Usage, Syntactic Maturity and Syntactic Development of Subordinate Clauses Among NUL Students

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Abstract

Many scholars became interested in looking at the syntactic maturity of students in their writing. In investigating this, they set themselves different measures. The current study explores usage, syntactic maturity and syntactic development of subordinate clauses among the National University of Lesotho (NUL) second and third year English language and Linguistics students. They were requested to perform the task of writing an essay on given topic. The findings of the present study reveal that NUL students have a reasonably high level of syntactic maturity in their writing as shown by how they used subordinate clauses. The data also demonstrate that there is no difference between second and third year students as far as the use of subordinate clauses is concerned. The study concludes that one year difference between the two years of study is not a great difference academically, which is why there is no difference in syntactic development in NUL students' writing as measured through the use of subordinate clauses.

Introduction

In the field of Linguistics, subordination is observed in complex sentences. A complex sentence is a sentence with a main clause together with one (or more) subordinate clause(s). It is complex because of the nature of dependent clauses within it. Some clauses may be introduced by subordinating conjunctions. This study considers two types of subordinate clauses, finite and non-finite subordinate clauses.

The present study explores syntactic maturity of NUL students' writing through their use of subordinate clauses; and to investigate whether there is syntactic development in NUL students' writing during their time at university.

Research on syntactic maturity and writing development of students in English as a First Language (L1) and English as a Second Language (L2) has been carried out by linguists such as Beard et al. (2002). However, Beard et al.'s study was on identification of different syntactic structures including subordination while tackling different tasks. The conclusions drawn in Beard et al.'s study were that at first, when children try to use subordinate clauses, they use them in an ungrammatical way, but later, they show signs of a general move towards the correct way of writing as they begin to transfer structures they have heard or have read to their own writing.

The questions that the study addressed are:

1. What degree of syntactic maturity do the National University of Lesotho's (NUL) students show in terms of the use of subordinate clauses?

   a) do they have ability to use English subordinate clauses appropriately?

   b) are there differences in NUL students' writing through the use of subordinate clauses from year 2 to year 3?

Population

The research subjects in the present study were National University of Lesotho (NUL) students. These research subjects were from two faculties, the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Humanities of the National University of Lesotho. The target population was the second year and third year students who major in English Language and Linguistics.

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The researcher knew that second year students were introduced to subordinate clauses, because, in their Introduction to English Grammar (EL 203) course outline, it was stated that they were taught types of clauses such as finite clauses and their functions, about which it was stated that nominal, adverbial and relative clauses are subdivisions of finite clauses. The outline further showed that they were taught non-finite clauses such as participial and infinitive. Apart from EL 203, second year students were also taught Advanced Reading and Writing Skills (EL 204). According to EL 204 course outline, this course equips the students with reading skills and writing skills where they are taught how to write in styles appropriate to a variety of genres such as academic writing. They are taught similarities and differences between spoken and written discourse, criteria of writing where they are taught an overview of academic writing skills and referencing skills. They are also introduced to paragraph development where they study organisational patterns and text types. They learnt academic essay writing skills: description and argumentation. They were also taught Introduction to Linguistics (EL 205) where they were introduced to different areas such as Morphology and Syntax.

Third year students studied grammar in Applied Grammar (EL 314) as the continuation of what they did in Introduction to Grammar (EL 203). They were also studying Discourse Analysis (EL 303) which helped them to analyse discourse and it was in this course that the students learnt to analyse linguistic features of discourse such as subordinate clauses and the relationship amongst them, hence becoming aware of the potential textual functions of subordinate clauses. The researcher engaged these two different years of study to observe whether there was a development in performance, indicating consistent change from second to third year in the two areas under investigation.

In Lesotho, English is used officially in schools as a medium of instruction from class 4 to class 7 at the primary school level, in high schools and up to tertiary level. It is also regarded as a second language which every Mosotho child should learn. The students in these different levels of education are considered as developing ESL students. Moreover, the tertiary sector intends to produce students who show syntactic maturity in their writing, as this is necessary for effective university study. The employment market, too, expects mature writing skills from graduates. Therefore, there is a need to carry out the present study as it looks at an important aspect of the writing development of NUL students.

