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## A DIFFICULTY ANALYSIS OF CLEFT SENTENCES

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### Abstract

This empirical study was investigated to define how difficult the clefts sentences for the EFL freshman students and to describe the difficulty levels of types of cleft sentences. The study examined to what extent instruction on cleft sentences clarified the EFL freshman students' confusion in cleft structures. The data administrated by 61 freshman students at the Department of English Language Literature (ELL) in a state university in Turkey was collected through the pre-test and post-test design. The results revealed that participants showed a significant improvement in understanding the cleft structures. In addition, there are significant differences among students' level of recognition for each type of cleft structure and the most confusing cleft types for the EFL students are it-clefts, if-because cleft and all-cleft.

*Keywords:* syntactic errors, cleft sentences, dummy subjects, pseudo clefts

### 1. Introduction

Second language acquisition research over the past three decades has generated a wide spectrum of different interpretations of “fossilization”, a construct introduced by Selinker (1972) for characterizing lack of grammatical development in second language learning. The conceptual differences found in the literature have created confusion rather than offering clarification, thereby obstructing a coherent understanding of the theoretical notion as well as empirical research findings. The ultimate goal of second language acquisition research is to come to an understanding of what is acquired (and what is not acquired) and the mechanisms that bring second language knowledge (Gass, 1988). The taxonomy of putative causal factors of fossilization (Han & Selinker, 2005) describes two main factors as external (environmental) and internal (cognitive, neuro-biological and socio-affective).

Fossilization, as then conceptualized, implicated both a cognitive mechanism known as the fossilization mechanism and a performance-related structural phenomenon (Selinker, 1972). As a cognitive mechanism, fossilization was thought to be a constituent of a latent psychological structure that dictates a learner's acquisition of a second language. As a performance-related structural notion, it denoted specifically “the regular reappearance in second-language performance of linguistic phenomena which were thought to be eradicated in the performance of the learner” (1972: 211). The two functions were conceived to be interrelated: “Fossilization is a mechanism that underlies surface linguistic material which speakers will tend to keep in their IL productive performance, no matter what the age of the learner or the amount of instruction he receives in the TL.” (Selinker, 1972: 229)

Further, as a performance-based structural notion, fossilization was indirectly, rather than directly, defined in terms of putative fossilizable structures. “Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular L1 tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL.” (Selinker, 1972: 215) This earliest conception suggests several properties of fossilization. First, fossilizable structures are persistent; second, they are resistant to external influences; and third, fossilization affects both child L2 learners and adult L2 learners alike. Behind these, it is important to note, is the

implication that L2 learners lack the ability to attain native-like competence. And it is precisely this view that accords the construct of fossilization its intrinsic interest; it is what has drawn the attention of many second language researchers and practitioners.

In the analysis of L2 ultimate attainment, the systematic analysis incorporates a macroscopic and microscopic level of analysis by Han (2004). Fossilization is no longer a monolithic concept but rather one tied up with different manifestations of failure in L2 learning. Research attempts to examine failure seem to be occurring on both a macroscopic and a microscopic level. On the macroscopic level, researchers (e.g. those who study critical period effects in SLA) typically look at general failure across adult L2 learners. On the microscopic level, on the other hand, they look at individual learners and focus on the local cessation of learning that takes place in various interlanguage subsystems such as phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and pragmatics. Given the emergence of the two mainstream perspectives on fossilization, it becomes essential that researchers make it clear what they understand by fossilization.

Syntactic errors are those which disobey the phrase structure rules and, by this way, violate the formation of grammatically correct sentences. These errors can be exemplified as word order, ungrammatical sentence constructions resulting from faulty use of verbs, prepositions, articles, relative clauses in sentences. These types of errors have captured the attention of a great number of researchers studying in different settings with learners of different backgrounds.

