

**Sentence Pattern and Grammatical Aspects in English Writing: A Comparative Syntactical Analysis of Two ESL Students' Writings**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper describes how syntactical analysis of writing can be used by ESL teachers to assess students' work in writing classroom. It investigates types of sentence, the way they are constructed and grammatical aspects of the sentences from two ESL students' texts.

The paper provides description of text samples and texts analysis both in quantitative and qualitatively approaches. In addition, the differences between two texts are described to demonstrate a comparative analysis. The discussion reveals that student at stage 2 demonstrates lower proficiency comparing to student at stage 4 in terms of sentence construction, S2 student constructs more simple sentences and S4 student uses more complex sentences. Additionally, S4 student shows a pattern in creating past perfect tense sentences and the pattern shown by S2 student is in "but" beginning-clauses. Some grammatical errors are also shown by both students.

Keywords: *ESL, Writing, Syntactical, Grammatical, Pattern*

## **A. Introduction**

Analysis of English as a second language (ESL) pieces of writing commonly emphasize on surface features of a text such as spelling, coherence and punctuation. Although this kind of text-surface analysis creates possibility to improve ESL learners' skill in writing, such analysis might fail to provide further comprehension, especially for students, on syntactical and grammatical complexity of their writing which in fact contribute to the development of writing ability. Moreover, some typical and recurrent mistakes that may occur in their writing which can be observed in sentences pattern need serious attention from ESL teachers in teaching writing. Additionally, different background of students indicates different level of proficiency which then demonstrates different ability in writing (Cumming, Kantor, Baba, Erdosy, Eouanzoui, & James; and Grant & Ginther as cited in Becker, 2010).

Grammatically, there are several common errors usually made by ESL students, for instance word orders, subject verb agreement and phrases combination, especially in constructing complex sentences in their writing, more in depth error analysis need to be taken into account by English teachers in scaffolding them. In developing writing ability, students, as the writer, need to know particular errors recurrently occur in their pieces of writing from grammatical point of view in order to have clear pictures on what aspects they need to focus. In that case, the ability of teachers to do further analysis of the texts on syntactical basis will help the students recognise their grammatical inappropriateness. Furthermore, this sentence-structure analysis can provide evidence and logical reasons to explaining grammatical errors, including ambiguity sentences (Valin, 2004).

This essay intends to show that how syntactical analysis of writing can be used by ESL teachers to assess students' work in writing classroom. It is a recommendation that in depth grammatical analysis on syntactic categories should not be ignored by ESL teachers in order to achieve successful writing teaching and learning. Concerning this expectation, therefore, it will investigate type of sentence, how they are constructed and what are grammatical aspects of the sentences from two ESL students' texts. The next section of the background provides a brief

description of the topic: sentence pattern, syntactical categories (e.g. type of sentences and clauses) and grammatical rules. Also, some major theories and studies on this issue are provided to give background understanding of the discussion. Description of text samples and how the texts are analysed both quantitative and qualitatively are provided in the next section. The main section of discussion reveals the results of analysis and qualitative discussion on sentence patterns, how they are constructed and grammatical erroneous followed by justification to the claims based on some findings and relevant theories. In addition, the differences between two texts are described to demonstrate a comparative analysis.

## **B. Background**

There is no specific definition to clearly describe what the sentence pattern means because *pattern*, in this case, may reflect a very general meaning that can be applied in every context of discussion. In terms of language teaching, however, Richards and Schmidt (2002) define, *sentence pattern* “is a structure which is considered a basic grammatical pattern for sentences in the language being taught, and which can be used as a model for producing other sentences in the language” (p. 481). In this definition, thus, sentence pattern reflects more specific sense to the extent that a pattern of a sentence which is accorded to grammatical rules of a language, in this case, English. Nevertheless, in the context of this essay, sentence pattern may be defined as typical structure of sentences which occur repeatedly in the texts regardless it reflects an accordance to grammatical rules of English or not.

Determining a grammatical or ungrammatical sentence incorporates closely with syntactic knowledge that many ESL learners, especially ESL teachers, need to be familiar with. In its application, this knowledge is essential because it can display grammatical understanding as well as syntactical rules which is required in test structure analysis. Fromkin, Blair & Collins (1991) note that “syntactical rules reveal the grammatical relations between the words of a sentence and tell us when structural differences result in meaning difference and when they do not” (p. 105). In this

sense, it clear that syntactical rules give clear boundaries to determine a grammatical or ungrammatical sentence.

