A Study on the Choice of Relative Clause

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The current study examined the choices of several relative clause (RC) forms; the degree to which these RC forms were considered more appropriate than another in some communicative situations; and linguistic and sociolinguistic factors contributed to the observed preference. The overall results suggest that while no gender differences were found, the choices of RC forms may be explained in terms of the following five factors: (1) the interplay between types of head nouns and those of relative pronouns; (2) informal registers, or the degree of formality; (3) lexical cohesion to keep a conversation coherent; (4) a simplicity principle, and finally (5) a politeness strategy.

Keywords: [relative clause/pragmatic use/appropriateness/관계절/화용론적 사용/적절성]

1. Introduction

A recent notion of language knowledge is not limited to knowledge of grammatical form and its meaning. Some researchers have conceptualized language in contexts of use (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Halliday, 1994; Hasan & Perrett, 1994; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 1998; Purpura, 2004 ; Rea-Dickins, 1997). In other words, appropriateness has been considered an important part of second language (L2) knowledge. An important pedagogical implication from such a broad view of language knowledge is that what second language (L2) learners

need to learn is perhaps more than the principles that govern the formation and interpretation of words, phrases, and sentences. In addition to form and meaning, L2 learners need to know when and why one form is preferred to another.

If we look at empirical studies regarding relative clauses (RC) in particular, however, notions of this linguistic structure embedded in these studies were somewhat limited to knowledge of grammatical form and/or its meaning. For instance, a number of studies (e.g., Keenan & Comrie, 1977, 1979; Kuno, 1974; Prideaux & Baker, 1986) investigated an order of difficulty for relative clauses, and a number of other studies sought for pedagogical implications from findings of the studies cited above (e.g., Doughty, 1991;Echman, Bell, & Nelson, 1988; Gass, 1982; Hamilton, 1994). Although their pedagogical implications with respect to the learnability of RCs have been valuable, the notion of acquisition held by such researchers as cited above appears to be somewhat limiting. A presupposition underlying these acquisition studies is, for instance, that L2 learners can be said to have acquired a linguistic structure if these learners can produce it accurately and comprehend its meaning at the level of sentences. In short, these researchers tended to ignore discoursal and pragmatic aspects of linguistic structures as they are used in communicative situations.

However, not all empirical studies regarding relative clauses constructions have ignored the importance of discoursal and pragmatic aspects of this linguistic structure and of its appropriate use (e.g., Flanigan & Inal, 1996; Fox & Thompson, 1990). In these two studies, several preferred patterns regarding the use of relative clauses were found. In Fox and Thomson's (1990) study, among other things, it was found that relative clause structure tends to be used for (a) grounding head nouns that are definite but not fully established in the on-going oral discourse (e.g., the car that she borrowed had a low tire; SO preferred), and (b) characterizing head nouns that are definite and already grounded

in the discourse (e.g., I don't like the pants that come down narrow and then bell out; OS preferred). In Flanigan and Inal's (1996) study, the use of object relative pronouns in native and nonnative speakers in academic settings was investigated. It was found that while relative pronoun *that* for writing and zero[1] for oral use was preferred by native speakers, no such preference was found by nonnative speakers. The nonnative speakers, however, preferred relative pronoun *which* for writing, and it was postulated that this observed preference in the nonnative group may be in part due to prescriptive training. Based on these findings, relative pronoun *which* was included in the current study. To summarize, findings of the studies mentioned so far have been valuable in helping to understand general tendencies concerning the choice of relative clauses or pronoun in oral and written discourse for native and nonnative speakers.

However, there are two main limitations of the studies cited above. First, these studies did not consider social factors such as gender differences in the choice of relative clauses or pronouns. By contrast, in the field of sociolinguistics gender differences in language use have often been reported. Men and women appear to differ in the choices of lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic forms. For example, it was reported that there are some gender-exclusive or gender-preferential forms (Coates, 1986; Smith, 1985). More specifically, women tend to use more intensifiers (e.g., a really pretty spot; Sargent, 1997, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 1998), facilitative tags (e.g., she's so cute, isn't she?; Lakoff, 1973), prestigious phonological forms (e.g., r-pronunciation in New York City; Labov, 1972) than men, and the like. Another limitation of the relative clause studies cited above is that these studies were not embedded in more broadly

1) Zero pronoun refers to the omission of relative pronoun in relative clause. In the following clause the house ϕ I live in, relative pronoun *that* or *which* is omitted and its omission is denoted by the symbol ϕ.

conceptualized linguistic theories. As Prideaux and Baker (1986) have rightly noted, the acquisition of relative clauses may be better understood within a more broadly conceptualized linguistic theory.

