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## Syntactic Factors Impacting Essay Writing Skills of Learners of English as a Second Language

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### ABSTRACT

*Writing essays at the tertiary level has always presented challenges to students in Sri Lankan universities as it involves a multitude of linguistic competencies. It is identified through essay writing activities and assignments that the first-year students are weak and have limitations in showing the variety of sentence patterns and phrasal and clausal embeddedness and sophistication. The objective of the study is to investigate how syntactic factors impact the essay writing skills of first-year undergraduates following the degree program in the English medium at the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the University of Vavuniya. The sample size was 10% of the population, and their written texts consisted of 150- 160 sentences. The semi-structured interview was conducted as a supplementary component and analysed qualitatively. The texts were selected based on their marks, and the collected data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. This result shows that most students' performance scores in <Subject+Verb+ Complement> (SVC) sentence pattern usage are above 50%. Therefore, it proves that the students acquired SVC better than other patterns. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that when students construct sentence patterns during essay writing in a constrained environment, the tendency to show structural variation, diversity of sentence types, and structural embeddedness are considerably low and grammatical errors in their written constructions are high. The study concludes that the syntactic factors, such as diversity of sentence types, variety of sentence patterns, syntactic structures, structural embeddedness, disinterest towards writing and practising structural components in essays, and lack of focus on phrases and clauses, impact essay writing skills. As a result, the study suggests using a novel approach to teach and learn sentences in essay writing for ESL students, including a variety of sentence pattern approaches and embedded structures and modifiers.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Essay writing skills, syntactic structures, linguistic competence, tertiary level*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

All four language skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, are integrated into General English courses provided by the English Language Teaching Units and Departments of the universities in Sri Lanka. Writing is difficult for ESL students and teachers teaching students at the tertiary level how to write essays.

According to Alsamadani (2010), writing is a complex activity requiring various macrometacognitive skills. As a result, writers must pay attention to multiple factors at once as they craft their texts, including manipulated ideas, content, language conventions, genre, and the readers. Due to a lack of vocabulary and the inability to effectively use a range of sentence structures, this occurs. According to Nesamalar, Teh, and Sarath (2001), writing in English is difficult for students.

Through essay writing exercises, assignments and classroom observation, it was discovered that the first-year students of Information Technology attached to the Faculty of Applied Science of the University of Vavuniya could not demonstrate a wide range of sentence patterns, phrasal and clausal embeddedness, and sophistication. Wiredu (2012) and Ernowati (2014) report that the writer uses a variety of sentence structures to keep the articles interesting and engage readers without boredom. The English language has "eight key sentence patterns" (Quirk and Greenbaum 2008) and "thirty-two expanded patterns" (Hornby

1992) that can be applied to a variety of sentences.

The current study emphasises the importance of essay writing in a second language and the impact of syntactic factors such as a variety of sentence patterns, sentence types and syntactic structural embeddedness, which promote the standard of academic style and pave the way to express sophisticated ideas in essays, explicitly showing the students' mastery of structural competence, proficiency and maturity as advanced learners. Further, learners can study how words can be changed into phrases, clauses, and sentences. When students comprehend the sentence patterns, they can imitate the original sentences into the new patterns by combining or adding sentence elements (Koh, 2021). Therefore, the research article advocates that these issues be addressed to improve the essay writing of ESL learners in higher education. Essays were selected for the study as they are compulsory in the assessment at the university chosen. The study signifies the importance of the structural range variation expected in academic writing.

The empirical gap was identified as the past studies focused on exploring issues in vocabulary, capitalisation, grammar, various forms of error analysis, fossilisation, mother tongue interference, cohesive devices, organisation, and content; the impact on essay writing and the study of syntactic structure in essay writing is hardly found or significantly less in the Sri Lankan context. It is acknowledged in the study findings of (Aldabbus 2017), where he listed some factors

contributing to this, including L1 interference, inconsistent writing directions, lack of capitalisation, various sentence constructions, irregular adjective placement, inconsistent spelling conventions, and use of articles.

## **1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1.1 Essay Writing in Higher Education**

Writing is the most challenging area of the language learning process in this digital era, as textual communication such as SMS, email, virtual classrooms, and internet usage have increased substantially more than ever before. As Bailey (2015) and Meyers (2014) report, essay writing is an academic writing genre, and Van Geyte (2013) adds that the essay has become the most popular assignment. Ortega (2003) and Lu (2010) Label two crucial factors in academic essay writing: the range of syntactic structures and the degree of phrasal sophistication. Most students in the class and the time slots for the subject become significant barriers to practising essay writing effectively. Writing aptitude is prominent as written assignments in a semester assess the students' competence and performance in their disciplines. The successful completion of the degree programme is determined by students' final results, which assess their focal subjects and language-oriented written performance. Therefore, higher education students must master various syntactic structures at the intrasentential level in their writing. Ortega (2003) states that a learner's syntactic repertoire is believed to be crucial to their development in the language being learned.

### **1.1.2 Transforming the Essays into Academic Writing**

Transforming the essays into academic essay standards requires a higher order of thinking skills, as sentence patterns and syntactic complexity play a significant role in writing. Wingate (2006), cited in Chokwe (2013), reported that many students are no longer required to write essays at secondary schools, which could be why students have problems with academic writing. On the contrary, in secondary schools in Sri Lanka, essay writing is a prominent assignment in the curriculum at all levels. Moreover, it is mandatory for national exams like GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) (National Institute of Education, 2019).

However, the art of scholarly writing is absent, and students fail to show the benchmark. Ahmad et al. (2017) argued that the complexity of academic writing increases with practice. Learning sentences with structural variety assists the students in understanding the complex structures and extracting the meaning, which helps to improve the comprehension power of the complex sentences in reading to interpret the meaning. Waddell et al. (1993) mentioned that learning to write better sentences is like learning other skills. Carhill et al. (2008), cited in Chokwe (2013), report that low academic achievement levels in English language proficiency can hinder academic success and full participation in the field.