In English, there are six areas covered under syntactical rules, three of them are: the grammaticality of sentences, word order and structural ambiguity (Fromkin et al., 1991, p. 105). In this case, syntactical rules, which is also called “grammatical rules” (McGregor, 2009; Newson, 2006), is considered as the basic definition to decide whether the sequence of words in a sentence is well-formed (grammatical) or ill-formed (ungrammatical) (Fromkin et al., 1991). In the same context, (Valin, 2004) argues that the rules of the grammar specify the way the form classes in the language may combine, and a useful distinction may be drawn between lexical and phrasal form classes. In addition, grammatical sentences are those that appropriate with the rules and principles of the syntax, while ungrammatical sentences are inappropriate or violate syntactic rules. For instance, “*The teacher is reading a book*” is a grammatical sentence, while “*Teacher the book a reading is*” is not because it violates word order rules of English. (Valin, 2004, p. 3).

For many reasons, ESL students still face many problems and potentially typical make errors which repeatedly occur in their writings. Providing some justifications, a study conducted by Zhang (2008), which aims at providing a comprehensive review on studies in ESL writing, reveals five major areas such as second language (L2) writing feedback, L2 writing instruction and L2 writer’s texts. Regarding final variable about the texts, Zhang (2008) reviews a study conducted by Hinkel (as cited in Zhang, 2008) which revealed some major findings in relation to textual language features of English NNS students from Asian countries, including Vietnam. Amongst, there are two findings which are relevant to our discussion: L2 texts are syntactically and lexically simpler than first language (L1) texts; and the effect of *prompts* (instruction) on writing performance of ESL students. This point is clearly supported by Berman and Nir (as cited in Danzak, 2011) who investigate the impact of topic on morphosyntactic structures in writing. They found that choosing specific topics of writing effect on selection lexical and syntactical features of the language which impact the results. In other words, the more familiar topic is given to the students, the wider range of vocabulary they able to employ.

In relation to psychological issue, Clachar's (as cited in Zhang, 2008) suggests that emotion obviously influences writing strategies. In this study, it is found that students who write an emotional text, spent more time on lexical, morphological and syntactic issues due to intention to express faithful and meaningful sentences. Also, the students show their concern on the semantic value of specific linguistic structures which cannot be found in non-emotional text writing. Clachar's (cited in Zhang, 2008).

In addition, other studies on grammatical ability of ESL writers indicate that L2 skilled writers wrote longer texts than less skilled L2 writers (Grant & Ginther; Sasaki as cited in Zhang, 2008). In the same context, Ferris (1994) suggests that students who were at higher levels of L2 proficiency produced more frequently syntactical and lexical features such as stative forms, participial constructions, relative clauses and other adverbial clauses rather than students who were at lower levels. From this finding, it is clear that the patterns shown by higher level students are more compound or complex sentences rather than lower level students. Hence, the second text written by stage four students creates possibility to show similar pattern. In addition, some studies also show important findings on the influence of background of ESL students, such as first language features and learning experience, on students' performance in second language writing. A recent study carried out by Maniam (2010) depicts that Tamil background students have faced negative interference in their English writing, for example in vocabulary command.

Moving from those findings, it is important to take into consideration that this essay investigates syntactical and grammatical features of ESL students in a sense of comparison. In other words, two ESL students' texts are compared which will lead to some judgments on in terms of grammatical or ungrammaticality of the texts. Previous findings mentioned above, therefore, have provided important background that higher level students demonstrate higher proficiency of writing ability.

### **C. Methods of Analysis**

In this essay, two samples of writing written by ESL students are analysed. The first composition is a story about life of a pirate. Imagining as a pirate, the student writes his journey and friends in the sea spending time by fighting and stealing gold from people. The writer is 15 years old student from Karen refugee camp whose Karen language as mother tongue. He will continue the study into year nine at secondary school after being for three terms in English language school. The second piece of writing was written by a 16 years old Vietnamese student. He is in year 10 and he has completed two terms of English classes in English language centre in Victoria. In his writing to the editor, he argues that the death of mountaineer, David Sharp is a tragedy and other climbers who were with David and left him to die should not be responsible for the tragedy.

In further analysis, both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to provide valid data. Syntactic categories, such as type of sentences, clauses, phrases and verbs, and grammatical aspect such as tenses, aspect and reference are identified and classified as well as counted as quantitative data. Then, the data from quantitative analysis will be elaborated in qualitative discussion. The discussion will clarify logical description to some patterns and type of sentences used by both students in the texts.

It is assumed that both students might create particular patterns in constructing sentences and makes some grammatical errors in their writing for many reasons; one of them is due to the interference of their first language (Maniam, 2010). A further assumption is that there are obvious differences between first and second text in the way students construct the sentences, particularly to the extent to the type of sentences they use.

