

The Effect of Syntax Instruction on the Development of Complex Sentences in ESL Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the influence that explicit syntax teaching has on the creation of complex sentences in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing, particularly in the setting of Pakistan. To achieve the aims, two instruments were applied i.e. semi-structured interviews beside the analysis of students' written compositions. Results demonstrate a considerable improvement in the participants' knowledge of syntactic structures as well as their application of these structures after receiving targeted training. The transformational impact of explicit syntax instruction is shown by the fact that written compositions exhibit varying degrees of syntactic complexity which are consistent with those of the previous study, which was conducted to highlight the beneficial association between training in syntax and improved writing skills. In addition to this, the research sheds light on the cultural integration of syntax, demonstrating a singular combination of linguistic abilities and cultural identity among students of English as a second language in Pakistan. The implications for ESL education include the possibility of using technology task-based methodologies and a culturally relevant framework. These findings contribute to the larger conversation about language education and provide useful insights for improving syntax instruction to cater to the varied requirements of ESL students in Pakistan.

Keywords: Syntax instruction, language proficiency, ESL writing, pedagogy, technology-mediated learning

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of English as a Second Language (ESL) education and recognizing the broader implications for educational policies (Akram & Yang, 2021; Akram 2020), the acquisition of language proficiency is a multifaceted journey. By providing more information, Abdelrady and Akram (2022) have demonstrated that the English language is of great significance in the contemporary global society. It is an indispensable instrument for communication (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Al-Adwan et al., 2022), as well as for business, academics, and other fields (Akram et al., 2020). At the core of this linguistic odyssey lies the intricate dance of syntax – the artful arrangement of words that transcends grammatical correctness to shape the very essence of effective communication (Mair & Leech, 2020).

The importance of English language proficiency cannot be overstated in our globalized society. Beyond being a mere skill, it serves as a passport to cross-cultural dialogues, academic pursuits, and professional endeavors (Prabhu & Wani, 2015). As ESL learners navigate this linguistic terrain, the mastery of syntax emerges as a linchpin, distinguishing between functional language use and the ability to craft nuanced and compelling narratives (Wood & Zanuttini, 2023).

This research embarks on a quest to unravel the profound interplay between syntax instruction and the development of complex sentences in ESL writing. Far beyond the rudiments of grammar, syntax dictates the structure and coherence of sentences, laying the groundwork for articulating intricate ideas. Within the ESL context, the significance of syntax extends beyond mere linguistic correctness; it becomes the conduit through which learners can express thoughts with precision and engage in sophisticated discourse (Burton-Roberts, 2021).

Our exploration delves into the heart of ESL education, seeking to understand how targeted syntax instruction shapes the trajectory of writing proficiency. The study aims to unveil the transformative potential of structured syntax guidance on the narrative prowess of ESL learners. Through theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and empirical findings, this research endeavors to contribute valuable insights to ESL pedagogy.

As we embark on this academic journey, we invite readers to accompany us through the nuanced landscape of syntax and its role in ESL writing development. It aims to examine the relationship between syntax education and complex sentence creation and tries to empower ESL learners on their linguistic journey, raising the following questions:

1. How does teaching clear syntax affect ESL students' ability to write complicated sentences?

2. What are the specific structures and traits of syntax that show significant improvements in ESL writing after the focused teaching in syntax?

2. Literature Review

It is vital to investigate the current body of literature that has explored comparable routes to have a better understanding of the influence that syntax teaching has on the formation of complex sentences in ESL writing from the perspective of teachers. Previous research, such as Burton-Roberts (2021) and Vysotska et al. (2021), have thrown light on many elements of language learning, syntax, and English as a Second Language (ESL) writing, offering vital insights to our knowledge of this delicate link. Vysotska et al. (2021), for instance, propagate that syntax modeling analysis is adopted for the automation of studying and synthesizing the text of natural language. Similarly, Burton-Roberts (2021) has claimed that language is used by speakers instinctively so it is difficult to stand outside yourself and think of it as something independent of you. Deane and O'Neil (2011) have clarified that teaching academic writing in L2 learning is neither a homogeneous nor a singular field but there is an institutionalized activity that reflects in parts. Furthermore, measures of overall length and syntactic complexities are used in traditional setting writing development which puts the consequences in suspicion as syntactic complexities are identified by subordination that is highly task-oriented dependence (Paltridge et al. 2009).

