

*Writing Conversations: Exploring How Metalinguistic Understanding
Fosters Young ESL Learners' Writing in Classrooms*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article has two main objectives: firstly, to investigate and identify the syntactic structures employed by young ESL writers in their compositions; and secondly, to explore how ESL writers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing. The study involved the analysis of essays from 92 ESL secondary students of advanced and intermediate proficiency levels. A manual linguistic analysis was conducted, utilizing a coding framework that assessed various syntactic complexity features at the sentence, clause, and phrase levels. The second set of data was obtained from semi-structured interviews and elicitation task with 12 students, chosen from the corpus sample. The results revealed a consistent pattern among advanced writers, characterized by a higher frequency of relative clauses, finite subordinate clauses, prepositional phrases, coordinate phrases, and adverbials as sentence openers. Despite inferential statistics suggesting a potential developmental pattern, a detailed examination of students' essays indicated that conceptualizing and measuring syntactic complexity solely based on the presence of specific syntactic features might be insufficient. The in-depth analysis showed that certain features, such as minor sentences, could not be adequately captured using the syntactic complexity measures employed in many prior studies. Additionally, the elicitation tasks also revealed that students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction does affect their writing, which suggest explicit teaching of syntactical constructions and varied sentence structures could enable more effective written communication.

Keywords: Syntactic Complexity, Metalinguistic Understanding, Second Language Writing, Linguistic Development

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Introduction

Writing skills are crucial for academic success, employment, and effective communication. However, many second language learners, especially in Malaysia, continue to struggle with writing. Sentence construction plays a vital role in facilitating higher-order writing skills such as planning, editing, and revising impacting the effective translation of ideas (Graham, 2006). Previous research by second language scholars has aimed to address these issues by examining the essays of second language learners, particularly focusing on university students in Malaysia and identifying common errors in their writing (Abdul et al., 2004; Yasruddin et al., 2010; Mukundan, J. & Khojasteh, L., 2011; Mukundan, J. et al., 2013).

Despite the recent surge in interest in syntactic complexity in second language writing, many studies have presented mixed and inconsistent results (cf. Robinson 2007; Skehan 2009; Spada & Tomita 2010). Additionally, corpus linguistics studies investigating syntactic complexity in writing have typically reported results solely based on the presence of syntactic features. This paper contends that a systematic exploration of syntactic complexity is essential to uncover how writers of different proficiency levels employ these features to shape and modify their sentences, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of their written communication. Furthermore, this study also looks at second language learners' metalinguistic understanding to investigate its relationship with students' syntactic constructions in writing.

Syntactic Complexity and Writing Quality

Numerous studies have explored the correlation between syntactic complexity and writing quality. These investigations were predicated on the belief that syntactic features play a pivotal role in assessing linguistic development, as more intricate syntactic structures are often associated with higher evaluations of writing quality (Crossley & McNamara, 2014). However, prior research has reported inconsistent results, with no comprehensive explanation provided for this variability. For instance, Crossley and McNamara (2014) examined the connection between syntactic complexity indices measuring second language (L2) development and human ratings in L2 writing. They found that essays featuring "a greater number of complex syntactic structures, including syntactic structures related to clause complexity ('that' clauses and 'to' clauses)," received higher ratings (Crossley & McNamara, 2014, p.75). Conversely, Biber (2006) and Biber et al. (2011) argued that dependent clauses are more characteristic of speech than academic writing. In another study by Bulté and Housen (2014), the *Language Use* scores from raters correlated with various syntactic complexity measures, including mean length of sentence, mean length of T-unit, mean length of noun phrase, subclause ratio, simple sentence ratio, complex sentence ratio, and compound-complex sentence ratio. Although these measures showed correlation with overall writing scores, not all were indicative of developmental sensitivity. For instance, the complex sentence ratio, used to measure subordination, significantly correlated with essay quality but did not signify developmental progression.

A review of syntactic complexity studies by Crowhurst (1983) concluded that the two most commonly used syntactic complexity measures, T-unit length and clause length, do not consistently relate positively to writing quality. Crowhurst argued that increased T-unit length can sometimes be associated with flawed writing, and the writing mode may influence the relationship between T-unit and quality. Importantly, Crowhurst (1983) emphasized that enhancements in writing quality should not solely rely on syntactic complexity scores; other

factors surrounding the writers must also be considered. Consequently, the idea that the presence of syntactic features unequivocally determines linguistic development and writing quality should be approached with appropriate caution.