## D. Analysis and Discussion

The table below shows classification of all categories from the analysis. It presents the first text (Stage 2) and the second text (Stage 4).

Table: Number of syntactic categories of the two texts

Categories	Stage 2	Stage 3	Categories	Stage 2	Stage 3
<b>Types of Sentences</b>			<b>Types of verbs</b>		
Simple	19	9	Verb transitive (vt)	33	37
Complex	9	10	Verb intransitive (vi)	23	14
Compound	8	1	Verb copula (vcop)	14	10
Complex-compound	6	9	Verb auxiliary (vaux)	4	15
Passive	-	4	<b>Aspects</b>		
Embedded questions	-	-	Progressive (prog)	4	3
<b>Types of Clauses</b>			Perfective (perf)	-	3
Main	15	18	Non-prog & Non-perf	39	43
Complement	4	6	<b>Other categories</b>		
Relative	6	2	Comp left out	4	3
Adjunct	5	7	Subject	63	51
Finite	-	-	DO	24	28
Non-finite	-	2	Ref	86	48
<b>Types of tenses</b>			Ant		
Past	25	26			
Non-past	26	27			

To compare the two texts: Stage 2 (S2) and Stage 4 (S4), the table above shows that there are considerable differences between S2 student and S4 student in using some categories. In the first category, the *type of sentences*, significant difference can be seen in number of occurrence of simple and compound sentences. S2 student, in this case, use greater number of the *simple sentence* (19 times) than S4 student (9 times) and the *compound sentences*, eight times while only one time by S4 student. In contrast, S4 student uses more the *complex sentence* (10 times) as well as the *compound-complex sentence* (9 times). However, less usage of both complex and compound-complex sentences shown by S2 student who has (9 times) and (6 times) usages of the sentences respectively.

In this category, the results of quantitative analysis apparently do not meet the qualitative prediction that S4 student demonstrates higher proficiency by employing more compound, complex and compound-complex sentences in comparison to S2 student. As the evidence, the data in the table shows that S2 student uses more compound sentences than S4 student. However, it is important to note that, S2 student constructs unnecessarily compound sentences in his writing, which is quantitatively counted but qualitatively considered redundant and incorrect. Below are examples of the sentences which are considered either redundant or incorrect (Appendix 1):

Example 1: “..... *so we never afraid and never afraid of death*”.

Example 2: “...*we separate each other and my friend went back to their home and I went back to my home*”.

The first example shows both incorrect and redundant sentence. In English grammatical rule, the sentence needs a verb in order to construct a correct sentence, in this case, it needs *verb copula* (Vcop: are) because “afraid” is an adjective phrase. Then, the use of another sentence “..*and never afraid of death*” is redundant pragmatically. However, in quantitative, this sentence is counted as a compound sentence because it is assumed that the original sentence is “*we [are] never afraid and [we are] never afraid of death*”. So, “and” functions as a *coordinator conjunction* (CC) in this example. In addition, Example 2 was counted as two compound sentences since it has two CCs coordinating those sentences. In fact, this sentence can be constructed only by using one CC. Instead of full sentence (Example 2), the sentence can be constructed in another way which is grammatically better: “..*we separate each other and we went back to our own home*”. Regardless these two examples are incorrect or redundant. These sentences account for amount of compound sentences in quantitative analysis.

Furthermore, from the sentence analysis, S2 student shows a pattern in constructing a sentence or a clause starting with “But”. This pattern is shown in following three sentences: 1) “*But they were afraid too*”. 2) “*But that day we were won too*”. 3) “*But they shoot my eye and my eye was broken*” (Appendix 1). Textually, these three sentences are simple sentences, but, from syntactical



perspective, those are dependent sentence or subordinate clauses which need other independent or simple sentences as the main clauses. Therefore, those three sentences are grammatically incorrect. Regarding this pattern, it is a fact that language background (Karen language) of the student influences his way of constructing the sentences. In Karen language, “adversative conjunction” *But* is usually used at the beginning of a clause (Gilmore, 1898, item 205).

Despite making errors grammatically, the two students demonstrate insignificant difference in using tenses. From the *Tenses* category, it is shown that S2 student uses twenty five *past tense* sentences and twenty six *non-past tense* sentences, while S4 student has one sentence more than S2 student in each tenses categories (26 past and 27 non-past tenses). In qualitative review, however, the students show typical form of using tenses in their sentences. In S4 student text for example, which is the most obvious, he shows a typical pattern in constructing sentences. The sentences are usually constructed in forms what commonly called *past perfect tense*. It is expressed in several sentences as follows (Appendix 2):

Example 1: “..*Sharp should have been left to die..*”

Example 2: “*To carry him down would have taken 20 sherpas..*”

Example 3: “..*he would have died while descending*”

Example 4: “*David could have been saved if..*”

Example 5: “..*he could have been revived..*”

Examples above shows the high level of proficiency of the student in constructing complex sentences using complex grammar tenses correctly. Thus, this evidence supports prior prediction that S4 student demonstrates better ability in writing.