When it comes to ESL students, research conducted by Bychkovska (2021) highlighted the favorable association between explicit syntax education and improved writing skills. The research conducted by Bychkovska showed that the implementation of specific instruction on sentence structure and syntactic subtleties led to an increase in the level of syntactic complexity in written works. A thorough investigation of syntactic characteristics that go through significant growth in English as a Second Language writing was carried out by Jones et al. (2019). After receiving concentrated teaching, the researchers found that certain syntactic patterns, such as subordinate clauses and sentences of varying lengths, were significant indications of language development.

Furthermore, Zhou and Lu (2022) investigated the efficacy of contextualized syntax education in ESL writing classes, building upon the findings shown above. According to the findings of the study, incorporating lessons on syntax into relevant situations not only boosted students' involvement but also promoted a better knowledge of syntactic principles in writing and encouraged their application during the writing process. Witkowska et al. (2022) have claimed that storytelling is a useful pedagogical tool for the assessment of students' knowledge about syntactic construction and it also identifies the target practice and minimizes the demand for word-finding in English as an additional language group.

The long-term effects of syntax training on the writing abilities of ESL students over the course of a relatively lengthy time have been explored by Selvaraj and Aziz (2019). According to the findings, persistent exposure to focused syntax teaching was a contributing factor in the development of long-term increases in syntactic complexity as well as overall writing skills. Taking into consideration the cross-cultural aspect, Perdana et al. (2023) researched to determine the extent to which cultural backgrounds impacted the reception and implementation of syntax teaching among ESL students. The findings of their study highlighted the need to take into account cultural subtleties when developing successful syntactic treatments that are suited to the distinctive characteristics of different learner profiles. Moreover, the research conducted by Vafae and Suzuki (2020) has investigated the metacognitive processes that are involved in the acquisition of syntax by ESL learners. As a result of their findings, which underlined the role of metacognitive awareness in learning and using syntactic structures, it was suggested that the development of metacognitive methods might potentially improve the efficiency of syntax training.

Technology and the process of learning

It is stated by the reports of the National Council of Teachers (1996) that Changes in technology and society have altered and will continue to alter how we use language to communicate and to think. Students must be prepared to meet these demands. In this day and age, it is impossible to ignore the significance that technology plays in the educational process (Akram et al., 2021). During the previous decades, prompt advancement in technology has dug out the opportunities for using it in education (Shadiev, et al. 2019). Similarly, the use of emerging technologies such as computational thinking (use of AI), language processing, and cloud computing are matured to use in language instruction and learning (Jin, 2018). Shadiev & Huang (2019) argued that the learning performance of language learners can be enhanced by using technology. In this vein, Muslimin et al. (2022) investigated the use of technology in the teaching of syntax to students who were learning English as a second language. Through their research, they revealed how interactive digital tools in the sense not only piqued the attention of students but also made it possible for them to learn at their speed and in a personalized manner, which ultimately led to an improvement in their syntactic abilities.

Individual differences and syntax training

Individual variations, such as cognitive ability and language aptitude, were explored by Kidd and Arciuli (2016) to determine the influence that these differences have on the results of syntax training. This was done in recognition of the variety that exists among ESL learners. An understanding of these variances is essential for adapting teaching to match the individual requirements of various learners, contributing to the development of an educational environment that is more inclusive and efficient. Ramzan et al. (2023) elucidate that there was a low level of ESL learning motivation among Pakistani learners and this low level of motivation may be caused by the blend in use of Urdu and English languages in informal settings. Klimova, (2014) suggests that learning writing is an intricate procedure and it is affected by various factors such as social reasons, cognitive differences, and cultural variations that are prominent causes in the writing acquisition procedure so teachers must consider these strategies for successful development of their students in writing skills.