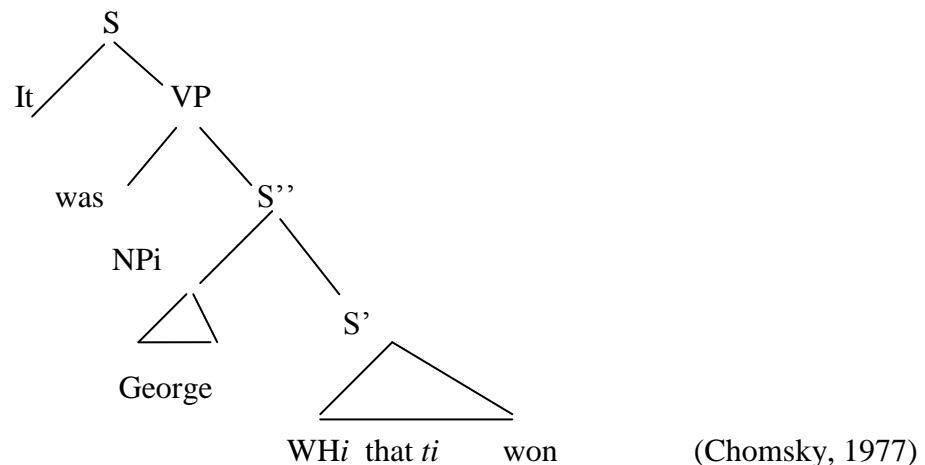
According to Kellerman's (1989) typical-error analysis approach, errors that are characteristic of learners with the same L1 background usually come across at different proficiency levels because of the different typology of languages. It seems inevitable to confront fossilization in temporary cessation of learning. Selinker and Lamendella (1979) suggest that a particular learner had fossilized if the cessation of further L1 persisted in spite of learner's ability, opportunity and motivation to the target language. At that point, corrective feedback approach has a healing effect to demonstrate that a certain interlanguage structure has ceased to develop. However, resistance and persistence of the L1 influence errors and the effect of corrective feedback (Han, 2004).

As one of the typical syntactic errors cleft structure in spite of the explicit explanation and corrective feedback indicate that remedial teaching had little effect on the correct use of cleft structures in different typologies (Han, 2004). Syntactic errors also are defined with Analogy Theory as an alternative mechanism to generative rules for explaining productive formation of structures such as words. Rules are analogies that have become entrenched as standard parts of the linguistic system (Langacker, 1987). Analogies as defined in rhetoric, are a comparison between words, but an analogy can be used in teaching as well. An analogy as used in teaching would be comparing a topic that students are already familiar with, with a new topic that is being introduced so that students can get a better understanding of the topic and relate back to previous knowledge. The steps for teaching with analogies are as follows: Step one is introducing the new topic that is about to be taught and giving some general knowledge on the subject. Step two is reviewing the concept that the students already know to ensure they have the proper knowledge to assess the similarities between the two concepts. Step three is finding relevant features within the analogy of the two concepts. Step four is finding similarities between the two concepts so students are able to compare and contrast them in order to understand. Finally, step five is indicating where the analogy breaks down between the two concepts and drawing a conclusion (Langacker, 1987).

### 1.1. The Structure of Cleft Sentences

Complex sentences consist of one independent clause (main) and one or more dependent clauses (subordinating clauses). There are three kinds of dependent clauses that form a complex sentence; noun clauses, adverbial clauses and adjective clauses (Demirezen, 1995). As a type of complex sentences, a cleft sentence includes a main clause and a dependent clause. Clefts typically put a particular constituent into focus. This focusing is often accompanied by a special intonation.

For the learning of transposition cleft constituent, Chomsky (1977) proposed that the clefted constituent is base-generated in an S'-adjoined 'topic' position, which is coindexed with the gap in the S' via the same 'predication rule' that links relative clauses to their associated heads. He assumes there to be a single structural configuration common to relative clause, cleft, topicalization and left dislocation structures, attributing any differences to surface interpretive rules peculiar to each structure. The focus of Chomsky's 1977 examination of clefts was on arguing that the syntactic relationship holding between the clefted constituent and the gap in the cleft clause observes general constraints on wh-movement. Chomsky formalizes the cleft analysis as follow:



A cleft sentence can be constructed as follows:

***it* + conjugated form of *to be* + X + subordinate clause**

where *it* is a cleft pronoun and X is usually a noun phrase (although it can also be a prepositional phrase, and in some cases an adjectival or adverbial phrase). The focus is on X, or else on the subordinate clause or some element of it as shown in (1) and (2):

(1) cleft pronoun + copula + clefted constituent + cleft clause

***It* + *is* + *beans* + that I like**

***It's beans* + *that I like*.**

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

(2) ***It's money* + *that I love*.**

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

A cleft sentence is a sentence that is cleft (split) so as to put the focus on one part of it. The cleft sentence is introduced by *it* (*dummy subject*), which is followed by a verb phrase whose main verb is generally *be*. The focused part comes next, and then the rest of the sentence is introduced by a relative pronoun, relative determiner, or relative adverb. If we

take the sentence *Tom felt a sharp pain after lunch*, two possible cleft sentences formed from it are *It was Tom who felt a sharp pain after lunch* and *It was after lunch that Tom felt a sharp pain.*" (Greenbaum, 1996)

The cleft sentence is a very easy way of highlighting different parts of a clause. The clause is 'cleft' into two components, related in the following way:

- At the beginning is the dummy pronoun *it* followed by a form of the verb *be*
- After the verb comes the focus of the cleft sentence (shown in bold below).
- This is then post modified by a clause containing the rest of the information in the original sentence.

