

**A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF SENTENTIAL PATTERNS AND
SENTENTIAL FUNCTIONS IN SELECTED STUDENTS' WRITING**

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Abstract

A sentence is a linguistic unit that consists of grammatically linked words which are grouped meaningfully to express the following; statement, question, command or exclamation. The English sentence patterns are; simple, complex, compound, compound-complex and multiple sentences. This paper made a syntactic analysis of sentence patterns and sentence functions in selected students' writings to know the degree students' display their knowledge of the various sentence patterns and sentence functions in writing. The theoretical framework used for analysis was the prescriptive grammar model. The research was a qualitative one. Therefore, a frequency count of the sentence patterns and sentence functions used by the students in their writings was made and the statistical tool used for calculation was the simple percentage method. The total population for the study was one hundred first year students from the department of English and Literature in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. The research came out with the following results under sentence pattern used by the students: simple sentence 36%, compound sentence 20%, complex sentence 19%, compound-complex sentence 15%, multiple sentence 10%. And then for sentence function, 40% of the students used declarative sentence, 22% used interrogative, 20% used imperative, 18% used exclamatory. From the above result, there is monotony in the researched students' writing. Therefore, the researcher suggests that second language learners should explore and also, know that there is plenty of room between the two extremes for them to experiment with words and sentences for better performance generally.

Introduction: Language exists in spoken and written forms. The written form consists of letters which form words that make up sentences. Language has structure and elements that are arranged in accordance with a set of rules. This set of rules is what is called the grammar of language. The part of grammar that concerns itself with the structure of sentences is called syntax. The word syntax can be described as the

grammar, pattern, or order of the elements in a language. One of the hardest things about learning a new language is figuring out the syntax or basic rules for the way that words and phrases should be arranged meaningfully in a sentence. It then means that, the teaching of grammar is very important for an accurate use of any language. This is because most people rate the literacy level of others through the correctness and style of their grammar. Correctness and style can be achieved through learning the rules of grammar both in speech and in writing. Ogenyi (2002, p.209) stresses that; “It is therefore apparent that the learning of English especially by a second language user is impossible without considerable reference to grammar and indeed without a detailed knowledge of grammatical processes”. The purpose of the study of grammar in schools is to help the learners become aware of the rules of grammar and follow these rules unconsciously when they make and understand sentences. Also, one of the major reasons that enables speakers of any language, to make and understand even sentences that have never occurred before is that, parts of sentences go together according to a system and that system can be described only by rules of grammar. Metcalfe and Astle (2000, p.70) suggest that:

There may be several grammatical ways in English of arranging the clauses, phrases and words in a sentence to result in the same meaning. The subject of arrangement is known as syntax, and ideally the arrangement to choose is that which reads the most smoothly and rhythmically while clearly expressing the sense. In this respect, English is fairly flexible.

Moreover, effective writing depends on the selection of vivid and interesting details to explain and support the main idea or impression. This is a rule that all effective writers keep in mind as they write. Effective here means producing the desired result. In addition, interesting writing depends on the writer’s ability to present specific details with words and sentences that are coherent. Syntacticians do not just invent these

rules. The rules of language are not the sort of rules which state that something must or must not be done. Linguists simply try to discover and describe what the speakers of a language know that let them form sentences. Rules like these exist whether or not anyone ever writes them down. One of such rules is that, a sentence is divided into two major parts; the subject and the predicate.

However, in the field of knowledge, the English language is very permeating and more challenging especially in writing. Apart from writing skill, the other language skills are; speaking, listening, and reading. Many language teachers have noted that acquiring the writing skill seems to be more labourious than acquiring the other skills mentioned above. Also, experience has shown that students swallow a number of misconceptions about how the sentence works in the English language and its potentialities. Finally, if students can make use of the grammatical or constituent parts of the sentence as well as the elements of the sentence, they can compose an infinite number of sentences in their writings. If they can also examine the different kinds of sentences and their functions, they can compose numerous sentences with variety and flexibility in their writings.