The data was collected through the use of an essay writing in both years of study. The research subjects were given the topic to write an argumentative essay on. Then the analysis was made.

Data Analysis

The researcher first identified subordinate clauses which appeared in the essays by underlining them. She then coded the types of those subordinate clauses. After identification of subordinate clauses, she tallied each type manually to see the frequency of occurrence of each type. The researcher explored how they were used in order to observe if the students showed awareness of the syntactic functions of subordinate clauses used in their essays. She further investigated different syntactic environments in which subordinate clauses were used in order to see if students were aware of textual functions of subordinate clauses. Thus, she explored their syntactic maturity through their use of subordinate clauses. That is, she looked at the frequency and range of subordinate clauses in the students' writing. She also noted, less systematically, whether they were using the appropriate style for academic writing style by looking at factors such as whether there were no abbreviations of words and informal language.

Comparison of the findings of the two years of study was made to investigate whether there was a development in syntactic maturity.

Discussion

Students were given the following topic to write an essay on: **''Some people believe that staying on campus as a student at NUL is advantageous. Others prefer staying off-campus. Explain your views on this issue. Use detailed reasons and examples''.**

Ranges for the students' use of subordinate clauses show that the lowest total number of subordinate clauses used in second year of study is 8 and the highest number is 33, which shows a fairly wide range. In the case of third year students, there is a similar range (9-30).

Clause Types Used

Table 1 presents the findings of the study for the second and third year sample essays. The total number of essays which was used in this study for the second year students was 76. The findings reflect that adverbial clauses have the highest frequency as they account for 24.2 percent of the total number. This category was observed in almost all the essays. In the case of third year students, the total number of essays which was used in this study was 44. To-infinitives in this year of study were observed in almost all the scripts.

Table 1:   Overall Use of Subordinate Clauses by 2nd and 3rd Year Students

Types of subordinate clauses	Total Numbers and their Percentages	
	2nd year	3rd year
1. Adverbial Clauses	352 (24.2%)	168 (19.8)
2. To-infinitives	332 (22.8%)	198 (23.3%)
3. Gerunds	301 (20.7%)	159 (18.8%)
4. Relative Clauses	265 (18.2%)	127 (15.0%)
5. –ing Participles	95 (6.5%)	127 (15.0%)
6. Nominal Clauses	68 (4.7%)	56 (6.6%)
7. Bare-infinitives	38 (2.6%)	5 (0.6%)
8. –ed Participles	6 (0.4%)	8 (0.9%)
Total	1457 (100.1%)	848 (100.0%)

Table 1 shows that the research subjects used both finite and non-finite clauses. It also demonstrates the rank order of occurrence of subordinate clauses observed in the sample essays in both years of study. In the category of finite clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses and nominal clauses were observed. In the case of non-finite clauses, To- infinitives, gerunds, -ing participles, bare infinitives and –ed participles were observed.

Table 2 shows the types of adverbial clauses realised in the students' essays in both years of study.

Table 2:   Frequency of Types of Adverbial Clauses in 2nd and 3rd Year

Adverbials	Their Total Numbers and Percentages	
	2nd Year	3rd Year
a) Reason	159 (45.2%)	95 (56.5%)
b) Time	92 (26.1%)	46 (27.4%)
c) Condition	61 (17.3%)	13 (7.7%)
d) Purpose	22 (6.3%)	5 (3.0%)
e) Concessive	18 (5.1%)	9 (5.4%)
Total	352 (100.0%)	168 (100%)

The data shows the rank order of occurrence of adverbial clauses used in both years of study. The findings show that reason clauses are the dominant subordinate clauses used in this category as they account for 159 (45.2 percent) in second year and 56.5 percent in the case of third year students. The reason behind this predominance of reason clauses might be due to "task effect" because the type of the given essay was an argumentative, where students had to argue and that resulted in the high use of subordinating conjunctions such as **because.**

The data indicates that the second most frequently used type of adverbial subordinate clause is the category of time adverbials for it scored 26.1 percent in second year and 27.4 percent in the case of third year students.

The category of condition occurred 61 times (17.3 percent) and 7.7 percent in third year which makes it the third type.

The fourth type is the category of purpose as it scored 6.3 percent in second year and 3.0 percent in third year.