Metalinguistic Understanding in Writing Classrooms

The debate surrounding the effectiveness of grammar instruction in second and foreign language pedagogy has persisted for over a decade. Early studies in Second Language Acquisition by Kessler and Idar (1977), Fabris (1978), and Krashen (1987) suggested a natural order and sequence in learners' acquisition of grammatical structures. According to this theory, the acquisition of grammatical structures progresses in an expected manner (Krashen, 1982). Scholars such as Krashen (1981) and Schwartz (1993) have argued that explicit knowledge of language is not advantageous for learners' acquisition (Ellis, 2008). This ongoing debate has prompted researchers to explore the effectiveness of various language instruction methods in second language learning, including form-focused instruction.

Long (1991) defined focus on form as the instruction which draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. However, Ellis (2001) pointed out potential issues with Long's (1991) definition, noting that previous research using it tended to overlook the second defining characteristic of focus on form – its incidental nature. According to Ellis (2001), form-focused instruction differs from meaning-making instruction by its primary focus on form and intensive treatment of preselected forms, requiring learners to concentrate intensely on specific forms for learning. Many second language researchers argue that form-focused instruction is an effective method in second language learning (Norris and Ortega, 2000), with Ellis (2008) supporting the idea that it enables learners to progress more rapidly along the natural order.

The teaching of writing in Malaysian classrooms, as observed by Lim (2014), has been noted to be form-focused, with grammar and writing often taught separately. While previous research has shown positive outcomes from explicitly teaching grammar knowledge to learners (Hammond, 2012; Moore and Schleppegrell, 2014), it is also essential for learners "to be able to think grammatically about language choices in writing" (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). This concept goes beyond viewing grammar as solely rules and compliance (Becker, 2006). Writing instruction in second language classrooms should emphasize not only explicit grammar knowledge but also the conscious awareness of language in shaping writing (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). In other words, teachers should guide students to move beyond "an abstract knowledge about language to apply that knowledge to their writing" (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). While this concept is relatively new in the Malaysian context, its introduction could significantly contribute to learners' writing development.

Methodology

The procedures for data collection were conducted simultaneously but separately, and the two data sets underwent separate and independent analyses. Corpus data were analyzed using statistical analysis, percentages, comparisons, and descriptive statistics. In contrast, interview and writing conversation data were analyzed by identifying patterns and conducting thematic analysis. The results from both data sets were subsequently organized thematically and

presented. The two datasets were combined to formulate a conclusive interpretation. The merged data is then presented, explaining how the diverse data types contribute to a more comprehensive understanding in the current study.

The Sample

Participants were assigned two essay prompts, with an effort made to ensure an equal distribution of argumentative and narrative essays. Half of the class received an argumentative task, while the other half received a narrative task. The requirement for the essays was a minimum of 350 words, and participants had one hour to complete the task. To maintain the reliability of the study, participants and teachers were not informed of the writing topics in advance to prevent students from planning their writing ahead of time, which could potentially impact the essays and, consequently, the findings. However, the topics or prompts provided were modeled after those found in the 1119 paper of the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination, as well as other Form four writing textbooks or exercise books, making them familiar to students and teachers. Out of 120 essays, only those that were complete and comprehensible were selected for inclusion in the research, resulting in a total of 92 essays.

