# Teaching English Abbreviated Clauses for Finnish Readers

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Non-finite and verbless clauses, which we choose to call *abbreviated clauses* in this paper, are problematic for Finnish readers. These clauses appear frequently in academic English texts, and the main difficulty for Finns seems to be to decide the function of an abbreviated clause within a complex sentence. In this paper, we first discuss the role of Finnish in the learning/reading process and attempt to define the concept of an abbreviated clause. We also explain how we teach our students to cope with sentences which contain abbreviated clauses and what problems we encounter.

## INTRODUCTION

About 95% of all schoolchildren in Finland study English as their first foreign language, that is, they start studying English in their third school year. The majority of those who go to university straight from school have had ten years of English, and they all have systematic grammar instruction of some sort through their school career. The best pupils have reached the point where they are able to read newspapers and fiction in English.

Every university student in Finland has to fulfill at least two language requirements: Swedish or Finnish (as Finland is officially bilingual) plus a foreign language. The foreign language requirement has two parts: reading comprehension and spoken skills. The requirement can be fulfilled by passing the initial test, and those who fail are directed to a course.

In the reading comprehension courses, the approach is based on skills needed in reading academic English texts. The courses consist of four components: reading techniques, structures, subject-specific terminology and reading practice. The course materials are authentic unsimplified texts taken out of the students' textbooks or scientific articles and similar sources. The role of grammar in these courses is to clarify difficult passages in context, as the objective is to help students study their textbooks. Attention is paid to those structures which are either very frequent in scientific texts or which are particularly difficult for Finnish students.

## ABBREVIATED CLAUSES IN ENGLISH

One such area of difficulty for Finnish readers of English text is the abbreviated clause. For example:

(1) A suitable means of internal inspection of delicate equipment is the endoscope *providing* immediate visual inspection by means of fibre optics.

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(2) In considering the "cut-and-cover" method of subway construction factors *likely* to cause delays — such as traffic congestion, weather, and damage to foundations of adjoining buildings — must be carefully weighed in advance.

(3) Pollution of rivers by industrial and agricultural wastes, *unless* considerably *lessened* in the immediate future, will pose a serious threat to the ecosystem.

(4) *Packed* so tightly that 150,000 would fit on a pin-head, the retinal cones mediate colour vision.

(1) and (2) are examples of relative clauses, (3) and (4) of adverbial clauses. For purposes of this paper, we call both categories *abbreviated clauses.*

## ABBREVIATED CLAUSES IN FINNISH

Although there is some reference to non-finite clauses in English grammar books used at school, the concept of an abbreviated or a non-finite clause is discussed and studied to a greater extent during the Finnish lessons. To describe these clauses, Finnish school grammars use the concept *lauseenvastike,* which translates roughly as "a clause equivalent". Thus a Finnish university student is aware of a potential equivalence between certain subordinate clauses and non-finite expressions.

Traditional school grammars list three clause equivalents in Finnish: *temporaalirakenne* ("the temporal structure", roughly similar to the English temporal clause), *partisiippirakenne* ("the participle structure", equivalent to *that*-clause but not comparable to English) and *finaalirakenne* ("the structure of purpose", similar to the infinitive of purpose in English). These are known as complete clause equivalents since they all contain both the subject and a verbal element. More scholarly presentations than school grammars may list more than three clause equivalents (e.g. Ikola, 1974) or treat the concept in an altogether different way (e.g. Hakulinen and Karlsson, 1979).

Usually, it is quite easy for a Finn to tell what words belong together (i.e. form a phrase) in a sentence. This is partly due to the fourteen cases in Finnish and the fact that in addition to nouns, also adjectives, pronouns and numerals are declined according to the case and the number of their head. Verbs have personal endings in finite forms. The non-finite forms consist of six participles, all of which have plurals and are declinable in all fourteen cases, and four infinitives, which cannot be declined but together have thirteen different forms.

In a Finnish clause equivalent, the subject is in the genitive form unless it is also the subject of the main clause. In case the main clause and the abbreviated subordinate clause have the same subject, the subject is expressed as a possessive suffix in the verbal element of the clause equivalent. In the clause equivalents both the form and

the position of the participles and infinitives is fixed. Thus in Finnish, form provides a better clue to the interpretation of abbreviated clauses than it does in English.