The last category in the rank order of occurrence in adverbial clauses is that of concessive clauses as it scored 5.1 percent in second year and 5.4 percent in third year. The data reveals that the students rarely used concessive clauses in this study. This shows that the research subjects are aware of adverbial clauses as sub-types of adverbial clauses were observed in their essays.

Sophisticated Uses of Subordinate Clauses

This section discusses two issues and their examples in relation to sophisticated uses of subordinate clauses. The first issue is that of embedding of subordinate clauses while the second one is that of ellipsis of some words or parts of speech in the sentences. This focus is very important in order to see whether the sample students were able to write mature sentences using subordinating conjunctions and ellipsis as these features may prove that students in these two years of study may write sophisticated texts through the use of subordinate clauses.

Embedding

In their essays, some students produced sophisticated sentences such as the one exemplified in (1).

> (1) Due to the reason [**that the allowances are just subsidiary**], it is hard [**to do much with the money**] but off-campus students are able [**to prepare their own food [which therefore reduces costs]]**.

Example (1) has both a compound and a complex structure in that it begins with a reason phrase whose Head Noun is post-modified by a **That** relative clause. The first main clause which has embedded To-infinitive follows. A conjunction is realised, then the second main clause which has embedded another To-infinitive clause which is followed by a **Wh**-relative clause which post-modifies the whole non-finite clause.

Some students used a reason adverbial in the final position of a sentence with further post-modifying subordinate clauses as exemplified in (2).

> (2) Financial reason also contributes] [**because off-campus requires a lot of expenses such as cooking utensils and gas [which is far higher than expenses in the campus]]**.

Example (2) begins with a main clause which has ellipted a phrase ''to this situation'', followed by an adverbial clause of reason that is post-modified by a relative clause. In fact, this has been used to post-modify a whole clause.

In the case of nominal clauses, students wrote sentences such as the one provided in (3)

> (3) People know [**that Roma boys attack off-campus students.**]

Example 3 shows that the students are aware of nominal clauses and their syntactic functions as in this example it has functioned as an object.

Ellipsis

Some words or parts of speech such as nouns, subordinators and prepositions were correctly ellipted in the students' writing, thus avoiding unnecessary repetition and showing good control of their syntactic structure. The example showing this situation is provided in (4).

(4) Those in off-campus are not given any time restrictions **[as to when to arrive and [ ] leave the residences].**

In this example, **when to** was ellipted so as to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Awareness of Syntactic Functions

The researcher also found out that the students are aware of the syntactic functions of subordinate clauses. This is shown by how they were used in the essays. The students used relative clauses to post-modify noun phrases and they used both **Wh-** relative clauses and **That** relative clauses.

In one occurrence, a non-restrictive relative clause which was appropriately punctuated was observed and it was used to post-modify the noun phrase. This reflects that students are aware of syntactic functions of subordinate clauses as where they appeared, they performed different syntactic functions. They also showed that they differentiate restrictive from non-restrictive relative clauses.

In all the scripts, adverbial clauses were used to show an adverbial element.

Nominal clauses were used appropriately as far as syntactic functions of subordinate clauses are concerned because they were used as objects and prepositional complement.

Looking at the case of non-finite clauses, gerunds were used as subjects and objects.

In the environments in which gerunds were seen, they reflected present tense and progressive aspect.

Sentences with **–ing** participles were also realised and they fulfilled various functions.

Other sentences demonstrate the use of infinitives which performed functions such as being direct objects.

Awareness of Textual Functions

The findings of the study further demonstrate that the students are aware of textual functions in that in their essays they used the subordinate clauses in different syntactic environments, those being the beginning, internally and at the end, such as when using reason subordinate clauses. They sometimes placed the clause at the beginning to emphasise the particular reason they wanted to state. Thus, subordination was used for framing purposes. For varying reasons students placed subordinate clauses in different syntactic environments. Fries (1994:241) states that similar information can be contained in Themes (at the beginning of the sentences) and N-Rhemes (at the end of the sentences), and that the same information can be used in various ways. He cites the example of temporal adverbials which can be placed both at the beginning and at the end of the sentence and have totally different effects in those two positions. In their essays, the students placed the reason adverbials at the end of the sentence in order to demonstrate the new information which they want the reader to remember. ''The writers use the position at the end of the clause to indicate the newsworthy information to their readers, and they use the beginnings of their clauses to orient their readers to the message which will come in the rest of the clause'' (Fries, 1994:234).