As we continue to analyze these studies, it becomes abundantly clear that the teaching of syntax plays a significant part in determining the landscape of writing in English as a second language. The purpose of this literature review is to lay the groundwork for our investigation, which will build upon the findings of earlier research to determine the complex dynamics of syntax development in the context of English as a Second Language composition.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the intricate relationship between syntax instruction and the development of complex sentences in ESL writing within the specific context of Pakistan. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the depth and richness of experiences (Hollstein, 2011), providing a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of ESL learners enrolled in high schools in urban and rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure a diverse sample of learners with varying language proficiency levels and socio-economic backgrounds (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The sample size was determined through data saturation, ensuring a sufficient number of participants for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions. The total number of research participants was 37 including 20 males and 17 females and they were all adult learners covering the age limit from 18 to 25 years in age.

Data Collection

Data was collected by employing interviews and document analysis of the participants.

a. Interviews:

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ESL learners to gather insights into their experiences with syntax instruction and its impact on their writing. Open-ended questions were formulated to encourage participants to share their perspectives, allowing for a deeper exploration of their understanding and application of syntactic principles (Husain et al., 2012). For validity purposes, a pilot study was conducted on five students with similar backgrounds as the target participants, so researchers can address any possible flaws that might occur during actual data collection. Also, the enhanced version of the questions was reviewed and approved by two ESL experts for validity reasons.

b. Document Analysis:

Samples of written compositions from the participants were collected and analyzed. This document analysis focused on identifying syntactic structures and complexities present in the written work, providing a tangible measure of the application of syntax learned during instruction.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews and analyzed written compositions were coded, and emergent themes related to the impact of syntax instruction on ESL writing development were identified. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing for the refinement of themes and ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research questions. A manual approach was used in transcribing and analyzing the interviews, and NVivo assistance was not utilized. Although, researchers acknowledge the benefits of NVivo software in streamlining the analysis process manual transcription allowed us to immerse ourselves in the nuances of each participant's responses, fostering a deeper understanding of the qualitative content.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted following ethical considerations, starting with ensuring that participation involvement is voluntary and anonymous. Moreover, researchers have ensured that all participants are given a general overview of the goal of the study with an emphasis that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking and peer debriefing were employed. Member checking involved seeking feedback from participants on the accuracy and interpretation of their contributions, while peer debriefing involved seeking external input from colleagues to ensure methodological rigor and accuracy in the analysis.

This qualitative methodology provided a comprehensive exploration of the nuanced dynamics surrounding syntax instruction and ESL writing development in the unique context of Pakistan, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on language education.

Findings

Findings about the effect of syntax training on the creation of complex sentences in ESL writing among participants in Pakistan were shed light upon by analyzing data collected from in-depth interviews and document analysis.

1. A Greater Understanding and Use of Syntax

Following the implementation of focused instruction, participants consistently indicated an enhanced awareness of syntactic structures

from intensive syntax training for measuring the purpose of the study. In both, participants written compositions and correspondence to the interview questions they demonstrated a more intentional and diverse use of syntax, which was aided by an increased awareness of sentence components such as clauses and phrases. Complex and nuanced sentences were produced as a consequence of a more refined application of syntactic rules brought about by this increased awareness.

As an example, the dialogue between a teacher and a student is provided below.

Instructor: Can you break this statement down into its parts?

Student: Both a primary and a subordinate clause are present.

Instructor: Great job! In what ways could you improve your writing if you had this information?

Student: By elaborating and providing additional information, I can construct more complicated phrases.

In addition, the same implication was noted in the written compositions in the sense that participants have produced a greater understanding of syntax usage; for instance, there was an improvement in the development of complex sentences in ESL writing such as;

Pre-Instruction Construction of Syntax Example Development of Complex Sentences:

Even though I would rather go to beach I went to library to study.