Proficiency Level	Essay Genre	
	Argumentative	Narrative
Advanced	23	23
Intermediate	23	23

N = 92

Table 1: Essay samples in the study

General Complexity	Clausal Complexity	Coordination	Phrasal Complexity	Frequency of Clause Patterns
Mean length of sentence	Mean length of clause	Frequency of Coordinate Clause	Frequency of Adjectival Prepositional Phrase	SV
Clauses per sentence	Frequency of Relative Clause	Frequency of Coordinate Phrase	Frequency of Appositive Noun Phrase	SVO
	Frequency of ING-clause		Frequency of Adverbial Prepositional Phrase	SVC
	Frequency of ED-clause			SVA
	Frequency of TO-clause			SVOC
	Frequency of Finite Subordinate Clause			SVOO
				SVOA
				SVCA
				AVS
				ASVA

Table 2: Syntactic complexity measures employed in the present study

In the second phase of data collection, writing conversations were carried out with 12 selected student participants from the writing sample. These writing conversations were conducted to address how students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical structure affects their writing. The writing conversation, resembling a semi-structured interview, combines questions designed to extract perceptions and beliefs regarding writing and essay grading with tasks aimed at eliciting a metalinguistic understanding from students. The 12 student representatives for these writing conversations were chosen based on their proficiency levels, categorized as intermediate and advanced, determined by their English language results in the Lower Secondary Assessment or PT3—a public examination for Form three students in Malaysia. The selection process also considered the syntactic structures used in the chosen essays, ensuring they could serve as prompts during the writing conversation. The chosen essays exhibited specific syntactic features that were intended to be discussed in the elicitation task.

Discussion

The results obtained from the linguistic analysis of students' essays, categorized by proficiency level and genres, demonstrate distinct syntactical patterns. Proficient writers exhibit enhanced control over their sentence structures, evident in the increased frequency of relative clauses, finite subordinate clauses, adjectival and adverbial prepositional clauses, as well as adverbial sentence openings observed in advanced essays. Advanced writers display confidence in using these syntactic features to achieve various rhetorical effects in their writing, such as amusing, shocking, persuading, or prompting readers. This is considered a marker of more skilled writers, as it involves conscious decision-making to enhance writing effectiveness.

Intermediate writers, on the other hand, favor compound sentences linked by coordinate conjunctions (primarily 'and,' 'but,' and 'so'), emphasizing content delivery over the consideration of rhetorical effects achievable through more complex syntactical features. Notably, the increased use of adverbials as sentence openings among advanced writers demonstrates their ability to manipulate sentence structures for diverse effects, employing short or minor sentences strategically. This proficiency allows them to use adverbials to initiate sentences, focusing on different ideas to communicate their messages more effectively. While intermediate writers also utilize adverbials at the sentence beginning, these are mostly linking adverbs, and their overuse is highlighted in the qualitative analysis, potentially diminishing the effectiveness of their essays. This underscores the significance of manual linguistic analysis and emphasizes that relying solely on numerical occurrences for complexity assessment may yield misleading findings, as complexity alone does not guarantee quality or effectiveness.

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Clause Length	Advanced	46	9.13	2.42	0.088
	Intermediate	46	8.41	1.44	
Relative Clause	Advanced	46	4.72	3.17	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	2.02	1.57	
ING-clause	Advanced	46	0.11	0.58	0.150
	Intermediate	46	0.02	0.15	
ED-clause	Advanced	46	0.11	0.48	0.133
	Intermediate	46	0.00	0.00	
TO-clause	Advanced	46	0.65	0.90	0.127
	Intermediate	46	0.39	0.71	
Finite Subordinate Clause (with connective conjunction)	Advanced	46	15.17	4.43	0.047*
	Intermediate	46	13.17	5.06	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 3: Clausal complexity of Advanced and Intermediate learners

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
SV	Advanced	46	0.52	1.03	0.077
	Intermediate	46	0.22	0.51	
SVO	Advanced	46	4.61	1.60	0.001*
	Intermediate	46	6.13	2.46	
SVC	Advanced	46	5.91	2.06	0.764
	Intermediate	46	5.76	2.74	
SVA	Advanced	46	6.02	1.42	0.069
	Intermediate	46	6.61	1.62	
SVOC	Advanced	46	3.91	1.64	0.192
	Intermediate	46	4.41	1.98	
SVOO	Advanced	46	3.07	1.50	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	4.87	2.36	
SVOA	Advanced	46	5.30	2.04	0.001*
	Intermediate	46	3.93	1.87	
SVCA	Advanced	46	2.96	1.25	0.516
	Intermediate	46	3.13	1.31	
AVS	Advanced	46	0.52	0.84	0.015*
	Intermediate	46	0.17	0.44	
ASVA	Advanced	46	1.98	1.47	0.084
	Intermediate	46	1.32	1.06	
ASV	Advanced	46	1.47	1.70	0.048*
	Intermediate	46	0.80	0.65	
ASVO	Advanced	46	2.31	1.04	0.104
	Intermediate	46	1.81	1.37	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 4: Syntactic constructions of Advanced and Intermediate learners