Theoretical Framework

This is anchored on the Prescriptive grammar model which is the best grammar rules for pedagogy because it teaches second language learners how to read and write. Lamidi (2008,p.6) stresses that, “Traditional grammar is the most widely used and the easiest form of teaching and understanding the English language, especially in Africa”. He further suggests that; “Perhaps this extends to other continents”. Also, Oji (1984, p.20) laments nostalgically that, “We must go back to traditional grammar which Chomsky, John Lyons and others have spoken in glowing terms. These other neo-grammars are not apt to teach a second language to second language learner”. Of course, the sentence is the central of language and of the act of speaking. This theory is relevant in contemporary time because second language learners’ need grammar for

accurate use of English in communication. This model of grammar is also the best in pedagogy because it classifies part of speech and describe the patterns of word inflection and rules of syntax by which these classified words are combined to form sentences. It is a comprehensive theory of grammar that insists on correct forms of language especially in linguistic excellence. According to prescriptive model, a sentence must have two parts; the subject and the predicate. It makes a value judgment of the correctness of an utterance and it is the grammar that is commonly taught in school. Because it is prescriptive, it focuses on the distinction between what some people do with language and what they ought to do according to a reestablished standard.

The Entailment of a Sentence

On the meaning of a sentence, some students easily rehearse the definition of a sentence as a group of words with complete sense while others refer to the phrase. This definition is incomplete for the definition of a sentence because its emphasis is on the completeness of thought. If I say *The dog wants spoon to eat*. This thought is complete but is there any possibility that a dog would want spoon to eat? Again, students are sometimes deceived by the length of some utterances and they immediately conclude that a particular utterance cannot be called a sentence because it is too short. The length of an utterance cannot be a criterion in the definition of a sentence. An utterance like *Jesus wept* is a complete sentence with *Jesus* as the subject and *wept* as the predicate. Syntactically, a sentence can be described as a linguistic unit consisting of grammatically linked words which are grouped meaningfully to express a statement, question, exclamation, command or suggestion. A sentence is a string of words arranged orderly, syntactically, and semantically which begins with a capital letter and ends in either a fullstop, question mark or exclamation mark. A sentence may be a simple clause that conveys enough meaning to imply a simple sentence even if it is not explicit; for example a “yes” as a sentence in answer to the

question *Did you buy the dress?* This implies the sentence *I bought the dress.*

However, as Ihejirika (2007, p.44) points:

Several attempts have been made to define the term sentence. To some scholars, sentence is a complete statement, or question, or command. Others see it as the largest grammatical unit used to express statement, question, or command. But for the purpose of this write up, a sentence is any linguistic utterance which contains a subject and a predicate used to express a complete thought.

A sentence means a group of words expressing a complete thought or feeling; it must be meaningfully understood by the receiver. It is a group of words that expresses an independent statement, question, request, command, and exclamation. The normal sentence must have two elements; the subject and the predicate. A subject can be described as the part which tells what the sentence is about. The subject is often defined as the unit that indicates who or what is engaged in carrying out the action specified by the verb. Anyanwu (2008,p.30) affirms this by noting that: “The function of the subject is to state the theme or to identify the person or thing that forms the subject of discussion. You may ask the question: who or what is talked about? The answer will invariably give you the subject of the sentence”.

The predicate is everything in the sentence except the subject. A predicate is that part that tells something about the subject. In other words, the subject is that part about which something is said and the predicate is that which asserts or states something about the subject. With certain kinds of verbs a third element is necessary in the formation of a complete thought; the subject complement, the direct complement and the indirect complement. This means that a sentence can be analysed into subparts and these subparts are called constituents.

The English Sentence Patterns and Functions

Incidentally, English is often regarded as an SVOCA language especially when we consider its elements when composing a sentence. The reason is that we can compose numerous sentences using the SVOCA paradigm in English. Another notable aspect of the sentence is the position of the subject and the predicate either in the active or passive sentences. Like we mentioned earlier, if students can make use of the grammatical or constituent parts of the sentence and the SVOCA elements, they can compose an infinite number of sentences in their writings. Also, if they can examine the different kinds of sentences and their functions, they can compose numerous sentences with variety and flexibility in their writings. The pattern of the English sentences are, simple sentence, complex sentence, compound sentence, compound-complex sentence or fused sentence, Multiple sentence while the function of the English sentence are, interrogative sentence, declarative sentence, exclamatory sentence, and imperative sentence.

Testing Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was a written essay test and the students were asked to write on a particular topic. The students were given one topic to write on. They were asked to write not more than 400 words. The topic given to the students to write on was a familiar topic that was within their level; therefore, if all the variables were constant, the testing instrument was reliable because the test type was an examination question type for second language learners in first year. However, to confirm the validity of the instrument, the researcher gave it English language experts.