To illustrate this, here is a clause where the elements are in the expected order:

(3) Di read a poem in the cafe last night.

The following clefted options are now available:

- (4) a. It was **Di** who read a poem in the cafe last night.  
 b. It was **a poem** that Di read in the cafe last night.  
 c. It was **in the cafe** that Di read a poem last night.  
 d. It was **last night** that Di read a poem in the cafe.

Not all elements take a clefted focus with equal facility (Crystal, 2004).

Clefts are used to bring particular elements of the clause into additional focus. There are seven types of cleft constructions:

1. **It-cleft:** (5) *It is Jaime for whom we are looking.*

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

(6) *It's a man I want.* (FICT) < compare: *I want a man.*>

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

*A man* is focused in this sentence (Biber et al. 2002).

2. **Wh-cleft/Pseudo-cleft:**

(7) *What he wanted to buy was a Fiat.*

(8) *What I want is something to eat, now!* (CONV) < compare: *I want something to eat.*>

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

*Something to eat* is focused in this sentence (Biber et al. 2002).

3. **Reversed wh-cleft/Inverted pseudo-cleft:**

(9) *A Fiat is what he wanted to buy.*

(10) *A weapon was what I needed* (Sedaris, 1997).

(11) *Buying a new car is what I want.*

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

4. **All-cleft:** (12) *All he wanted to buy was a Fiat.*

(13) *All I have had in my life is just your love.*

(14) *All I said to him is to be happy.*

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]

### 5. Inferential cleft:

(15) *It is not that he loves her. It's just that he has a way with her that is different.*

(16) *It is not that John wants to invite her. It's just that she gets worried when she has heard the reality.*

(17) *It is not that I want to go to holiday. It is just that I do not want to break my parent's heart.*

[main clause] + [subordinate clause]. [main clause] + [subordinate clause].

### 6. There-cleft:

(18) *And then there's a new house he wanted to build.*

(19) *There is a big fish in the aquarium*

(20) *There are quite impressive expressions in the book.*

[main clause] + [subordinate clause].

### 7. If-because cleft: (21) *If he wants to be an actor it's because he wants to be famous.*

(22) *If Katy wants to go to holiday for this weekend it's because she wants to have a rest.*

(23) *If Andy comes to the zoo it is because he loves animals a lot.*

[main clause] + [main clause] + [subordinate clause].

## 1.2. The Purpose of the Study

In this study, freshmen students in ELL department have been chosen as subjects due to the fact that most of them will be practicing English Teachers in 4 or 5 years. Their level of recognition on cleft sentences has been analyzed and discussed in the present study. The research questions handled within this study are as follows:

1. What is the difficulty level of cleft sentences for EFL university students?
2. What is the difficulty level of types of cleft sentences used by EFL university students?
3. Is there a significant difference in terms of the use of cleft sentences regarding gender?

## 1.3. The Significance of the Study

English language is very rich in cleft constructions; however, not all languages are so rich in cleft types as English (Miller, 1996). Turkish students as learners of English as a foreign language have difficulty of producing the cleft sentences, as well. It seems to be more salient in the observations of the teachers and if difficulties of using the cleft structures in foreign language learning are not overcome, the structure is an area where stabilization, most probably fossilization, can occur. In a similar vein, it is a generally accepted fact that due to the differences between Turkish and English in terms of their cleft structures, Turkish learners of English experience problems in the recognition and production of cleft sentences. The subjects in this research who will be prospective English Language Teachers also have serious problems on this topic.