## ENGLISH ABBREVIATED CLAUSES AS A TEACHING PROBLEM

At a recent reading comprehension teachers' national workshop in a discussion concerning the role of grammar, one item emerged that everyone recognised as a problem: the teaching of what we call abbreviated clauses. It emerged that however varied were teachers' opinions about the importance of various structures, everyone agreed that it was important to teach abbreviated or contracted clauses, which are characteristic of academic and scientific writing.

This paper deals with the problem of describing the practical contingencies of abbreviated clauses in reading comprehension teaching. We are not offering a teaching model or presenting research results. It is our intention to give an idea of the difficulties that arise when we teach authentic academic English texts to speakers of a non-Indo-European language.

By an abbreviated clause we mean a relative or adverbial clause that has no finite verb. In other words, the clause is either non-finite or verbless and usually without a subject, but corresponds in meaning and in function to a finite relative or adverbial clause. Nominal clauses, which can also be non-finite or verbless, are not included. Thus we are concerned with clauses whose verbal element is either a present or past participle or an infinitive with *to*, or the verbal element is missing, and whose syntactic function is that of a postmodifier or an adverbial adjunct.

Our approach is one of practical pedagogical grammar, by which we mean that it is not based on any specific grammatical theory but rather on practical experience. So far we have not come across any uniform presentation in English grammars that would group together these clauses in exactly the same way as we do. Neither have we found any appropriate grammatical term to cover this category. However, the phenomenon is treated in a loosely similar manner in most large grammars of English. To give a few examples, in Quirk et al (1972) the term "abbreviated clause" is used in a more restricted sense to refer to such adverbial non-finite and verbless clauses that begin with a subordinator, as distinguished from conjunctionless clauses. Unlike many other grammars, Quirk et al regard most, but not all, of the clause types we are dealing with as ellipsis. Close (1975) subsumes nonfinite and verbless clauses under the heading "Condensing the sentence". Curme (1947) talks about "abridged clauses". Sinclair (1972) calls clauses with a non-finite verb "P-bound clauses". Winter (1982) includes in his discussion of non-finite clauses only those without a conjunction.

Why it should be abbreviated clauses that present particular difficulties to our

students is not clear. If we look at it from a contrastive point of view, it seems that these structures ought to be relatively easy for Finns to comprehend on the basis of analogy, since written Finnish abounds in abbreviated clauses formed with infinitives or participles. Finnish is, however, morphologically a far more complex language than English, and abbreviated clauses are relatively easy to recognise from morphological cues. English employs a restricted range of verb forms in abbreviated clauses, and the same grammatical forms can also perform various other functions in a sentence, e.g. in finite phrases and nominal expressions. Thus it may simply be that Finns fail to recognise abbreviated clauses, perhaps because they lack sufficient flexibility in approaching the same recurrent forms in different functions. As a result, in processing a complex sentence they fail to break it down into its constituents correctly. This is hardly the whole explanation, and it would certainly be interesting to see how students from different language backgrounds perceive these clauses. Another source of difficulty may simply be that these structures often occur as part of very long and complex sentences, which may be hard to understand irrespective of the readers' background.

In our teaching we usually discuss abbreviated clauses in three phases, each forming only part of a class-hour. The first time we present the general idea of an abbreviated clause and discuss relative clauses. The next time we deal with adverbial clauses, and finally we take up the two participles and revise what has been discussed before from a slightly different angle.

The abbreviated clauses are thus first divided into two main groups on the basis of their syntactic function, i.e. whether they replace a relative or an adverbial clause.

We teach very few rules of use, and chiefly show the students the principles employed in abbreviating clauses, such as the deletion of the relative pronoun as a subject and the transformation of the verb. In addition to teaching the students to recognise abbreviated clauses, we teach them some basic productive rules and have them do exercises which require them to abbreviate "full", or finite, relative or adverbial clauses. It seems to us that in this way the structures become more familiar, perhaps more automatised, to the students and thus more readily recognisable. Only simple and straightforward examples are involved in these productive exercises so as to avoid the extra load of rules that would result from observing all restrictions of use.

Normally we use simplified examples in our presentation of the principles of abbreviated clauses to the students, but we also point out instances of the structures as they appear in their texts. In this paper, for the sake of illustration, we use authentic examples from our course materials.