Method of Data Analysis

This was a qualitative research therefore, the investigation made a frequency count of the sentential patterns and functions in students' writing. Therefore, all the sentences found in the study were organized, grouped, and qualified according to their pattern

and function. The researcher used the simple percentage method as the statistical tool to calculate based on the sentence pattern and function in students' writing.

The mathematical formula used for calculating was

$$= \frac{\text{frequency of the sentence}}{\text{Total population studied}} \times 100$$

Total population studied 1

Population

The population was one hundred first year students in the the department of English and Literature of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. The data was collected, grouped, and organized into tables and the percentages computed according to sentence pattern and sentence function.

Data Analysis

An analysis of the senetence patterns students used in their writing

Thirty-six students representing 36% of the total population used the simple sentence pattern in their writing, twenty students representing 20% of the remaining population of students used the compound sentence pattern in their writing, nineteen students representing 19% of the remaining population of students used the complex sentence pattern in their writing, while fifteen students representing 15% of the remaining population of students used the compound-complex sentence in their writing and lastly, ten students of the remaining population 10% students used the multiple sentence pattern.

An analysis of the sentence functions students used in their writing

Forty students representing 40% of the whole population of students used the declarative sentence in their writing; twenty-two students representing 22% of the remaining population of students used the interrogative sentence in their writing; twenty students representing 20% of the remaining population of students used the

imperative sentence in their writing; eighteen students representing 18% of the remaining population of students used the exclamatory sentence in their writing.

Discussion of Findings

36% of students used the simple sentence pattern more than other sentence patterns in their writing; the second in rank under sentence pattern is the compound sentence pattern with 20% of students who used it in their writing, and the third in rank is the complex sentence pattern with 19% of students who used it in their writing and lastly, 15% and 10% of students used the compound-complex and multiple patterns respectively. Therefore, the above analysis has shown that, the simple sentence pattern dominates students' writing in English.

While on sentence function, 46% of students used the declarative sentence function in their writing; next in rank is the interrogative sentence function with 22%; followed by the imperative sentence function with 20% and lastly, the exclamatory sentence function with 18%. Therefore, the above analysis of sentence function has shown that the declarative sentence function dominates students' writing.

Suggestions and Recommendations

It is worthy to note to second language learners from the researcher's experience during marking that, unity in any given sentence means singleness of thought. Like many simplified definitions, this one does not make much sense until its simplicity is explained away. Second language learners should know that, the real point is whatever that is put in a sentence must be related in some way to every thing else that is put in that sentence. The length of a sentence has nothing to do with its unity. A sentence filling a half page may be more unified than a short one. A unified sentence must be grammatically complete irrespective of what it says. A sentence may lack unity because the thoughts in it have no possible relation to each other, but it may also lack unity because the thoughts seem unrelated. Learners should also know that the

expression “fine writing” does not mean good writing. Never does it refer to literary or poetic writing. Rather, it has a lot to do with unity or completeness of thought in sentences. When a learner is told to avoid wordiness, he is inclined to retort. Brevity on the other hand is not the same as conciseness. As such, wordy writing is puffy while concise writing is firm. The point of violation of sentence unity is very common in most learners’ writing. Therefore, to achieve unity in sentence construction, learners must be very familiar with concord.

Students should know that the longer the sentence, the greater the chances of confusion and ambiguity or even being misunderstood by the examiners and readers at large. This of course, is enough to hinder efficient and effective communication in writing. It is glaring that most essays written by students lack vitality, interest and effectiveness because of monotony in their sentence pattern and their sentence function. Students must learn that a good essay does not mean a mere mass collection of sentences that can drown the reader in an ocean of words. Okoh (1998, p.41) warns that a failure by our students to understand the principles of paragraph construction remains a major cause of bad composition. Therefore, the invitation to strive for greater concreteness and vividness in writing need not be misunderstood by students because we all know that, a virtue carried too far becomes folly; nobody would want a page littered with fenetic and exploding sentences with the same sentence pattern and sentence function. Monotony in writing is fully as bad as dull and drab writing.