The current study, on the other hand, is embedded in the theoretical framework for linguistic knowledge proposed by Larsen-Freeman (1991) and more recently by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), where linguistic knowledge is viewed as consisting of three dimensions: form, meaning, and pragmatic use. Among these dimensions of relative clause, however, only its pragmatic use dimension will be considered in the current study. Pragmatic use in this study, following Larsen-Freeman (1991) and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), is defined as context-appropriate choices of RC forms that have more or less the same meaning. Given this, the current study addresses the following research questions:

1. Are there gender differences in the choice of relative clauses?
2. What are the factors that affect the choice of particular RC forms?

2. Method

In order to investigate the research questions mentioned above, it was necessary to employ an *ex post facto* design. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate native speakers' choice of linguistic forms[2)](mostly relative clauses) as it was, there was no need to control study variables. Specifically, in the current study

2) Data were also collected from students learning English in Korea and other countries, using a revised version of the questionnaire used in the current study. Since the leaners' choices of relative clauses and their pedagogical implications are discussed in more detail in another study (i.e., Chang, 2007), the current study focuses on the native speakers' choice of relative clause.

the dependent variable was appropriacy ratings of native English speakers on the linguistic forms given in three situations. Gender and form were two independent variables.

This section describes the methodology used throughout the study.

2.1 Study Participants

The participants of this study were 35 native speakers of English at Teachers College, Columbia University. All of them were graduate students studying TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages). Nineteen of them were males and 16 were females. Their median age was 28.5.

2.2 Measurement Instrument

A questionnaire was used in this study (see Appendix). This questionnaire consists of three situations with 17 items. Across the situations, social distance/status, and channel of communication were held constant. Specifically, in each situation, two friends Jane and Bob communicate with each other in a spoken channel.

2.3 Data Collection, Scoring and Statistical Procedures

All study participants were asked to rate the degree of appropriateness across the situation on a scale of 0 to 5, where 5 means the most appropriate in the given context. Their appropriacy ratings for each item were then input into a computer, and then averaged to form composites. In order to analyze the RC data, SPSS for Windows version 9 was used. Using this version of SPSS, I computed descriptive statistics, and examined the internal consistency estimate (i.e., coefficient alpha), and then performed a series of ANOVA.

3. Data Analyses and Findings

Data from the RC questionnaire, based on all 35 study participants, were then analyzed. The internal consistency estimate for appropriacy ratings was .7233. With the number of study participants and items considered, the overall ratings appeared to be relatively trustworthy. Based on these results, gender differences in appropriacy ratings across all the three situations were investigated. Across all situations, no significant interaction (or simultaneous) effect of gender difference was found ($F = 1.123$; n.s), whereas in Situation 2, gender difference was statistically significant ($F=7.68$; $df = 1, 165$; $p < .006$). In other words, at least one form was differentially rated by men and women. However, the effect size of gender on appropriacy ratings was only 4.4%. According to Hatch and Lazaraton (1991), this observed relationship between gender and ratings (i.e., eta squared = η^2) is theoretically and educationally unimportant because these two variables share less than 10% of their total variance ($\eta^2 = .044$). The gender difference observed in Situation 2 could therefore be ignored. In summary, gender did not play an important role in the choice of RC forms across the three situations. Based on these results, NS males and females will be considered as a single group and their averaged ratings will be used in the subsequent discussion.

In addition to gender difference, this study examined which form was considered more appropriate than another, and what factors may have contributed to the choice of RC forms. Table 1 presents the summary descriptive statistics for Situation 1. As shown below, a general pattern that emerged from NS ratings that relative pronoun *who* was considered more appropriate for the human head noun *someone* than relative pronoun *that* in this situation. This observed preference was statistically significant ($F = 47.81$, $df=1, 243$; $p < .001$). In other words, this observed preference is statistically reliable. In addition, this observed

preference has often been addressed by researchers (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Startvik, 1985). However, it should be noted here that the means for the relative clauses beginnings with relative pronoun *that* were 2.5 or above out of a possible total of 5.0. In other words, native speakers did not find it odd to use relative pronoun *that* in the given situation, although relative pronoun *who* was favored.

Situation 1: Two friends Jane and Bob are talking over the phone.
Over the phone
Jane: What kind of person do they want for the job?
Bob: They have someone _____.
Jane: I have a driver's license. Any other requirements?