### **1.1.3 Sentence Patterns and Syntactic Complexity in Essays**

Fries (1945), cited in Koh (2021), reported that the sentence pattern method is one of the

beneficial writing techniques. Similarly, Hostmeyer (2012) demonstrates that teaching sentence patterns empowers students to write sentences by adding, deleting and rearranging the components of sentences and creating a wide range of patterns. In addition, Wong (1979) mentions that when the sentence pattern is fixed in ESL/EFL learners' brains, they boost their natural inclination to create new types of sentences. Sundari (2013) asserts that mastery of sentence patterns facilitates students' writing development. Therefore, introducing a variety of sentence patterns is a valuable and effective strategy to improve the learners' writing.

According to Ortega (2003), a learner's development in the acquired language depends on expanding their syntactic range. Similarly, (Larsen-Freeman 1978 and 2009; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998; Ortega 2003; Lu, 2011) and others noted in (Lu 2013) that syntactic development effectively evaluates learners' standards and writing proficiency in L2. Considering the phrase structure rules, phrasal sophistication is viewed as a need in writing; however, this feature at the university level of learning seems absent in the students writing. Ravid and Berman (2010) and Staples, Egbert, Biber and Gray (2016) advocated that phrasal features develop during university years in writing.

Some of the findings of the past studies are given below:

Putrayasa, Ramendra, and Aryana (2018) analysed sentence structures while compiling 120 compositions with three paragraphs from

Grade VI students. The Burton-Roberts Model was used to analyse the data. Out of the 1,036 sentences, only simple and compound sentences were examined. The following four sentence patterns were found in the study:

<SV> <SVC> <SVO> <SVA>

The case study by Sundari (2018) examines the level of proficiency in simple sentence structures among college students in their third semester. There are found to be five sentence patterns:

<S+V> <S+V+O> <S+V+C> <S+V+IO+DO> <S+V+O+C>

Demirezen (2012) researched a study of Turkish university students to examine the problematic structures of simple sentences. Simple sentences are the first type of writing that comes with learning the English language. The primary English sentence is short and has a subject and a verb. Any of these five combinations, for example:

<S + V> <S + V + O> <S + V + C> <S + V + IO + DO> <S + V + O + C>

## 1.2 Research Objective

The study aimed to identify syntactic factors that affect the essay-writing abilities of first-year undergraduates enrolled in the English-medium degree program at the University of Vavuniya.

### 1.2.1 Research Question

What syntactic factors affect the essay writing abilities of first-year undergraduates enrolled in the English-medium degree program at the University of Vavuniya?

## **2 MATERIALS, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES**

### **2.1 Research Context**

This study was conducted at a university where tertiary students are taught English as a second language (ESL) in various writing classes. The ESL program offers all undergraduate students a range of core subjects following their degree program. Additionally, depending on the academic years, these students may enrol in intermediate and advanced writing courses at various times, such as in first-year Level I and II and second-year Level II and III (based on the semester system). Writing sessions give students the tools they need to improve their command of the language, academic progress, fluency, and proficiency levels when exposed to fundamental academic writing genres like essays, summaries, letters, and reports.

### **2.2 Research Design**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study to analyse the data. Qualitative content and thematic analysis were conducted respectively to interpret the texts and semi-structured interviews. In addition, the quantitative descriptive statistical analysis method was also used to analyse the students' written texts, applying Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet Software.

This research paper offers a case study to answer the question. The case study evidence bears this out. This paper substantiates the varying issues and challenges the first-year students of Vavuniya University face in using syntactic structures and how they impact the skill of

writing a good standard essay. Therefore, exploring the issues and factors affecting their essay writing skills, searching for solutions or remedies to develop and improve their writing skill and training them to be better and more successful individuals in the academically challenged world is a must.

Furthermore, the Eight Key patterns of Quirk & GreenBaumn (1973) were adopted to categorise the students' sentence patterns. Further, the Transformational Generative Grammar Theory of Chomsky (1969), which captures a leading role in constructing novel sentence patterns, the relationship of how various elements and functions in a sentence and increasing syntactic variety in forming any number of sentences, has been incorporated in the study. A tree diagram also was applied to show the hierarchy of the constituents and the relationship. Radford (2004) stated, "Tree diagram is a way to represent syntactic structure and make a specific claim about how the sentence was structured.

**Table 1.** Key sentence pattern (Quirk & Green Baumn 1973)

Key Sentence pattern(Quirk & Green Baumn,1973 as cited in Subajana, 2022)	
1.< Subject + Verb>	SV
2.<Subject + Verb+ Complement>	SVC
3.<Subject + Verb+Adjunct>	SVA
4.<Subject + Verb+ Direct Object>	SVO
5.<Subject + Verb+IndirectObject+ Direct Object>	SVOO
6.<Subject + Verb+Complement +Adjunct>	SVCA
7.< Subject+ Verb+Object +Complement>	SVOC
8.< Subject+ Verb+Object+Adjunct>	SVOA

### 2.3 The Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population of the study was first-year undergraduates in information technology following the BSc degree program in English at the Faculty of Applied Sciences at the University of Vavuniya. The 10% of the population was selected, and the written texts collected from them comprised 150-160 sentences as the study sample. A sample size of at least 10% is necessary to achieve appropriate confidence (Alreck & Settle, 1985). A simple random sampling technique was used. The participants were multilingual and came from all three major ethnic groups. All the students studied English as a second language and have been following the Degree programme in English medium.