In the case of time adverbials, they sometimes stressed the importance of time by placing the time adverbial clause at the beginning of the sentence and also sometimes placed them at the end of the sentence to show the ''newsworthy information to the readers'' (Fries, 1994:234).

The second reason for the researcher to say that students are aware of textual functions is that the students used subordinate clauses for **sentence-combining,** as the researcher observed that the identified subordinate clauses performed textual functions such as showing cohesion because of being correctly linked together.

Thus, in the essays, students elaborated their arguments by combining sentences and this resulted in writing long appropriate, though not always fully grammatical sentences. The sentence showing this incidence is shown in (5).

(5) **[Staying off-campus]** is advantageous over **[staying on-campus]** because **[to cook]** and therefore **[saving most of their cash]].**

The possible simple sentences which can be teased out of the sentence in example (5) in order to demonstrate its complexity are shown in (5) (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e).

(a) [**Staying off-campus**] is advantageous.

(b) [**Staying on-campus**] is disadvantageous.

(c) Students are free.

(d) Students cook.

(e) Students save most of their cash.

Looking at how the subordinate clauses have been used in the sample essays, it is observed that the students have syntactic maturity as they seemed to have reached a level of use of syntax which is considered as the appropriate style in educational contexts such as this study.

Weaknesses Observed in the Sample Essays

Although the findings of this study illustrate that there is syntactic maturity in the students' essays, as they generally utilized subordinate clauses appropriately, there are some students in the sample who showed inappropriate use of subordinate clauses. The researcher observed two different types of weaknesses in the students' essays and these are categorised as **sentence structure errors** and **other errors**.

Sentence Structure Errors

In some of the sample essays, there are 'floating' subordinate clauses as shown in examples (6) and (7).

(6) [**Because it allows families**]. Off-campus students can live with their members of the family either parents or the partner.

(7) [**Even though they do not consider the disadvantages**]. They are just happy to stay on-campus.

Examples (6) and (7) indicate that in some cases students write incomplete subordinate clauses even if they have syntactic maturity. This reveals that having syntactic maturity does not necessarily mean that one cannot make sentence structure errors.

Other errors

In the students' essays, performance errors were realised. Some sentences which illustrate this are shown in (8).

(8) Off-campus students are able to make groceries **which includes perishable goods such as all kinds of vegetable they want** and **the** can even **brought** them from the **villager** in bulk and cook them **latter**.

In some sample essays various mistakes were observed in relation to use of prepositions, punctuation, abbreviation, spelling, and register.

Looking at both years of study, it is realised that third year students were very similar to second year students.

Conclusion

The current study concludes that the sample students have a reasonably high level of syntactic maturity in their writing, as shown by how they used subordinate clauses. The entire sample of students in both years of study (2nd and 3rd year) used subordinate clauses. They used them effectively, as the data show that they can control long and complex sentences in terms of their syntactic structure. For example, in their writing,

sentences with restrictive relative clauses post-modifying one another and within them non-finite clauses which are embedded were realised. In the students' essays, all types of subordinate clauses were observed, both finite and non-finite subordinate clauses.

The findings also reflect that the students in both years of study used subordinate clauses similarly. That is, the students in both years of study used subordinate clauses appropriately and they used different types. This implies that as far as the use of subordinate clauses is concerned, there is no difference between second year and third year students. On the basis of these findings, the present study concludes that there is no clear syntactic development in NUL students' writing through the use of subordinate clauses between second year and third year.

The present study concludes that one year difference between the two years of study is not a great difference academically, which is why there is no difference observed in syntactic development in NUL students' writing through the use of subordinate clauses. The data demonstrate that the students used subordinate clauses successfully in their essays. They showed that they know different types of subordinate clauses because they used them and they produced long and sophisticated structures. That is, the students used subordinate clauses effectively, as where the subordinate clauses were realised in their essays, those subordinate clauses performed different syntactic functions. They further performed various textual functions in different syntactic environments.

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