Furthermore, the findings indicate that argumentative essays exhibit higher mean sentence length, sentence complexity, mean clause length, coordinate phrases, and adjectival prepositional phrases. These features are likely influenced by the academic nature of argumentative essays, reflecting characteristics commonly found in academic writing. Additionally, the use of more post-modifiers in managing arguments and depicting cause-effect relationships contributes to these results. Interestingly, although argumentative essays are generally more complex than narratives, they display fewer adverbials as sentence openings. The prevalence of short or minor sentences in narratives may afford writers more opportunities to use adverbials at the sentence beginning. Writers may also feel more confident starting sentences with the typical subject-verb structure, as it facilitates argument management and presentation. This specific finding suggests that the syntactic variation in sentence openings could benefit from further exploration, particularly in diverse genres.

In addition, the study has also generated comprehensive interview data about students' metalinguistic understanding and their perceptions of what is important in essay writing. The results can be discussed in several evident themes.

Significance Lack of Confidence

Primarily, there was a noticeable lack of understanding in sentence syntax, extending beyond the basic subject and verb components to encompass clauses, phrases, and sentence variety. This inadequacy was evident in students' performance during the elicitation task, where most struggled and expressed low confidence in task completion. If they possessed a more comprehensive knowledge of sentence syntax, clauses, phrases, and sentence variety, their performance could have been improved. Increased metalinguistic comprehension of these elements might have empowered students to employ grammatical reasoning, thereby enhancing their ability to correctly respond to the task.

Misconceptions

Misconceptions among students regarding syntactic elements were further exacerbated by the lack of metalinguistic understanding. When tackling elicitation tasks, students struggled to employ grammatical reasoning and instead, relied on 'proxies' to decipher sentence structure. Misconceptions, such as viewing phrases as shorter than clauses, equating simple sentences with short sentences, and perceiving clauses as incomplete sentences requiring additional words, were among the various misconceptions causing difficulties for students.

The Importance of the Teacher, Exams and the Teaching of Writing

Students consistently emphasized the significance of adhering to teachers' guidance regarding exam priorities. This underscores their strong dependence on teachers, and the comments imply that teachers might be overly instructive. There is minimal indication that students are cultivating independence and authorship skills in English, which could pose challenges later on, especially in higher education where students are expected to be self-reliant learners.

Students' feedback indicates that the teaching of writing primarily emphasizes accuracy without giving due attention to communicative effectiveness. The instructional method employed by teachers, involving cloze passages and error analysis, is heavily focused on form rather than adopting a functionally-informed approach to grammar. While this approach may enhance the precision of students' essays, it may not contribute significantly to their

ability to effectively communicate ideas through writing. Interestingly, students seem to accept this form-focused approach, potentially influenced by the exam-oriented education system. It is noteworthy that the rubric emphasizes sentence variety without commensurate attention to it.

Ultimately, the teaching approach adopted by teachers appears to result in students prioritizing good grades over developing strong writing skills. Throughout the interviews with all students, the frequent use of the word 'memorize' to describe their learning approach is surprising. This suggests a preference for a spoon-fed learning style, potentially driven by the pursuit of good grades. Notably, none of the students expressed concern about how effectively they could convey their messages through their writing.

Conclusion

The results discussed in the study have uncovered information that could be valuable for various stakeholders in the field of education and linguistics. Developers of curriculum and educational materials can utilize these findings as guidelines when creating textbooks, modules, lectures, and other materials for L2 classrooms, particularly in the context of writing lessons. Moreover, the study underscores the significance of metalinguistic understanding in the teaching and learning of writing, potentially challenging the rigid concept of form-focused pedagogy in Malaysian classrooms. The outcomes of this research are also beneficial for educators, parents, students, and future researchers, offering insights into the current state of writing competence among Malaysian learners and shedding light on potential reasons behind writing challenges faced by these second language learners.

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