### 2.4 Data Collection Instruments

#### 2.4.1 The Written Texts

The essays were collected from the first-year Information Technology students on the summative assignment from their semester examination. The task was 15-20 minutes, writing, "It is impossible to return to life without technology". The handwritten scripts were transformed into MS Word for documentation and analysis. The sentences were read, categorised, and recorded using the Micro Soft Excel spreadsheet. The sentences were identified, and sentence structure variations were described based on the participants' sentence patterns in their essay writing. Most specifically, this evaluation primarily focused on how syntactic factors impact the essay writing skills of Learners of English as a Second Language.

#### 2.4.2 The Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview selected five out of ten students, applying a random sampling method. "The sample size of 5-25" (Kuzel 1992 as cited in Cresswell 2007 & Saunders 2012). The interview was recorded with the student's consent and then made as transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed, and meaningful patterns across the data were looked for in five themes. The sentence patterns were analysed by repetitive data reading, coding, and theme creation, a "framework of thematic ideas about it" (Gibbs 2007).

Before the interview, the nature of the interview questions was explained to the students. According to Wallace (1998), it helps students provide informative answers. Interviews were conducted in the target language and recorded with their consent. The participants were assisted when they needed help using their mother tongues, Sinhala/ Tamil.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this study is to investigate how syntactic elements affect students' essay writing, identify potential issues, and offer possible solutions. The line graphs below show the usage of the sentence patterns of first-year students at the University of Vavuniya.

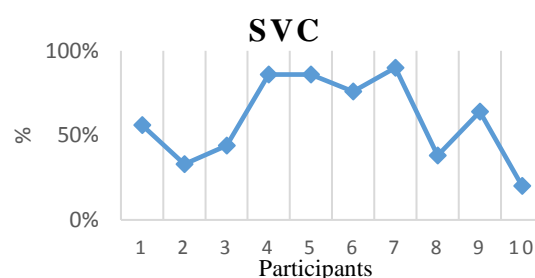
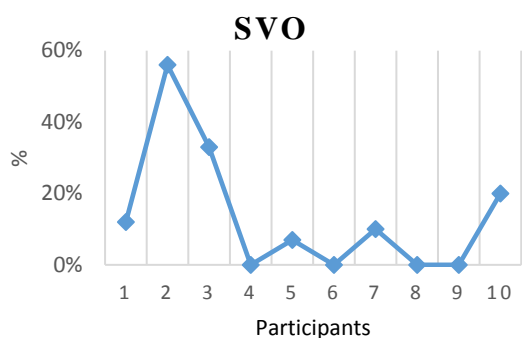
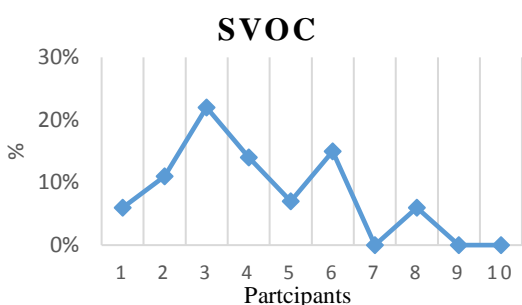


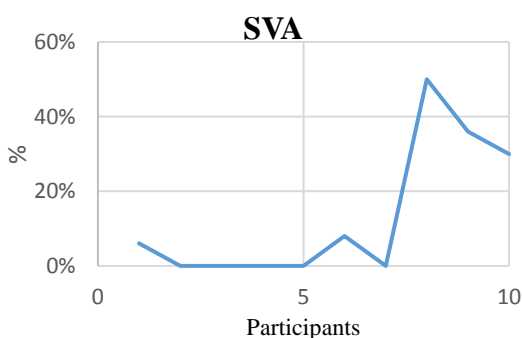
Figure 1. Students' performance in the SVC pattern



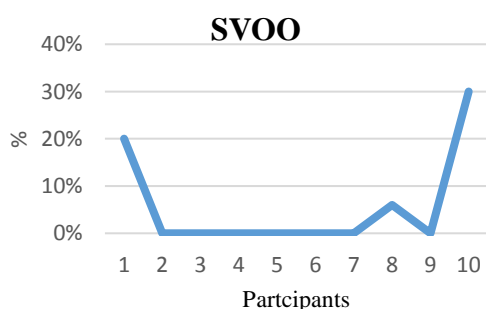
**Figure 2.**Students' performance in the SVO pattern



**Figure 3.** Students' performance in the SVOC pattern



**Figure 4.** Students' performance in the SVA pattern



**Figure 5.**Students' performance in the SVOO pattern

Figures 1-5 indicate the students' performance in producing sentence patterns in essay writing. Figure 1 elaborates that most of the students

have produced SVC patterns. This result shows that five out of ten students' performance score in SVC pattern usage is higher than 50%. Therefore, these students have acquired SVC better than the other patterns. However, the SVC pattern is fundamental; sometimes, this construction cannot convey the anticipated information. For example:

- a) *Technology helps* (SV)
- b) *Technology helps reduce mental stress* (SVO<sub>d</sub>)
- c) *Technology helps us reduce mental stress* (SVO<sub>i</sub>O<sub>d</sub>)

An indirect object informs the readers of the person or thing for whom an action is performed. Therefore, the students must construct a longer sentence to comprehend such ideas. In the above sample sentence, (c) *Technology helps us reduce mental stress*; the subject is *technology*, *helps* is the verb, the direct object reduces *mental stress*, and the indirect object is *us*.

- *Technology helps whom? Us because it reduces mental stress*

Further, SVOO sentences can be transformed into SVOA clauses by substituting a prepositional phrase for the indirect object with a change of order. This ends up in a new pattern of sentence formation. (Green Baum & Quirk, 1973).

*An example from the student's writing:*

- (d) *Technology helps us reduce mental stress* (SVO<sub>i</sub>O<sub>d</sub>)
- (e) *Technology helps reduce mental stress for us* (SVOC)

As discussed above, students with structural knowledge can construct any form of a sentence showing diversity.