TABLE 1
Summary Descriptive Statistics for Situation 1 (N=35)

Form	Mean (5.00)	S.D
(f) who has a driver's licence	4.09	1.20
(a) who can drive	4.00	1.33
(e) with a driver's license	3.77	1.48
(c) who knows how to drive	3.29	1.32
(g) that has a driver's license	2.91	1.62
(b) that can drive	2.54	1.56
(d) that knows how to drive	2.51	1.46

Note. (5.00) indicates a possible total score

In addition to the interplay between the human head noun *someone* and relative pronoun *who*, cohesion and simplicity also appeared to play a role in the choice of RC forms. In Situation 1, (a) *who can drive* was preferred to (c) *who knows how to drive*. As compared with (c) (i.e., SVO), (a) is simpler in clause formation (i.e., SV). The fact that (f) and (e) were preferred

appears to be in part due to lexical ties (i.e., a driver's license) with Jane's utterance. It should be noted, however, that (e) *with a driver's license* is not relative clause, but a prepositional phrase. In the given situation, this prepositional phrase was almost as appropriate to use as relative clauses beginning with *who*. In short, there are too many possible answers for Situation 1. To avoid this problem, based on the findings mentioned so far, this item should be revised in the following or similar way:

Bob: They have someone [who can drive] a truck.
Jane: I have a driver's license. Any other requirements?

I also analyzed the appropriacy ratings in Situation 2. Table 2 presents summary descriptive statistics for Situation 2. As shown, the native speakers found it most appropriate to use the non-finite relative clause (a) *to write with*. The appropriacy ordering continues as follows: (b) 〉 (c) 〉 (e) 〉 (d). The means for (e) and (d) were lower than 2.0 out of a possible total of 5.0. Given these relative low ratings, it can be inferred that native speakers are not likely to use the relative clauses beginning with relative pronoun *which* in the given context. It should be noted that these results were consistent with those of the studies previously mentioned (e.g., Flanigan & Inal, 1996). In addition, these observed differences in appropriacy ratings regarding relative pronoun *that* and *which* were statistically significant ($F = 29.77$; $df = 1, 173$; $p < .001$). Based on these results, the use of relative pronoun *which* in Situation 2 could be considered relatively inappropriate. However, the mean difference between (b) and (c) appeared to be small. In other words, both of them could be considered appropriate responses for nonnative speakers. In summary, in informal speeches such as Situation 2, the simpler form appeared to be preferable to the more complex ones: non-finite RCs 〉 finite RCs; and zero or *that*〉 *which*.

Situation 2: Bob and Jane are friends. They are working in an office, and Bob is looking for a pen.

At the office

Jane: Are you looking for something?

Bob: Yeah. I'm looking for something _____.

Jane: You can use my pen.

TABLE 2
Summary Descriptive Statistics for Situation 2 (N=35)

Form	Mean (5.00)	S.D
(a) to write with	4.66	.64
(b) I can write with	3.46	1.15
(c) that I can write with	3.26	1.01
(e) with which I can write	1.46	1.65
(d) which I can write with	1.11	1.13

Note. (5.00) indicates a possible total score

Finally, I examined the appropriacy ratings in Situation 3. Table 3 presents the summary descriptive statistics for Situation 3. As depicted in the table, similar patterns were observed. The relative clause containing relative pronoun *which* was rated as the least appropriate response, as compared with zero and as compared with relative pronoun *that*. There appear to be a couple of reasons for this. First, as mentioned earlier, relative pronoun *which* may make an utterance sound odd or formal in informal speeches such as below. Another reason is that relative pronoun *which* tends not to be followed by head nouns containing superlatives such as *the best, the most* (Quirk, et al., 1985).

Situation 3: Bob and Jane are friends. They have just had dinner at Jane's place.

After having dinner together

Bob: Jane, this is the best _____.

Jane: Thanks, Bob. I'm so glad you liked it.

TABLE 3
Summary Descriptive Statistics for Situation 3 (N=35)

Form	Mean (5.00)	S.D
(c) meal I've ever had	4.57	.85
(d) meal that I've ever had	3.63	1.14
(b) meal ever	2.80	1.49
(a) meal	2.54	1.72
(e) meal which I've ever had	.97	1.20

Note. (5.00) indicates a possible total score

Another observed pattern of linguistic behavior is that native speakers prefer to use relative clauses to noun phrases (e.g., meal ever) in the given context. As the respective mean for (a) and (b) indicates, some native speakers do use noun phrases in this context. As a consequence, these single word responses contributed the relatively lower internal consistency estimate for the dialog completion task. An implication of this observed behavior is that it is not a matter of either appropriate or inappropriate responses, but just a matter of the degree of appropriateness. In other words, it would be better for teachers to give students a range of possible options instead of giving them prescriptive rules of language use.

However, it should be noted that unlike Situations 1 and 2, relatively longer responses such as (c) and (d) were considered more appropriate than shorter responses such as (a) and (b). This might be in part because Bob was making a compliment. To clarify, consider the followings:

(a) Thanks. (b) Thanks a lot. (c) Thank you so much.
(d) I greatly appreciate what you did for me. Thank you.