## RELATIVE CLAUSES

Relative clauses are taught first, as we feel they are easier to teach and easier for the students to comprehend. Abbreviated clauses replacing relative clauses are classified as follows:

A. the *-ing* participle clause, corresponding to an active finite verb, e.g.

> (5) Life is a logical consequence of known chemical principles *operating* on the atomic composition of the universe.

B. the *-ed* participle clause, corresponding to a passive finite verb, e.g.

> (6) The following describes an evaluation of the efficiency of these two techniques applied to milk formulas *used* in the Gloria Bigham Health Center, Detroit, Michigan.

C. the verbless clause, in which *be* is deleted and what is left is an adjective phrase, e.g.

> (7) The factors *responsible* for bringing the microfilariae into the surface blood just at the peak feeding period of the mosquitos concerned are beyond the scope of this article.

or a prepositional phrase, e.g.

> (8) The actors, *on stage* throughout the performance, are receptive to the unknown roles they will be asked to play, and come back to their personalities between scenes.

In this connection we also discuss *with*-phrases because of their surface similarity to other prepositional phrases, although these imply omission of *have* instead of *be*, e.g.

> (9) The distribution of food within the family is a potent factor in the nutritional deprivation of children, and the belief that only adults should eat meat or other "rich" or "heavy" foods is not restricted to the poverty-stricken or illiterate peasant family: it is also found in many well-educated families anxious to do their best for their children, and *with ample means.*

D. the infinitive clause, both active and passive, as in the following examples:

> (10) Basically, a flow chart is a set of instructions placed in boxes that are connected by arrows *to indicate* the order in which the directions are to be followed.
>
> (11) The manufacture of a satellite power station in space to convert the Sun's radiation into electrical energy, *to be transmitted* to Earth through the

atmosphere by a microwave link, is an application of the imminent space shuttle that is worth serious consideration.

All these clauses present the problem of how to infer the tense from the context. Confusing to the student can also be the fact that the *-ing* form of the verb does not necessarily stand for the progressive aspect.

Another problem is that with regular verbs the *-ed* form can be taken for a finite verb, i.e. the past tense, in long complex sentences, e.g.

(12) The alternative appears inevitable and unacceptable – more dependence on Arab oil, the depletion of nonrenewable resources, the international proliferation of nuclear weapons technology, the high environmental cost of burning large amounts of coal and uranium, and the hundreds of billions of dollars in capital cost *required* to meet even a modest increase in the demand for electricity.

(In the above example, a further source of confusion is that the lexical item *cost* is more familiar to the students as a verb than as a noun.)

The fact that a non-finite or verbless non-restrictive relative clause can be separated from its head much more freely than a full relative clause can also make it more difficult to the reader. In sentence (13), for instance, the abbreviated relative clause comes in front of the related head noun, which thus cannot properly be called the "antecedent", or the relative clause a "postmodifier":

(13) *The meat of its findings well published in advance, and with the added cachet of having had an attempt made to stop its publication,* **Negotiated Justice** is now out, the book by Dr John Baldwin and Dr Michael McConville on their research into the reasons behind last minute pleas of guilty in the higher courts.

The infinitive postmodifying clause is more varied in meaning and use than the participle clauses. The omitted relative pronoun can be the object of the non-finite clause, which may have its own separate subject introduced by *for*, or the subject may be indefinite. In addition to tense, the students must also grasp the mood implied in the infinitive construction. Further, it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between the two functions of the infinitive: the postmodifying function and the adverbial function of purpose, which will be discussed below.

## ADVERBIAL CLAUSES

The classification of abbreviated clauses according to form into participles, infinitives and prepositional phrases is of course very much the same as with relative clauses, but not very helpful to the student. The conventional kind of

classification on the basis of meaning illustrates the variety of adverbial clauses more clearly.

It is possible to teach adverbial clauses either by dividing them into two categories at the outset on the basis of whether a conjunction is expressed or not, or the basic clause types can be taught first by using clauses with conjunctions, and by pointing out later to the students that certain adverbial clauses appear without a conjunction. These conjunctionless clauses present a major comprehension problem, because their relation to the main clause has to be inferred from the context only. Therefore we usually introduce the clearer cases of clauses with subordinators first, and have a separate discussion of the conjunctionless clauses afterwards.