According to Chomsky's theory, a sentence can be extended to any length to express a sophisticated idea.

a) *In the modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology found on the internet helps us reduce the mental stress of the people working in the IT field.*

b) *Technology, in the modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, found on the internet helps us reduce the mental stress of the people working in the IT field.*

c) *The technology found on the internet helps us reduce the mental stress of the people working in the IT field in the modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,*

*In the modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a vocative is a nominal element added to a sentence or clause optionally denoting extra information related to the main sentence, signalling the fact that it is addressed about them. The above three sentences show how a vocative may take an initial, medial and final position in the sentence. One obvious function of a vocative in writing is to seek attention and function as an adverb.*

Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that 10% of the students only produced the SVO pattern. Sundari (2013) reports that the students who developed the sentence pattern failed to form SVOC. The finding aligns with the present study. According to Figure 4, one student

performed better than the others in producing the SVA pattern. The same results are observed in Figure 5. The distribution of descriptive statistic values has proved these results in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the students' usage of sentence patterns. Again, the results show that the mean score for the SVC pattern is 59.3%, and the lowest and highest performance scores are 20% and 90%. Further, the result indicates that the students lack mastery in using the other patterns, specifically SVOO. The sentences were collected and sorted based on the 7-8 key patterns Green Baum & Quirk (1973) of simple sentences in Table 1.

**Table 2.** Distribution of statistics values

Students	Sentence Patterns usage (%)				
	SVC	SVO	SVOC	SVA	SVOO
S1	56%	12%	6%	6%	20%
S2	33%	56%	11%	0%	0%
S3	44%	33%	22%	0%	0%
S4	86%	0%	14%	0%	0%
S5	86%	7%	7%	0%	0%
S6	76%	0%	15%	8%	0%
S7	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%
S8	38%	0%	6%	50%	6%
S9	64%	0%	0%	36%	0%
S10	20%	20%	0%	30%	30%
Descriptive Statistics Values					
Mean	59.3%	13.8%	8.1%	13.2%	5.6%
Median	60%	8.5%	6.5%	3%	0%



**Table 3.** Some of the sentences used by the students in the essay

	Sentences	Sentence structure	Sentence pattern
S1	1. Reasons may differ, but people are using smartphones because they are available at different prices, which could be affordable for many people.	<Subject +Linking verb+ Complement> +Conj.< subject+Trans. Verb+ object> Conj. Subject +Linking verb Complement> Relative Clause.subject+Auxiliary Verb+ complement>	<SVC +SVO+SVC>
	2. One person has to use Technology with or without willingness in today's world.	<Subject +Trans. Verb+Object+Adjunct>	<SVOA>
S2	1. Now, the world is in our hands.	1.<Adverb+ Subject+ Linking Verb+Complement >	<SVC>
	2. We can retrieve any news at anytime, anywhere.	2.<Subject+ Transitive Verb+Direct object + Adjunct: Prepositional phrase>	<SVO>
	3. Technology saves our time		
S3	We are living in this 21 <sup>st</sup> century	1. <Subject +Linking Verb+Adjunct >	<SVA>
	In this 21 <sup>st</sup> century, Technology has become a high place.	2.<Adjunct+Subject+Linking Verb+Complement>	<ASVC>
S4	1. This is a modern world.	1.<Subject+Linking Verb+ complement>	<SVC>
	2. Sadly, there is a big problem in the world now.	2.<Adverb+ Dummy Subject+ Linking Verb+ Complement+Adjunct>	<SVCA>
S5	1. Mobile phones replace the clock, calculator, compass, letters and more on	Subject+ Verb+ Object	<SVO>
	2. Technology is the thing that has all in one	Subject+ Verb+ Complement	<SVC>

Considering Table 3, S1 has attempted merging the sentences using conjunctions (but, because) and relative clauses (- which) compared to other students who have only written simple sentences. Further, though S1's sentence shows the SVC pattern, it somewhat shows structural complexity. S2's sentences like "Now the world is in our hands" and "Technology saves our time" contain one idea. S2 could have combined these two sentences (1) Now the world is in our hands, (2) We can retrieve any news at anytime, anywhere as one. Now the world is in our hands, and we can retrieve any news anytime, anywhere. Students S3 and S4 showed some range of structural development, such as In this 21st century (a noun phrase), and sadly function as adjuncts to give additional information. The Examples above show the high level of

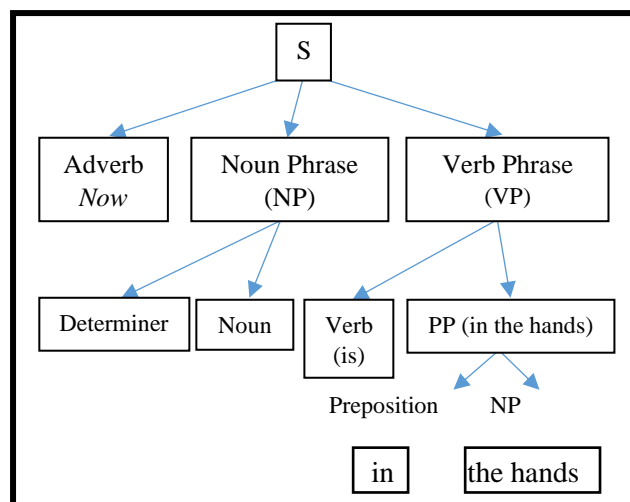
proficiency of student S1 in constructing complex sentences using complex grammar tenses correctly. Thus, this evidence supports the prior prediction that S1 student demonstrates better ability in writing.