Learners should know that a sentence should begin with a capital letter and end with a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. Just like the sentence, clauses are groups of words having a subject and a predicate. There are two kinds of clauses: the independent (main) clause and the dependent (subordinate) clause. An independent clause is a clause that is complete in meaning and can be used as a sentence; a dependent clause is a clause which does not make complete sense but depends on something else in the sentence for its full meaning. Students should also know that, in contrast, a group of words that either does not contain a subject and a predicate or does

not express a complete thought is called a sentence fragment. Troyka and Nudelman (1986, p77) give elaborate illustrations of how sentence fragments are caused and how learners can avoid sentence fragments in formal writing. According to them, for learners to avoid sentence fragments in writing, they must:

- find the conjugated verb,
- find the subject and,
- look to see if the subject is introduced by what is called a “danger word” like *although, after* etc.

If the conjugated verb and subject are introduced by a danger word, there is therefore, no complete thought. The most commonly used danger words are: *after, although, though, as, as if, because, before, since, if, unless and others*. See examples;

After the waiter calculated the bill

Although a family budget is important

Because he is such a dependent person

The students should avoid slang in formal writing because choice of words is governed by certain standard of good taste. A word is said to be in good use if it is in present and in reputable use. It is in good use if it belongs to our time and age and accepted by educated men and women. Slang is a kind of made-to-order language characterized by extravagant fancy. Just like slang, colloquialism should be avoided in formal writing. Colloquial language is a language that is somehow more respected than the slang. Students are generally warned not to avoid the use of neologisms, archaisms, vulgarisms, barbarisms and improprieties in writing or speech.

The learners should avoid empty wordiness in their writing rather, they should pack their themes with ideas and concrete details because concise writing is firm. The expression ‘fine writing’ when applied to flowery writing means that the writing is ornate or excessively fastidious. It does not mean good writing. It is pretentious and gaudy writing just as trite expressions. Trite expressions are phrases, often figurative

that have been used too often. A trite expression is also called a cliché in our present day.

A second language learner should avoid fragmentary sentences. A unified sentence, no matter what it says must be grammatically complete. The length of a sentence has nothing to do with its unity. A sentence filling a half page may be unified. A very short sentence may have too much in it. There are three guides that can help a learner in this aspect. They are; a) a sentence may lack unity because it does not have enough grammatical completeness; b) a sentence may lack unity because the writer thrown together two or more unrelated ideas; and c) it may lack unity because the writer has tossed in some minor detail which has nothing to do with the main purpose of the sentence. It is not advisable to write compound sentences in which the ideas are not closely related even though it is common in students writing as some other errors. If there are sentences which are unrelated to the central thought, it is advisable to cut out what does not belong. If the detail that is cut out is important to the writing, the learner should put it somewhere else where it fits better. Another error that occurs frequently in students writing is the failure to punctuate the end of a sentence correctly. This failure results in what is known as a run-on sentence. A run-on sentence consists of two or more sentences strung together without punctuation at all and no connecting words between them or connected only with commas. Incidentally, the important thing students should remember is that punctuation marks tell readers something about the grammatical structure of the word groups they set off.

A second language learner should not write loose, straggling sentences rather, he should make separate sentences out of the part that express separate ideas because long sentences are as good as short sentences. The most important or most interesting idea should be given prominence in a sentence. The grammatical structure of a sentence indicates the value given to an idea. Important ideas should be put in the main clause.

A student may violate sentence unity by putting either too little or too much in a sentence. A stringy or overloaded sentence has more than a good sentence should carry. It can be improved by breaking up the sentence into logical units.

The second language learner should know that balanced sentence style is a tool of effective writing because it uses the form of sentences to make the content more emphatic. Also, if the writer is writing a sentence which deals with a series of ideas of varying importance, he should arrange these ideas in the order climax. Climax is a rhetorical device which can occasionally be used with real effect. It cannot be used often. It is appropriate under only one condition and the condition is, there must be a number of ideas of unequal importance.

Conclusion: Second language learners should know that there is much room between the two extremes for them to experiment with words and sentences. A sentence should be clear to the reader on the first reading. The reader should not be forced to guess what the writer intended to say. An awkward and confused sentence should be rewritten completely.

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¹ Oka or Amala is cassava or yam flower meal among the Yorùbá

¹ *Péréseke* is one of the Yorùbá musical genres that predated *waka* music. The band makes use of *saworo*, *Péréseke*, *àkùbà* and so forth. It is being played at Ibadan, Oyo State.