In abbreviated adverbial clauses, as in relative clauses, the *-ing* participle corresponds to an active and the *-ed* participle to a passive finite verb and *be* can be omitted. The tense is implied in the main clause. The deleted subject is assumed to be identical with that of the main clause. A clause without a conjunction can take a subject of its own, often introduced by *with.* This absolute construction is relatively infrequent in English but perhaps worth mentioning to the students, as corresponding non-finite expressions with a subject expressed are the standard case in Finnish.

Because our teaching is directed towards the development of receptive skills, it is not necessary to attempt to present an exhaustive analysis of adverbial clauses to the students. Rather, we believe it is more useful to illustrate, with examples, the most frequent types of non-finite and verbless adverbial clauses, such as clauses of time, condition, concession, manner, place, reason and purpose.

In temporal, conditional and concessive clauses the adverbial relations can be indicated by a conjunction, as in examples (14), (15) and (16). Clauses of reason always appear without a conjunction when they are abbreviated.

> (14) They are said to have politicised social work, to have made grandiose claims to end such social problems as poverty *while helping* to increase the numbers of people on the public assistance rolls to an enormous degree.
>
> (15) These words seem to me to express best the fundamental idea of Darwinian evolution – namely, that two species which exist today as independent species, *if followed* back in time, were originally two varieties of the same species.
>
> (16) *Although present* in relatively small quantities, fossil fuel-produced sulfuric acid has been measured in the rainfall of northern Europe.

As mentioned above, non-finite and verbless adverbial clauses without a conjunction are more difficult for the student to comprehend because context is the only indicator of their semantic connection with the main clause. This gives rise to difficulties in assigning the correct function to these clauses, particularly with respect to causal vs. temporal interpretation, and one clause often seems to carry both meanings. To decide the "right" meaning might be hard for a native speaker of English, let along a foreign reader. On the other hand, in many cases it seems to make little difference to the overall comprehension of a text whether a given adverbial clause is unambiguously interpreted to mean either time or reason or something else. Perhaps a certain amount of ambiguity is inherent in these expressions, and the relationship between main and subordinate clauses is purposefully vague.

These conjunctionless clauses are illustrated in our examples from (17) to (23). The perfective *-ing* form in (17) suggests a temporal link but here might be interpreted as causal or circumstantial as well. Condition is implied in example (18). Example (19) can be temporal or causal. Examples (20), (21) and (22) are perhaps more clearly causal, and in (22) the adverbial clause has a subject of its own introduced by *with.* The present participle in (23) expresses manner. Usually, though, the prepositional phrase *by* + *-ing* appears to be more frequent.

(17) Further, *having* now successfully *rid* ourselves of these two scourges and *having read* of successful campaigns in other places, we are lulled into supposing that mosquito-borne diseases generally are a thing of the past.

(18) *Shown* a stimulus offering sufficient incentive, the individual will respond and, if rewarded a sufficient number of times, will continue in a similar manner.

(19) *Forced* into closer contact with the ten-month old child, she subsequently beat him because she found his cries "so demanding".

(20) *Wrapped up* with our own twentieth-century ills, emanating in no small measure from the very richness of the lives we lead, we are apt to forget some of the awful diseases that afflicted us not so long ago in less enlightened times and in less prosperous days.

(21) *Inherently undesirable, unjust to defendants, and a blemish on the system of criminal justice*, such practices ought to be strictly limited.

(22) Today, *with microbial activity fairly well understood,* fermented foods and beverages constitute a large and important sector of the food industry.

(23) *Quoting* statistics of female employment, prostitution, etc., the writer attempts to show how the cinema has held a 'warped mirror up to life'.

In Finnish there is a corresponding use of non-finite forms in clauses of time, both for simultaneous and consecutive actions. However, clauses of condition, concession and reason cannot be replaced by non-finite clauses. In clauses of purpose, again, the Finnish system, analogous to the English, can replace the full clause with an infinitive. But in Finnish that particular infinitive signifies only purpose, whereas in English the infinitive has several other functions as well. Example (24) is a clearer case of purpose, but in (25) there are two possible interpretations: purpose and postmodifier, although the meaning in this case is more or less the same.

(24) Future food and feed production is endangered by the dwindling supply and availability of crude oil; the ever increasing world population will need even larger inputs of crude oil *to just maintain* the present intake per day for man.