The above sentences show that the < SVC> pattern is the most frequent one than <SVO> and <SVCA>. Lintunen & Mäkilä (2014) support the current study with their findings that sentence pattern is one of the measurement scales used to test the students' syntactic complexity and proficiency. At the tertiary level, students are expected to express their advanced, creative ideas and critical thoughts using sophisticated structures rather than simple, choppy sentences. The current study is strengthened by Solikhah's (2017) assertion that

the most effective method for raising essay quality is to use a variety of sentences. Similarly, Oshima & Hogue (2006), cited in Chang (2010), stressed that writing complex sentences could improve writing because it marks a mature writing style. Considering the students' sentences, they failed to construct and add a variety of phrases or dependent clauses to the main clause already built.

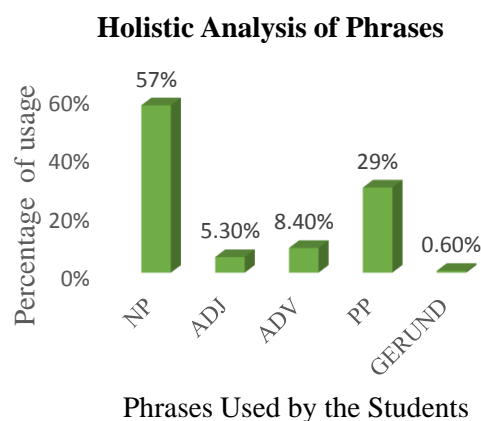
The Transformational Generative Grammar Theory (TGG) theory captures a leading role in constructing novel sentence patterns and increasing syntactic variety. The TGG shows the relationship of how various elements in a sentence are interconnected. The possible sentences in the English language and processes or rules are called transformations of sentences. The knowledge of TGG allows a learner to formulate and authenticate the written text. It also promotes the consciousness of syntactic structures and independent learning because the learners learn new structures, sentence patterns, and types by practising.

The tree diagram Chomsky (1969) shows the hierarchy of the syntactic structures and the forms of constituents and functions. The relations between the constituents are the connections within the nodes that form the hierarchical levels of complexity (Chomsky 1957, cited in Jagaiah, 2017). For instance, Sentence 1: *Now, the world is in our hands*



**Figure 6.** Tree structure diagram

The bar chart below shows the performances of the phrases used in their essay writing by the first-year students.

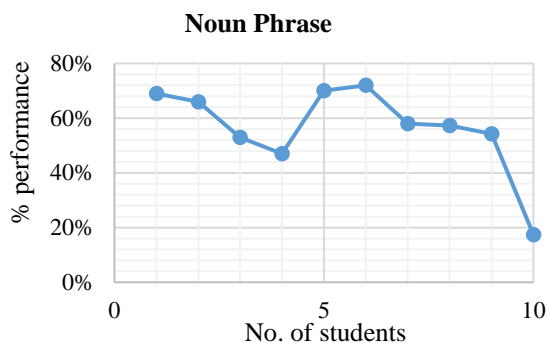


**Figure 7.** Holistic analysis of phrases

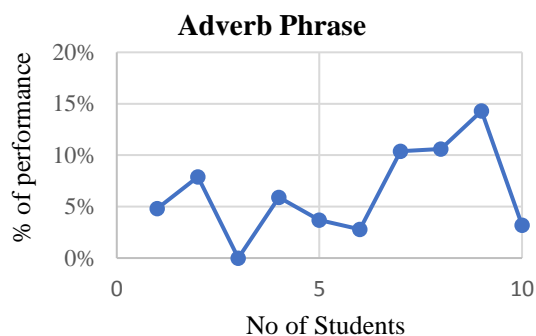
Figure 7 indicates that students have dominantly used noun phrases (57%) and prepositional phrases (29%) only; the phrases like adjectival (5.3%), adverbial (8.4%), and gerund (0.6%) have been attempted the least and to- infinitive phrase also has not been tried by the students in the essay writing.

This situation indicates that students are weak in producing a range of structural variations using different phrases, so producing high-quality text

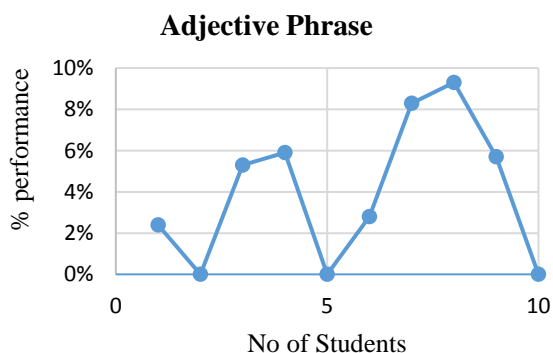
at the tertiary level becomes challenging. Gnevsheva and Perera (2021) affirm that phrasal complexity better predicts writing proficiency, aligning with the present study. Further, Figure 8-12 shows each student's usage of the phrases.



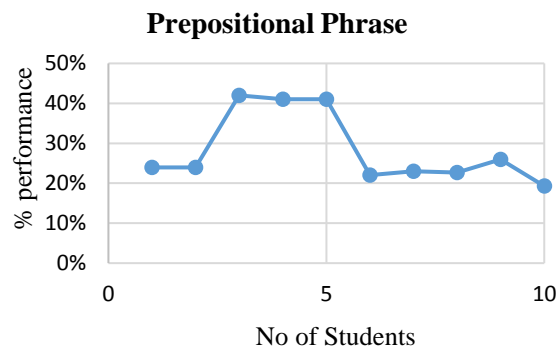
**Figure 8.** Noun phrase used by the students



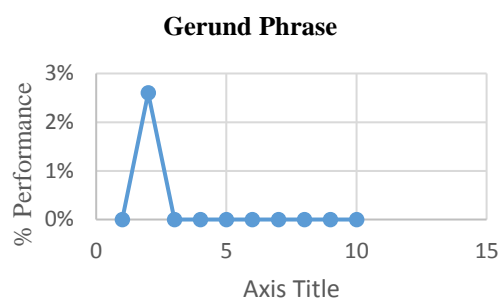
**Figure 9.** Adverb phrases used by the students



**Figure 10.** Adjective phrases used by the students



**Figure 11.** Prepositional phrases used by the students



**Figure 12.** Gerunds used by the students

Table 3 illustrates the students' performance using phrases in essay writing. The results show that the mean score for the noun phrase is 55%, and the lowest and highest performance scores are 17.4% and 72%. In the second rank, the prepositional phrase, with a mean value of 29%, the performance ranges from 19.3% to 42%. The mean of the gerund phrase usage is 0%, indicating the lowest usage of all the students' attempted phrases.