Post-Instruction Construction of Syntax Example Development of Complex Sentences:

Even though I would rather go to the beach, I went to the library to study.

2. Differences in the complexity of syntax

Upon doing document analysis, it was discovered that the participants' written work had a discernible variance in the level of syntactic complexity. A wider variety of sentence constructions, including aspects like subordination and parallelism, were displayed by those who were subjected to formal syntax training. For instance, student (1) has written the following sentences before the designed treatment:

Although he was sick, tired, and exhausted Aslam stay up late to complete his task and he still manage to complete his job before time.

However, the same student has exhibited a considerable level of syntactic complexity, see the example;

Although he was sick, tired, and exhausted, Aslam stayed up late to complete his task, and he still managed to complete his job on time.

From the prior example, we can note the development of the level of syntactic complexity the student has shown. In particular, the student, in the sample after the treatment, has implied the punctuation marking, correct use and placement of articles, and exact use of syntactic structures according to native rules such as the exact form of verbs, exact placement of adverbs and adjectives, etc. Second, the student has covered the cultural influences such as the uses of words and phrases of natives in the structures of the English language as it is mentioned above. According to this variant, targeted teaching seems crucial in helping ESL students build more complex and interesting sentences by increasing their syntactic repertoire.

3. Applicability to Different Writing Contexts

The participants proved that the syntactic abilities they had learned could be transferred for use in a variety of different writing scenarios. The interviewees' answers suggested that students might use what they learned about syntax in a variety of contexts, including creative writing, public speaking, and academic assignments. Consequently, this indicated a strong incorporation of syntax training into the total language ability of the participants, highlighting the far-reaching influence that it has on a variety of aspects of English as a Second Language writing. For instance:

Interrogator: Could you provide an instance when you implement your knowledge of syntax in your daily writing?

Student: Certainly, while engaging in text conversations with my friends, I make an effort to diversify my sentence constructions to enhance the conversation's level of interest and expressiveness.

4. Cultural Aspects of Syntax

During the course of the interviews, a nuanced component arose, which revealed the effect of cultural subtleties on the use of syntax. A distinctive blend of syntax and cultural identity was on display as participants frequently included culturally significant aspects in their written utterances. The need to take into account cultural context in syntax training was brought to light by this discovery, which acknowledged that cultural context is a dynamic aspect that influences language use among English as a second language trainee in Pakistan. For instance:

Although it was raining, they decided they decided to go for pedal walk in kheet.

Even though it was late, he continued working on mansooba.

In the examples above, it seems that the words; Kheet and mansooba are the effects of cultural subtleties on the use of syntax.

In sum, this study's findings provide credence to the idea that teaching ESL students in Pakistan precise syntax has a beneficial effect on their ability to write more complicated sentences. Enhancing the linguistic tapestry of ESL learners in this unique cultural milieu, the findings highlight both the immediate impact on syntactic awareness and the persistent transferability of these abilities across varied

writing settings.

4. Discussion

To answer our first RQ, our findings have indicated a level of enhanced awareness of syntactic structures. This finding is in line with previous research, in particular the studies conducted by Bychkovska (2021) and Selvaraj and Aziz (2019), all have highlighted the beneficial link between explicit syntax teaching and enhanced writing skills in ESL learners. It seems that there is a strong correlation between the findings of these earlier research and the improved awareness of syntactic structures that were found in the current study, as well as the subsequent use of these structures in writing.

The outcomes of our research are consistent with the findings of Albelihi (2022), who conducted a study that highlights the effectiveness of task-based syntax education. Consequently, it seems that, in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Pakistan, task-based learning can be an effective method since it allows students to use their understanding of syntax in real-world situations. Furthermore, the current study results which emphasized contextualized education are in line with the study that was carried out by Seyyedi et al. (2023), which emphasizes the significance of incorporating syntactic courses into relevant situations to improve both engagement and comprehension.