(25) Agronomists will search for methods *to minimize* the tillage of the soil.

## PROBLEMS

In quite a few instances, a non-finite form can best be interpreted as an equivalent of a co-ordinate finite clause, as no subordinate relationship between the clauses can be found. This, again, may be worth pointing out to the students, because in standard Finnish corresponding substitution of a non-finite clause for a co-ordinate clause is not acceptable, although it is used. Such non-finite clauses as illustrated by examples (26), (27) and (28) appear in scientific writing, and native speakers of English seem to find them quite normal.

(26) *Setting aside* the long-range ethical dilemmas, Congress will concentrate on an immediate problem: the microscopic life forms now being created in research laboratories may be a hazard to human health and the environment.

(27) Nevertheless, further space exploration and eventual exploitation, to satisfy human needs other than curiosity, are inevitable, their accomplishment *being* merely a question of time and economics.

(28) Then the hyenas, supported by jackals, move in to feed on the carcass, *to be followed* later by vultures.

Confusing to the student can be participial forms which have assumed functions of conjunctions, prepositions and disjuncts, such as *concerning, considering, provided, given, strictly speaking, etc.,* which are not related to the subject of the main clause. These fixed phrases are perhaps best treated as lexical instances, as in examples (29) and (30).

(29) *Given* the culturally defined male-aggressive/female-passive roles in our

society, it might be surprising that females are so highly represented and overrepresented in cases of child abuse.

(30) The scientific world view is based upon the great discoveries of the nineteenth century *concerning* the nature of electricity and heat and the existence of atoms and molecules.

Even if students learn to recognise abbreviated clauses of the above kind, they face a further problem in the form of unattached or unrelated participles, also known as "dangling participles". Although, apparently, often warned against these, native speakers appear to use them. While it seems that few dangling participles are truly ambiguous to the native reader, for a foreign reader they can present a genuine comprehension problem, at least if he tries to tackle complicated sentences by applying rules that he has learned. It seems that examples (31) and (32) are easily understood, whereas in (33) and (34) the reference is much harder to deduce.

(31) Several approaches come to mind *when trying* to reduce the input of oil.

(32) *Assuming* a fairly high field efficiency of 82.5 per cent, the field capacity of a machine in acres per 10-hour day is simply obtained by multiplying the forward speed in miles per hour by the working width in feet.

(33) And we can go even farther back to that time when there were no molecules, only atoms, *bringing* us to the period of the evolution of the elements themselves.

(34) In general, foliage sprays are used to correct in a relatively short time a deficiency of some essential element and to supply essential elements which, *if applied* to soils, would, for some reason, become unavailable to the plants.

## CONCLUSION

We have thus in describing and teaching abbreviated clauses used functional, formal and semantic divisions as has seemed convenient at any point. The angle has been chosen in each case with intuition and experience. It seems that our solution works in practice but is not entirely satisfactory in all respects. For example, the inclusion vs. exclusion of prepositional phrases corresponding to adverbial clauses, such as *on arrival, in trying, by taking* or *with* denoting reason, is problematic. If we were teaching grammatical analysis they would have to be included, but since we are primarily teaching reading, would it not be easier to leave these to be interpreted from the meaning of the preposition and its complement, i.e. to be learned as lexis? There are several problems of this kind, basically arising from the conflict between the need for an elegant and comprehensive linguistic description and the need to limit the students' learning load to what is most helpful and usable.

We try to make do with as few grammatical terms as possible, because our students' familiarity with even the most traditional and seemingly simple terms varies a great deal. Consequently, we feel the need for a simple set of grammatical terms and concepts to cover the syntax that we want to teach to our students. It need not be a systematic and comprehensive grammar, but a subsystem to cover the areas relevant to advanced reading. There is no need for such a grammar to rely heavily on traditional grammar, given the students' varying familiarity with it – in fact, it might be more profitable to the students to acquire a new angle from which to view sentence structure. Another feature in such a pedagogical mini-grammar of English for reading purposes is that it should, perhaps, reflect the native language background of the learners. The abbreviated clauses discussed in this article suggest this, as they would be of central importance in a reading grammar for Finns, whereas readers whose native language contains few of these structures could probably escape the whole problem.

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