Discussions of broad concepts are common in academic writing. Often, actions serve as the foundation for these ideas. However, using actions as subjects or objects requires writers to use gerunds or infinitives, which the students in the current study have not satisfactorily

attempted. They are verb tenses that can serve as both subjects and objects.

The findings depict the weaker range of phrases in their essay writing at the tertiary level. Ortega (2003) attributes syntactic complexity as the range of forms that surface in language production and the degree of sophistication of such forms.

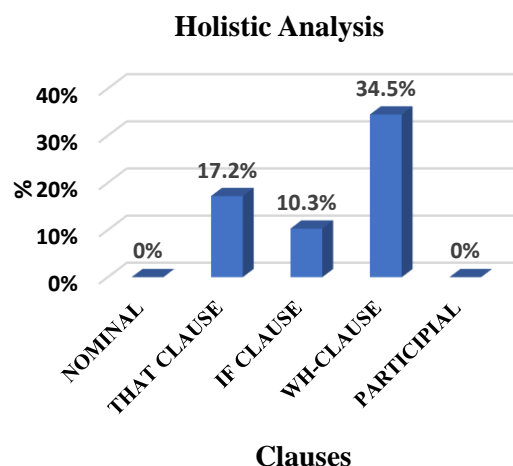
Students have used only a few collective nouns like military, people and government; however, it is observed that subject-verb disagreement is a frequent error when using collective nouns. It can be challenging for writers to decide whether to use the singular or plural form of a collective noun.

Though students showed some phrasal variety, there is no complexity within each pattern or variety except in one or two students' essays. For example, though Noun Phrases and Prepositional Phrases are dominantly used, these two structures do not show complexity, such as embedding the same patterns within one pattern: PP having two or three PPs within or NP having two or three NPs within. So, in complexity, there is no dynamic recursivity within the pattern: PP having two or three different patterns, such as NP+PP+PP or NP having two or three different patterns, such as NP+PP+NP. The investigation into the complexity of phrases in pre-post-modification showed that complex noun phrases found in the students' corpus feature are of a low degree.

The bar charts below show first-year students' usage of clauses in their essay writing.

**Table 4.** Distribution of statistical values for phrases used by the students

Students	Phrase Usage				
	Noun phrase	Prepositional phrase	Adjective phrase	Adverbial Phrase	Gerund phrase
S1	69%	24%	2.4%	4.8%	0%
S2	66%	24%	0%	7.9%	2.6%
S3	53%	42%	5.3%	0%	0%
S4	47%	41%	5.9%	5.9%	0%
S5	70%	41%	0%	3.7%	0%
S6	72%	22%	2.8%	2.8%	0%
S7	58%	23%	8.3%	10.4%	0%
S8	57.3%	22.7%	9.3%	10.6%	6%
S9	54.2%	26%	5.7%	14.3%	0%
S10	17.4%	19.3%	0%	3.2%	0%
Descriptive Statistics Values					
Mean	55%	29%	6%	4%	0%
Median	58%	24%	5%	4%	0%



**Figure 13.** Holistic analysis of clauses used by students

Figure 13 shows that students used That-clause (17.2%), If-clause (10.3%) and Wh-clause (34.5%) as dominant varieties. However, nominal clauses and participial clauses are not used at all. Participle clauses allow for more concise communication of information. Participial clauses are acquired later than attributive adjectives and participial pre-

modifiers are considered separate features. Moreover, the clause types varieties dominantly used do not show complexity, such as the embedding of the same clause or phrase patterns within one clause pattern: That-clause having two or three clause or phrase patterns within such as That-clause having That-clause and Wh-clause within or That-clause having Noun Phrases and Prepositional Phrases or Adjectival Phrases and Adverbial Phrases embeddedness. Despite no statistically significant use of them in writing, using that + noun complement clauses is also noteworthy.

The figures below show each of the clauses used by the students.