#### 1.4. The Limitations of the Study

This study has been conducted at ELL department in a state university in Turkey and only freshman students attended the study. The same results may not be obtained in another institution or with other classes studying in Linguistics and English Language Teaching departments. In addition, the recognition of cleft sentences by the subjects has been focused on in this study rather than the production. As far as the production skills are concerned, the results may be different. Finding equal number of gender among EFL students is the most challenging limitation in this research. In the present research, the number of female EFL freshman students is more than the male individuals. It may change the validity of the difficulty analysis of cleft sentence in terms of gender. These facts constitute the limitations of the study.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

The number of the subjects who have participated in this study is 61 (44 females and 17 males). Their ages range between 18 and 26. 10 of the students attended prep classes the previous year. All of the subjects attend the same class in ELL Department at a state university in Turkey. The participants are from different cities in Turkey. The name of the grammar course-book that 10 students have studied in prep class is 'Focus on Grammar Third Edition Level 5' by Maurer (2005).

### 2.2. Data Collection Process

In this study, a pre-test has been prepared to check whether the subjects can recognize the cleft sentences. The 'pre-test' includes 50 multiple choice questions and it has been checked by the researcher. In order to distract the subjects from thinking only about uses of the cleft sentences, each question in the test included five choices including simple, complex and compound sentence forms in English but these items have not been included into the analysis.

The questions in the pre-test and post-test have been gathered from the grammar structure books of Demirezen (1995), Öndeş (2004) and Azar (1998) and Longman Contemporary English Dictionary. In both pre-test and pos-test, the questions are distributed equally according to the types of cleft sentences. As the main focus of study was to analyze the recognition of cleft sentences, 50 questions in the tests were about all types of clefts and the questions for each cleft types were randomly distributed in the test. The distribution of questions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of questions in pre-test and post-test*

Type of Cleft Sentences	Number of Questions
It-cleft	8 (Questions 3,4,5,6,7,12,14,17)
All-cleft	7 (Questions 1,16,23,25,32,35,47)
Wh-cleft	7 (Questions 8,9,11,13,18,19,24)
Inferential cleft	7 (Questions 10,15,21,22,26,28,30)
Reversed wh-cleft	7 (Questions 2,20,48,34,37,38,39)
There-cleft	7 (Questions 33,40,41,42,45,46,50)
If-because cleft	7 (Questions 27,29,31,36,43,44,49 )

	Total: 50
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Following the 'pre-test', the subjects have been provided with a 6-hour intensive instruction on the 'cleft sentence'. Two weeks after the instruction, a 'post-test' that also includes 50 multiple choice questions has been conducted.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed through Statistical Package of Social Sciences 19. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated to find out the means and standard deviation of pretest and post test applied to the participants and to see the distribution of normality of both pre-test and post-test. Besides paired samples t-test procedure was applied to reveal differences between pre-test and post-test and to notify the difficulty level of types of cleft sentences used by EFL university students. The reason a paired samples t-test is used instead of an independent samples t-test is because the scores are for the same people, which suggests there is an underlying relationship between the scores. Independent samples t-test was applied to understand the use of cleft sentences regarding gender.

### 3. Results and discussion

In this section, the collected data was discussed separately in relation to the research questions of the study.

#### *R.Q1: What is the difficulty level of cleft sentences for EFL university students?*

EFL freshman students' total pre-test and post-test scores were compared and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Q-Q plot distribution and a paired samples t-test to be able to determine to what extent instruction facilitates acquisition of knowledge of cleft sentences. In addition, the effect size was calculated to get reliable information about the effectiveness of the instruction. The results concerning the comparison of pre-test and post-test results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics*

<b>N:61</b>	<b>Pre-test</b>	<b>Post-test</b>
Mean	22.2295	40.3934
Median	19.0000	42.0000
Mode	10.00	45.00
Std. Deviation	13.74093	6.09994
Skewness	.277	-.966
Std. Error of Skewness	.306	.306
Minimum	2.00	22.00
Maximum	47.00	49.00

According to the results of descriptive statistics, there is a significant difference between the results of pre-test and post-test. While the minimum score of the pre-test is 2.00, it reaches to 22.00 in the post-test. The standard deviation shows a decrease from 13.74 to 6.09, which means that cleft sentence structures are quite difficult for EFL freshman students without taking remedial teaching. The difficulty rate of cleft structure is nearly 45% in pre-test compared to the difficulty rate of post-test, 90%, which means that cleft sentences as a type of complex sentences are difficult for understanding of Turkish EFL students without learning it explicitly.

