understand clearly what was stated in the sentences with relative clauses. Both in defining and non-defining form of the sentence, they were confused by the clause in the sentence and lost the main head noun of the sentence. Students made three different kinds of errors for the first sentence. Accordingly, 70% of them were not able to translate the sentence correctly. The students translated the second sentence incorrectly in two different ways and they compose 85% of the group. As it can be inferred from these rates, the majority of the students have problems in differentiating between defining and non-defining relative clauses. Even the commas in the second example did not help them to differentiate the relative clause and the main sentence. The correct answer would be as stated below:

1. Silahlı adamlar mücadele eden kadın bacağından vuruldu.
2. Silahlı adamlar mücadele eden Bayan Debbie Clark bacağından vuruldu.

As seen in the correct translations, the only difference between the two sentences is the name of the woman. No commas are used to show the difference between defining and non-defining relative clauses since Turkish does not have the same structure.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at determining the common errors made in the use of relative clauses and in the distinction of defining and non-defining relative clauses by Turkish students of EFL. The participants of this research were twenty 9th-grade students who were the intermediate level learners of English, all of whom were Turkish. Their midterm papers concerning the use of relative clauses were collected and also they were given a

quiz prepared for the purpose of this study. The data collected were examined in the light of the research, and the interpretations of data analysis were presented. Next, the common mistakes of the students were categorized under some subtitles and some examples were given for each case.

As a result of this study, it has been found out that the main reasons for the errors in using English relative clause system were concerning the complexity of the subject due to the fact that Turkish does not have the same relative clause system as in English. The influence of the first language brings many other problems such as errors in use of comma, errors in choice of relative pronoun, errors in prepositional relative clauses, errors in omission of *that*, errors in determining whether *that* is interchangeable with another relative pronoun, errors in omitting the object pronoun (him, it...etc), errors in translation, errors in the function of non-defining relative clause as an additional comment or knowledge in a sentence.

Teachers of English can benefit from these findings in many ways. The common errors show the way to be treated when their sources are identified correctly. The errors tell the teachers how far towards the goal the learners have progressed and what remains for them to learn (Corder, 1987). Following the students' progress, the teachers are able to carry on their studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy to change or reconstruct.

Classifying the sources of errors in the use of relative clauses will provide the teacher with an approach or a plan for an order in the process of using the relative clause system appropriately. Therefore, errors are a means of feedback for the teachers reflecting how effective they are in their teaching style and what changes they have to make to get higher performance from their students. Additionally, it is clear from the findings that it is of crucial importance to draw the attention of the students to the structural and semantic differences between the two languages.

Keeping the influence of the first language and the linguistic structure of the target language in mind, problems can be coped with the collective study of the teachers and the students.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, C. L. (1978). *Introduction to Generative-Transformational Syntax*. USA: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Celce, W. L. and D. L. Freeman. (1983). *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Guide*. USA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Corder, S. P. (1987). *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dictionary of English Language and Culture. (1998). England: Longman.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, R. (1971). *An Introduction to Transformational Syntax*. Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fries, P., Grant, L., and W. Spruiell, (1999). *Increasing language awareness in English classrooms*.
<http://www.chsbs.cmich.edu/English/mctehnd.htm> . 25.04.2005.
- Kolln, M. (1982). *Understanding English Grammar*. USA: MacMillan Publishing CO. Inc.
- Lightbawn, P. M. and N. Spada, (1999). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Odlin, T. 1989. *Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slobin, D. I. and A. Aksu-Koc. (1985). *The Cross-Linguistic Study of Language Acquisition*. Volume 1: The Data. London: Lawrence Erlbarn Associates, Publishers.
- Slobin, D. I. and K. Zimmer. (1986). *Studies in Turkish Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Swan, M. (1995). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tallerman, M. (1998). *Understanding Syntax*. Great Britain: MPG Book Ltd.
- Underhill, R. (1976). *Turkish Grammar*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Wong, J. (1990). *Learnability of relative clauses*.
<http://sunzil.lib.hku/hkjo/view/10/100022.pdf> . 25.04.2005.