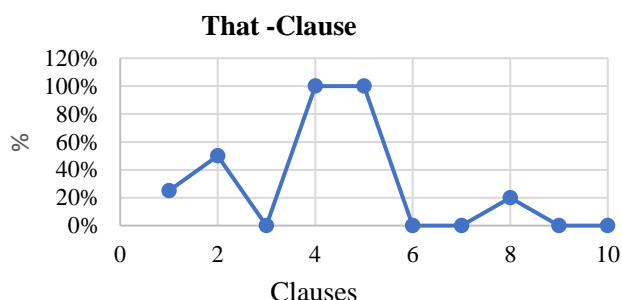


Figure 14. That-Clause used by the students

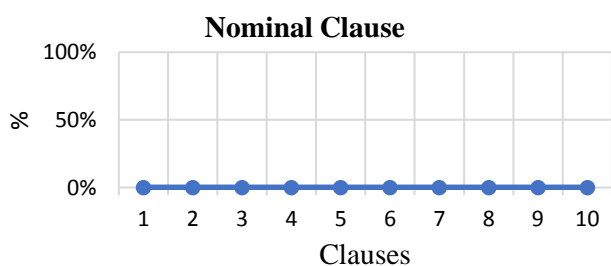


Figure 15. Nominal Clause used by the students



Figure 16. If-Clause used by the students

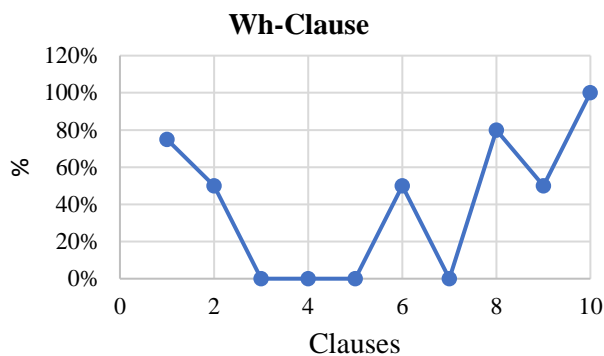


Figure 17. Wh-Clause used by the students

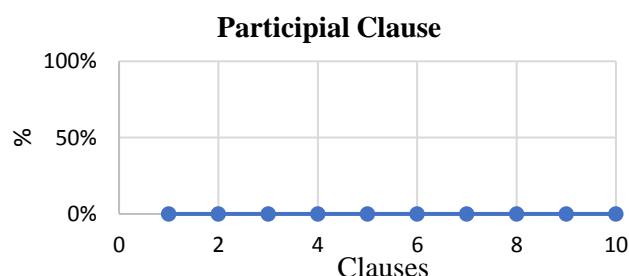


Figure 18. Participial - Clause used by the students

Table 5. Distribution of statistical values for clauses used by the students

Students	Clause Usage (%)				
	Nominal clause	That-clause	If-clause	Wh-clause	Participial clause
S1	0%	25%	0%	75%	0%
S2	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%
S3	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
S4	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
S5	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
S6	0%	0%	50%	50%	0%
S7	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
S8	0%	20%	0%	80%	6%
S9	0%	0%	50%	50%	0%
S10	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%

Descriptive Statistics Values					
Mean	0%	30%	20%	41%	0%
Median	0%	10%	0%	50%	0%

The distribution of Mean values indicates that nominal and participial clauses are in the zero (0%) percentage as none of the students has used the clauses. The students' performance shows the restricted usage of clauses in essay

writing. The Transformational Generative Grammar Theory highlights that based on the grammatical premise, the writer or speaker can keep constructing and adding subordinate or dependent clauses on an independent or main clause already built. However, the findings regurgitate that most students' performance deviates from the theory.

Embedding is an integral part of academic writing in a sentence. Subordinate clauses embedded in the main clause amplify a sentence's meaning. Embedded clauses surround the main clause of a sentence. Unlike main clauses, they are incomprehensible as stand-alone sentences. Nominal clauses are not seen in any of the sentences in the essay writing, and most importantly, less functional applications of phrases and clauses were observed. In other words, the student's essay writing was not sophisticated enough to meet the optimum level.

### 3.1 Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

The participants were interviewed to find their attitudes and opinions toward syntactic structures and sentence patterns, in addition to corpus-based analysis, to gauge how well they practice them.

\*Using Grammarly software, Students' comments (sentences) were revised slightly without affecting the sentence pattern.

#### Theme 1: Interest in writing essays in English

Three students declared they would not be interested in writing essays if they were unaware of the topics. Two students said they would be interested in writing the essays and

be comfortable with the topic if they had previous knowledge of the content. The student's comments are given below.

- *"I would not say I like writing essays if I do not know the topics/ do not understand / or am familiar with the title"*.
- *"I am interested in writing essays"*.

#### Theme 2: Memorising and reproducing essays

Three students declared they memorised, wrote the essays, and obtained good marks. On the other hand, two students said they wrote spontaneously on the spot.

- *"I memorise the essays and write and have no reading habit"*.
- *"I do not memorise nowadays, and I write spontaneously"*.
- *"My marks for the essay at school were good, but I memorised and did well"*.

#### Theme 3: Students' unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge

Three students said they did not know or even heard of sentence patterns. Further, they revealed that they were comfortable in simple sentences and avoided the trouble of trying other types of sentences, such as compound, complex and compound-complex. One student said he/she had heard teachers telling, but limited sentence patterns but could not remember. Another one said he/she did not know the sentence pattern but wrote randomly without realisation. Further, they declared that they wrote sentences and did not know which sentence fell into which category.

- *“Knowing different sentence patterns allows me to express advanced ideas in essay writing”.*
- *“I focus on simple sentences because my vocabulary is poor. I do not write compound and complex sentences somehow, and I try to write essays, though I feel much more manageable in simple sentences”.*
- *“I studied in English medium and knew <SV, SVC, and SVO> but did not know these are sentence patterns”.*

Theme 4: Challenges students face in writing sentences in essays in English

Four of them wanted to pass the English course to obtain the degree. Further, they said that their perspective towards English subjects is the exam point of view and did not bother with the structural elements or any other related components to improve the structure of the language. Also, they were not taught such structural practices at schools.

- *“I learned English to pass the exam”*
- *“I have no time to learn English”*
- *“When I write compound and complex sentences, I fear facing structural problems”.*

Theme 5: Performance in the G.C.E. (O/L) and G.C.E. (A/L)

Five students revealed their GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) English results below.

**Table 6.**GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) English Results

Student (S)	GCE (O/L)	GCE (A/L)
S1	B	B
S2	C	C
S3	A	C
S4	A	B
S5	A	B

Though the students' performances in the GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) were good when the participants were interviewed, they declared their inability to construct sentence patterns, sentence types, phrases and clauses, and some said they had never heard of them. However, students' overall performance in writing is weak, and they score marks in objective questions like multiple-choice matching, completion, and true or false.