The finding of the second RQ has intended to focus on the specific structures and traits of syntax that appeared as a result of the intentional focus teaching that has been applied. As expected, the current study's participants have exhibited a level of complexity in their syntactic usage. Particularly, they showed an enhanced level of sentence construction and syntactic complexity. This is in line with prior studies such as Saricaoglu, & Aatkm, (2022) which conducted a study by exploring proficiency-oriented variation in lexical and syntactic complexity in second-language writing and they concluded there was a significant variation between the two complexities. Also, Talosa, & Maguddayao, (2018) conducted a study and found that syntactic errors in second-language writings are significantly linked to the writing exposures and level of study. These findings should reveal the significance of the international focus teaching on ESL students' syntactic complexity in different writing contexts.

The unintentional finding of our research concerning the effect of cultural subtleties on the use of syntax seems to be in line with the findings that Boutabba et al. (2022) have discovered. In their writing, our participants displayed a distinctive combination of syntax and cultural identity, which highlights the need to employ pedagogy that is culturally sensitive in ESL training. Because this feature of cultural integration provides an additional degree of complexity to the application of syntactic skills, it is an essential factor to take into mind in the instruction of language.

Ultimately, this discussion places our findings within the larger context of earlier research, highlighting both the consistent contributions and the innovative ones that have been made. To improve writing competency, the synthesis of these ideas offers a framework for the refinement of ESL pedagogy in Pakistan and abroad. This foundation helps to promote an approach to syntax training that is holistic and culturally sensitive.

5. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the transformational influence that explicit syntax training has on the construction of complex sentences in English as a second language writing in the Pakistani context. The value of focused teaching is shown by the fact that they have been shown to raise both awareness and application of syntactic structures, in addition to the fact that there has been documented diversity in syntactic complexity. The findings are consistent with those of the previous studies, which were conducted to highlight the beneficial association between training in syntax and improved writing skills. Additionally, the acknowledgment of cultural impacts on syntactic application provides a new and distinctive dimension, which advocates for a culturally responsive approach in the teaching of ESL. Thinking about these findings more, it could become clear that putting resources into teaching sentence structure in a way that fits the needs and culture of ESL students can help them improve their language skills and abilities.

6. Suggestions & Implications

The findings of this research, taken as a whole, have many implications for ESL education in Pakistan. Firstly, the use of technology and task-based techniques has the potential to improve syntax education while also appealing to the preferences of a wide range of learners. Secondly, acknowledging and accommodating individual variations may include how self-awareness and regulation influence the absorption and application of syntactic information. In addition, researching the long-term impacts of sustained syntax training and the influence that it has on total language competency would give significant insights. According to Muslimin et al. (2022), educators should explore using technology and task-based methods in their pedagogical practices to make the teaching of syntax more interesting and appropriate to situations that occur in the real world. In conclusion, recognizing the dynamic interaction that exists between syntax and cultural identity may greatly enhance ESL writing by adopting a culturally responsive approach.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Alahmadi was responsible for creating the introduction, literature review, study design, discussion, and revising the final draft. Mr.

Mlaik was responsible for data collection/analysis, results explanations, and drafting the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. The two authors have contributed equally to the study.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix 1.

Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself briefly, including age, educational level, and language proficiency.
2. Describe your experience with syntax education in ESL classrooms.
3. What parts of syntax intrigue or challenge you the most?
4. Could you give me some specific examples of syntax lessons that helped or weren't effective for you?
5. How satisfied are you with the syntax training in ESL classes?
6. Can you recall a specific instance where you applied syntax knowledge in a writing task outside of the classroom?
7. Has syntax teaching improved your English language competence throughout your ESL journey?
8. What impact does cultural background have on how ESL learners in Pakistan benefit from syntax instruction?
9. What are your ideas for enhancing syntax education in ESL courses based on your experiences?
10. What else would you like to share about your experiences with syntax training and improving ESL writing?