Furthermore, another interesting fact shown in the table is the range of using the *subject*, the *verb* and the *direct object* (DO). The data shows that S2 student uses sixty three times the *subject*, twelve times greater in number than S4 student who uses fifty one times. This data supports the previous claim that S2 student uses less *compound or complex sentences* in a sense that such sentences give possibility for subject omission, which in turn will reduce the number of subject or noun phrase in the writing. In English grammar, it is allowed for two identical structures of

sentences to combine and omit some parts of the sentence. In similar way, Quirk and Greenbaum (1987) calls “structural deficiency”, which means combination of two or more sentences by omitting parallel devices: syntactic, semantic or lexical parallelism. In this case, a subject is considered as syntactical parallelism. Therefore, a compound or complex sentence can be constructed by omitting identical *subject* to combine two or more sentences become one. Following are two examples of this description (Appendix 1):

Example 1: “*He can speak. He always travelling with me*”

Example 2: “*...I and my friends travelled in the sea. We saw a big ship coming*”

According to grammatical rule, the two sentences in first example can be combined become a compound sentence because they have two typical subjects (NP) “He”. To combine, the NP “He” can be omitted in the second sentence. Thus the compound sentence will read as follows: “*He can speak and always travelling with me*”. In the same manner, the sentences in the second example can be combined as a compound sentence as in the example: “*I and my friends travelled in the sea and saw a big ship coming*”. From this example, thus, it is indicated that S4 students still lack of ability in constructing compound or complex sentences.

In the *verbs* category, the *verb intransitive* is used more by S2 student: twenty seven times compare to S4 student (14 times). In contrast, the *verb transitive* is used more by S4 student (38 times) rather than by S2 students (29 times). While S2 student uses twenty eight times the *direct object* (DO), S4 student uses four times more than S2 student (28 times). At this point, it is interesting to understand further reason why there is significant difference between number of the *verb transitive* and the *direct object* used by the S4 students while it is fact that, ideally, every verb transitive is followed by a direct object. Valin (2004) describes a direct object is a clause feature with active-voice transitive verbs, and it is an undergoer in semantic view.

Responding to this finding, the analysis reveals several reasons why the *verb transitive* in S4 student’s text is not always followed by a direct object, one of them is *passive* construction. The NP which is considered as a direct object in passive can be a subject in the passive voice (Valin, 2004). To provide evidence, following

sample taken from S4 student's text contains a passive voice with transitive verb: “..David could have been saved if they..”. The underlined word “save” is a transitive verb that is not followed by direct object due to passive construction. In addition, other reasons may be due to the use of an *adjective* followed by a *prepositional phrase* (prepp) after transitive verb, for instance “..to climb solo to the roof of the world..”, here, “solo” is an adjective and “to the roof of the world” is a prepositional phrase. Grammatically, it can be considered as an object, however syntactically, it cannot be defined as a direct object because in syntax, direct object appears when a *verb transitive* has a sister relation to an NP (Vt  $\leftrightarrow$  NP). In this case, syntax tree diagram can clearly describe the relation.

## **E. Conclusion**

Since a text-surface analysis cannot provide a comprehensive improvement to students' performance in writing, a syntactical analysis is a requirement to investigate deeply to grammatical and syntactical features of students' text. This analysis can help both ESL students and teachers to recognize grammatical errors in writing. Many studies have provided evidence that many factors contribute to students' performance in writing classroom: background of students, such as first language features, topic of writing and level of proficiency of the students. Current discussion reveals that student at stage 2 demonstrates lower proficiency comparing to student at stage 4 in terms of sentence construction, S2 student constructs more simple sentences and S4 student uses more complex sentences. Additionally, S4 student shows a pattern in creating past perfect tense sentences and the pattern shown by S2 student is in “*but*” beginning-clauses. Some grammatical errors are also shown by both students.

In relation to this finding, several considerations can contribute to improve students' performance in writing classroom: providing close assistance, reconsideration on combining grammar translation method in communicative teaching and exploring contextual topic in writing, are some of alternatives to improve writing ability of the students. However, a clear description on how

grammar translation method can be combined in communicative teaching, particularly teaching writing, in practical curriculum level requires more exploration.

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