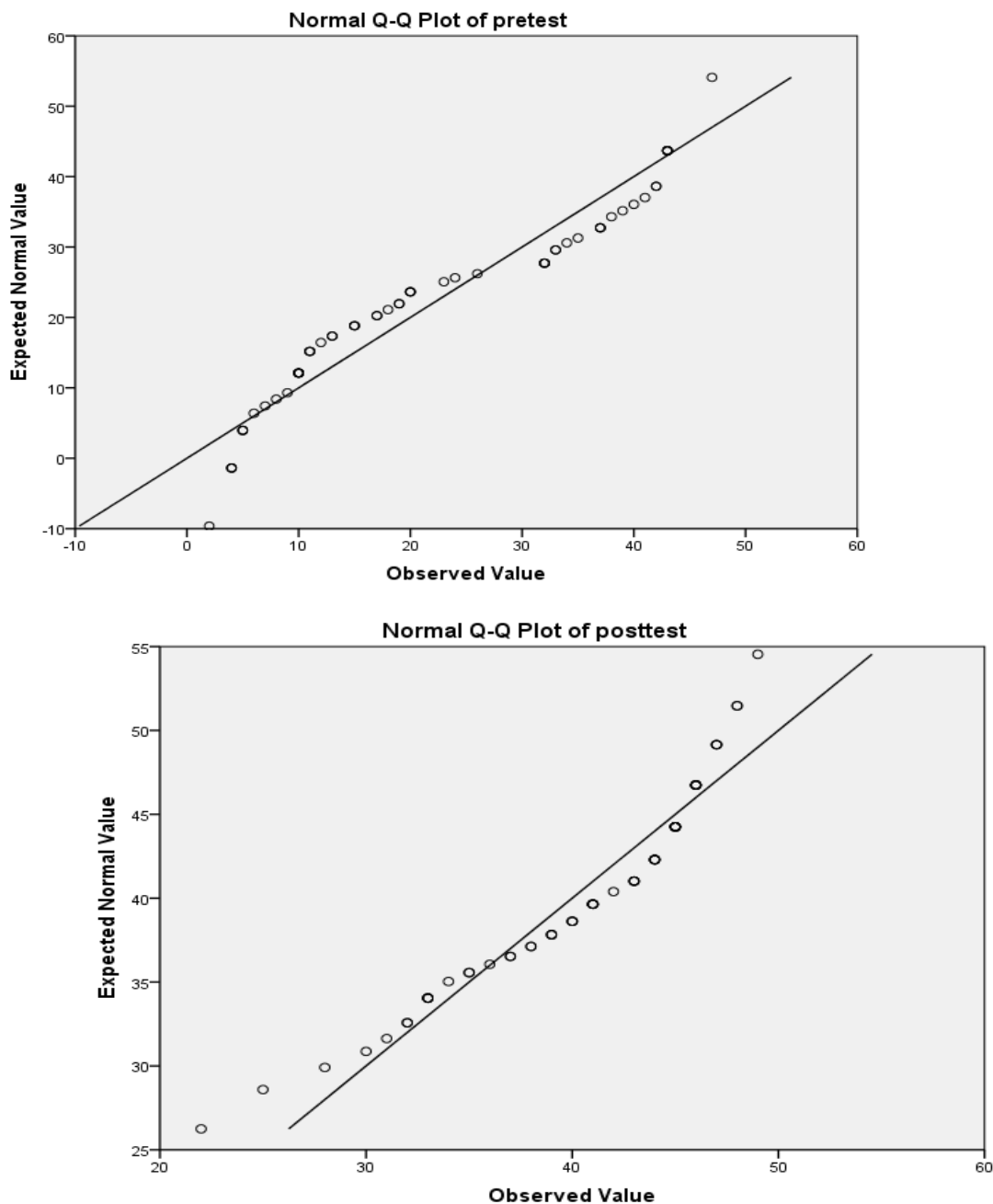


Table 3. *Effect size*

	Mean	Number	Std.Deviation	Sig (two-tailed)	<i>r</i>
					( <i>effect size</i> )
<b>Pre-test</b>	<b>22.22</b>	61	13.74	0	<i>r</i> = .89
<b>Post-test</b>	<b>40.39</b>	61	6.09	<i>p</i> < .05	<i>r</i> = +/- .5

The results indicated that on average, participants did better on cleft sentence structure knowledge at the end of the remedial teaching (M=40.39, SD= 6, 09) than at the beginning of the course (M = 22.22, SD = 13.74). (*p* < .05, *r* = .89).

Figure 1. *Normal Q-Q plot of pre-test and post-test*



The normal distribution of both pre-test and post-test supports the reliability of the collected data. In pre-test, the results were mostly between 10 and 30; the scores of post-test

show how the test scores of 61 students increased ranging between 30 and 49, which shows quite high success.