**4 CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS**

The present study findings reveal how syntactic factors impact English as a Second Language learners' essay writing skills. The results indicate that the students show ineffectiveness and limitations in applying a variety of sentence patterns in essay writing. The dominant and overused sentence patterns they used are <SVC> <SVO>. The underused patterns are <SVOO>, SVCA, SVA and SVOC. There are "eight key sentence patterns" to apply a broader range of sentences in the English language (Quirk & Greenbaum, 2008). Learning and acquiring a variety of sentence patterns is essential in higher education. The following studies have corroborated this claim.

Christianto (2018) illustrates that understanding sentence patterns is vital to identifying the structure of each type of sentence. Further, Fitri (2017) states that sentence patterns are formulas used by grammarians to illustrate the design of basic English sentences.

The key sentence pattern <SVC> comprises two extended patterns, and they are basic-level formations where students can only form simple sentences. According to Saun (2014), the sentence pattern approach to learning keeps ESL students motivated without using monotonous sentences. As a result of the students' low level of using sentence patterns, they are comfortable producing simple sentences, lack confidence, and feel insecure about attempting compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Abdulla (2014) reports that most students preferred to use simple and compound sentences, which were easier to create and had fewer chances of committing errors.

Students writing simple sentences at the preliminary stage is good and a requirement at the introductory level. However, Oshima and Hogue (2007) added that choppy sentences are non-standard. However, in higher education, students are expected to increase the structural variation and sophistication in academic writing as advanced learners. Therefore, "the sentence pattern method is one of the practical writing instructions" (Koh, 2021).

In analysing the syntactic complexity at the phrase and clause level, the students mainly applied noun and prepositional phrases, more

manageable forms, where they were embedded in each other and overlapped. However, the underused and never-used phrases in the essay are adjective, adverb and gerund phrases, and at the clause level, the overused ones are that-clause (17.2%) and wh-clause (34.5%). In contrast, the rest of the dependent clauses, like nominal clause, adjectival and adverbial clause, and participial clause, were not attempted at the tertiary level summative assignment of essay writing, which is not a positive sign in the higher education scenario as the medium of instruction is in English.

Less functional implications of phrases and clauses were observed. Many students placed single nouns in the subject, object and complement positions, some used simplified phrases, and a few showed limited complexity in the positions and nominal clauses in the subject position. The nominal usage gives more specifics than simple nouns Junaid (2018). Writing more authoritative and influential requires diverse applications of complex sentences, participial phrases, and subordination clauses. Complexity at the nominal position is an advanced form of writing expected in high-quality texts in academic and professional settings.

Finally, the following factors also influenced the structural limitations in their essay writing. They are (1) disinterested in writing essays at the tertiary level, (2) habit of memorising and reproducing essays, (3) students are unaware and lack knowledge of sentence patterns, (4) participants' perspective of learning the English Language, (5) performance in the GCE (O/L)



and GCE (A/L) do not help obtain the command in challenging structural application. The participants' responses indicate they encounter the following challenges: fear of writing/attempting compound and complex sentences as they face grammatical problems, Mother Tongue interference in writing, no time to practice writing, and no knowledge of identifying the sentence pattern.

These insights will enable teachers to understand what needs to be done to enhance students' academic writing abilities, fill the gap, and raise the level of syntactic complexity in writing.

Finally, the study concludes that the syntactic factors, such as diversity of sentence types, variety of sentence patterns, syntactic structures, structural embeddedness, disinterest towards writing and practising structural components in essays, and lack of focus on phrases and clauses, impact first-year undergraduates' essay writing skills. Chokwe (2013) states that several factors contribute to poor academic writing skills among first-year university students.

This study will raise awareness among students, highlight the importance of learning structures, and motivate them to overcome their writing problems by following the proposed strategies. The study recommends implementing an innovative alternative for ESL learners: Introducing a variety of sentence pattern approaches and embedded structures and modifiers to increase the complexity of teaching and learning sentences in writing

essays. In addition, teachers of English and students work together and find all possible means that can facilitate the students to enrich their knowledge for better writing. Ogalo (2011) reports that teaching techniques enhance integration and improve English language skills. It might also inspire and motivate ESL students to write paragraphs, essays, and advanced writing in English at the tertiary level. Therefore, early detection and reflection on taking drastic remedial measures in developing and improving writing prepare the students to face the future confidently in the academic and professional progressive path. "Students of any higher education institution need to be highly competent at writing for an academic audience" (Abdullah, 2014, p.1).

There are also some restrictions on this study; the study's findings may not be as generalisable as they could be due to the dataset's small size.

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#### Appendix

##### Annexure -1

1. SVC-Subject + Verb+Complement
2. SVO- Subject+Verb+ Object

3. SVOC- Subject + Verb + Object + Complement
4. SVA-Subject + Verb + Adjunct
5. SVOO – Subject + Verb + In Direct Object + Direct Object
6. Chomsky (1969) explains that Transformational Generative Grammar theory is based on syntax and syntactic structure within Universal Grammar, especially in Structural and Applied Linguistics. This theory is based on the grammatical premise that the writer or speaker can keep constructing and adding subordinate or dependent clauses on an independent or main clause already constructed.
7. In syntactic analysis, a constituent is a word or a group of words functioning as a single unit within a hierarchical structure.
8. Functional application- forms and functions are linked together. For instance: A noun phrase can function as a subject (The man in the corner seat is my friend), object (My mother bought a saree in the town), NP- a saree. The prepositional phrase (PP) is in the town. Here the NP of the town is embedded in the PP. Even NP can function as a complement, e.g. My friend is a wonderful person).in sentence construction, rather than using one word in the subject, object, or complement position, students to be trained to use phrases at the fundamental level they will continue them to use syntactic structures effortlessly in due course of time.
9. \*Using Grammarly software, Students' comments (sentences) were revised slightly without affecting the pattern.