Although all of these express the same proposition (i.e., gratitude),

(d) would sound more polite and at the same time more formal than the others. In other words, a polite utterance appears to require a certain degree of formality. In part due to this reason, the relatively longer responses containing relative clauses were considered more appropriate than the relatively shorter responses containing noun phrases.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined (1) gender differences in the choices of RC forms; (2) which form was considered more appropriate than another in the given context; and (3) what factors may have contributed to the observed preference. A questionnaire was used in order to investigate the research questions mentioned above. The instrument used in this study drew on research in the field of applied linguistics, and was mainly based on the three componential model of L2 knowledge by Larsen-Freeman (1991) and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). Accordingly, the three situations of this instrument were designed to represent what Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman called pragmatic use.

With regard to gender differences, the overall results suggest that no gender differences in the choices of RC forms were found. In the case of Situation 2 where a statistically significant gender differences were found, as addressed earlier, this observed difference was educationally unimportant. Based on these results, no distinction between male and female responses was made.

With regard to factors that may affect the choices of RC forms, several factors appear to be involved with these choices. First, the interplay between head nouns and relative pronoun choices was detected. Specifically, when the head nouns are personal, and function as the subject of the RC (e.g., they want *someone who* can drive a truck), relative pronoun *who* is preferable to relative

pronoun *that*. These observed tendencies were consistent with those of the previous studies (e.g., Flanigan & Inal, 1996), and with those described by some researchers (e.g., lexical ties) and simplicity may have played a role in choosing a particular form of RCs over another. While the simplicity principle (i.e., everything being equal, the simpler form the better as far as informal speeches are concerned) plays a non-negligible role in the choice of form, in Situation 3 a politeness strategy appeared to be a more important factor than the simplicity principle. However, even in this situation, using relative pronoun *which* appeared to be too formal or sound strange. In short, I tried to explain the choices of RC forms in terms of 5 factors: (1) the interplay between types of head nouns and those of relative pronouns; (2) informal registers, or the degree of formality; (3) lexical cohesion to keep a conversation coherent; (4) a simplicity principle, and finally (5) a politeness strategy.

Finally, some limitations of this study and some suggestions for future research should also be addressed. There were several limitations in the current study which may affect the validity and generalizablilty of the results. The questionnaire used in this study only contained three situations. In each situation, the native speakers of English were asked to rate the degree of appropriateness in the choices of RC forms. No task eliciting a more extensive writing and oral sample from these informants was given. Therefore, the degree of appropriateness rated by the informants can only be generalized to the situations used in the current study. Despite all these limitations, to a certain degree the current study appears to be beneficial in helping to understanding some factors that may affect the choices of RC forms in the simulated oral discourse. However, only conclusion that can be drawn with any degree of certainty may be that further research is necessary to better understand disoursal and pragmatic aspects of linguistic structures as they are used in communicative situations.

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Appendix
Questionnaire for Native English Speakers

Name (optional):

Gender: Male Female

Age:

Situation 1: Bob and Jane are friends. They are talking over the phone. Which of the following utterances do you feel is most appropriate to use in

the given context? Rate each utterance of Bob in terms of its appropriateness on a scale of 0 to 5, where 5 means the most appropriate. Circle the number.

Over the phone
Jane: What kind of person do they want for the job?
Bob: They want someone _____.
Jane: I have a driver's license. Any other requirements?

	least ppropriate			most appropriate		
(a) who can drive	0	1	2	3	4	5
(b) that can drive	0	1	2	3	4	5
(c) who knows how to drive	0	1	2	3	4	5
(d) that knows how to drive	0	1	2	3	4	5
(e) with a driver's license	0	1	2	3	4	5
(f) who has a driver's license	0	1	2	3	4	5
(g) that has a driver's license	0	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 2: Bob and Jane are friends. They are working in an office, and Bob is looking for a pen. Rate each utterance of Bob in terms of its appropriateness on a scale of 0 to 5, where 5 means the most appropriate. Circle the number.

At the office
Jane: Are you looking for something?
Bob: Yeah. I'm looking for something _____.
Jane: You can use my pen.

	least ppropriate			most appropriate		
(a) to write with	0	1	2	3	4	5
(b) I can write with	0	1	2	3	4	5
(c) that I can write with	0	1	2	3	4	5
(d) which I can write with	0	1	2	3	4	5
(e) with which I can write	0	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 3: Bob and Jane are friends. They have just had dinner at Jane's place. Rate each utterance of Bob in terms of its appropriateness on a scale of 0 to 5, where 5 means the most appropriate. Circle the number.

After having dinner together
Bob: Jane, this is the best _____.
I didn't know you were such a good cook.
Jane: Thanks, bob. I'm so glad you liked it.

	least appropriate			most appropriate		
(a) meal	0	1	2	3	4	5
(b) meal ever	0	1	2	3	4	5
(c) meal I've ever had	0	1	2	3	4	5
(d) meal that I've ever had	0	1	2	3	4	5
(e) meal which I've ever had	0	1	2	3	4	5

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