**R.Q2: What is the difficulty level of types of cleft sentences used by EFL university students?**

According to the results of descriptive statistics, the mean values of each student to the pre-test and post-test revealed that they have difficulties in different cleft types as it is stated in the following Table 5.

Table 5. *Distribution of difficulty rate of types of cleft sentences*

Type of Cleft Sentences	Pre-test	Post-test
It-cleft	20%	10%
Inferential cleft	9%	11%
If-because cleft	18%	12%
There-cleft	13%	14%
Wh-cleft	10%	16%
Reversed wh-cleft	12%	17%
All-cleft	16%	20%

As Table 5 shows overall mean scores of cleft sentence types for both pre-test and post-test indicates that there are significant differences among students' responses (diagnosis assessment) for each type of cleft sentences. On the other hand, it seems that the number of incorrect answers for each type of sentence is not parallel with each other in two tests. In pre-test, it-cleft, if-because and all-cleft types are the most difficult cleft sentence types but reversed wh-cleft and all cleft become the most difficult types of cleft sentences. In that point, the post-test rates can be regarded as more reliable than the pre-test rates because each student answer the questions in the post-test after the remedial teaching. Also, the difference among the rates might be because the students have answered the pre-test questions without paying attention as they are not familiar with the word "cleft" and its types.

**R.Q3: Is there a significant difference in terms of the use of cleft sentences regarding gender?**

Statistically measured the difficulty of cleft sentences, it is found that there is not any significant difference considering gender differences in both pre-test and post-test. The significance of each test is noted in Table 6 as there is a significant difference if it is  $p < .05$ .

Table 6. *Independent samples T-Test (significant at  $p < .05$ )*

Pre-test-Post-test / Gender	N 61	S	t	P
Pre-test Female	44	3.9318	-,873	<b>.386</b>
Male	17			<b>.408</b>
Post-test Female	44	1.7518	-,706	<b>.569</b>
Male	17			<b>.487</b>

The analysis of independent samples t-test for Pre-test, the difficulty of cleft sentences do not reveal a significant difference in terms of female ( $p=.386$ ) and male ( $p=.569$ ) students (significant at  $p < .05$ ). Similarly, the result of the independent samples t-test for Post-test shows that there is not a significant difference between male and female students in terms of the difficulty of cleft sentences ( $p=.487$  for pre-test,  $p=.408$  for post-test).

#### **4. Conclusion and pedagogical implications**

In the present study, it has been investigated whether the freshman students in the English Language and Literature Department can recognize the cleft sentences in a given multiple choice test. According to the results of the pre-test, the overall mean score of the EFL students is 45%, which is very low for the candidates who will most probably work as Foreign Language Teachers. On the other hand, the results of the post-test, which has been conducted two weeks after the remedial teaching of the cleft sentence structures, show that their overall mean score has increased to 90 %, which means that the general mean score of students in post-test have referred to 40 points.

The present research has revealed that the structure of cleft sentences is among the micro level errors and basically difficult syntactical errors without instruction. Thus, further research is warranted. From a theoretical point of view, on the one hand, this research directly contributes to a resolution of the developmental problems, the two fundamental issues of EFL research. From a practical standpoint, on the other hand, this continued effort may, in the long run, aid foreign language educators in identifying what is or is not learnable/ teachable, and more importantly, in searching for pedagogical strategies that can narrow the scope, and delay the onset, of fossilization, thereby stimulating and enhancing learning.

Another important point this research has produced is that there is a great difference between the scores of the EFL students in pre-test and post-test in terms of the difficulty rate of types of cleft sentences. Although it-cleft, if-because and all cleft types are the most difficult cleft sentence types in pre-test, reversed wh-cleft and all cleft are the most difficult types of cleft sentences, which creates a question mark in researcher's mind because there is not any parallelism between the difficulty rates of cleft types in both the pre-test and post-test. Therefore, it is possible to suggest this topic for further studies.

As noted by Demirezen (2013) and Han (2004), foreign language learners whose native language are typologically different from the target language. The cleft structures studied in this research can be stated as an example for typologically distant languages. The use of cleft sentences in Turkish language represents a typologically distant context compared with the clefts in English language.

To conclude, assuming that the derivation of cleft sentences is universal for some languages which have such constructions, the present research on difficulty analysis makes certain predictions which are subject to falsification, and therefore provide an interesting empirical test for its validity. This difficulty analysis predicts that cleft sentences will exhibit the properties of difficult complex sentence structure for some EFL students without remedial teaching.

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