

Prospects for Considering the Role of Syntactic Awareness in Academic Writing

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Abstract: Speaking or writing in a foreign language can be predominantly performed for the sake of communicating with others and interacting with the social community of that language. Besides, EFL learners may not put a strong emphasis on the grammatical components of that language in their speech or within their EFL language classroom discourse. Ultimately, familiarizing learners with the syntax of academic written English in the ELT classrooms may be a matter of interest. Adequately, writing effectively requires being aware of how learners write rather than how they learn what to write. Despite the fact that students learn grammatical aspects unrelatedly in the ELT classes, they may be deficient to switch this syntactic knowledge into an authentic written language. This can be because syntactic knowledge cannot produce effective writing without regularly practicing and incorporating these grammatical components into their writing. This study has been conducted with the aim of investigating the relationship between syntactic knowledge and learners' writing performance in an ELT classroom. To further up the study, the researchers have opted for an experiment with second year students of English at ENS of Laghouat who are studying online through Edmodo application. They have received a test through which the researchers tested their syntactic competence through the quality of their writing and their writing performance. Preliminary results suggest that the students, who have a good mastery of practical grammatical aspects, will have ability for producing effective and good writing competence. Hence, being aware of language grammar in writing might not be efficient; this might be because writing requires applying grammatical knowledge and also the need for a high control over it.

Keywords: Linguistic text theory, Writing performance, Grammatical competence, EFL classroom, Language structure

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed new alterations which have taken place due to the dawn of innovations and advanced technology. This resulted in massive changes in all spheres of life along with economy, politics, education, and communication. Indeed, in order to achieve good communication with people of different backgrounds; we need to learn language regularly because it is a key for communication. As we should be aware of all the skills of that language in order to easily communicate with individuals in society. Further, language is yet a tool for communicating our ideas, thoughts and feelings, as we can learn language skills of that foreign language to achieve good communication skills.

For English language, learners need to learn the four skills which require productive and receptive skills. Among those language skills are the writing skills which require much efforts to learn because it is characterized by the intricacy of its structures compared to other skills. Teachers in the EFL context need alternative teaching methods and strategies which can help promoting their students' writing skills. Writing in the ELT classroom requires spelling, vocabulary and grammatical structure which signify the linguistic competence of the student. It is considered as

the most complex skill because students need to take into consideration coherence, structure, and organization. In this vein, students should always put emphasis on coherence, structure, form, and organization of their piece of writing.

Students can learn language in both written and spoken ways to convey their message and improve their communicative competence. Through communication, students should be aware of how to communicate with others and how to get information and build knowledge. When the students understand the knowledge and structure of the language, this means that they have linguistic competence. Brown (2000) identified linguistic competence as “one’s underlying knowledge of system of a language, its rules of grammar, its vocabulary, and all the pieces of language and how those pieces fit together” (p.31). Similarly, learners are required to begin their writing tasks from sentence to paragraph and paragraph to essay, as educators should always intervene to help learners accomplish difficult tasks.

The problem of this study is contextualized within the frame of EFL students’ grammatical and written competences. As the evidence of grammar knowledge can appear in the writing performance of students, this leads to the problem of successfully incorporating grammar knowledge into the writing skill in the EFL context. Teachers have been trying to recognize how their students manage to use their acquired grammar knowledge to write more accurately. The study aims at bridging the gap between acquired syntactic knowledge and good writing performance in the EFL classroom. In order to validate the aforementioned hypothesis of the study, the research seeks to answer the question “To what extent can an efficient writing be affected by the level of syntactic awareness of EFL Students?”

I. Literature Review

Most students at the global level may need to write different forms of assignments in their EFL educational classrooms such as paragraphs, essays, research papers, dissertations, and articles for their lesson tasks, exams, or research. Yet, writing good academic English can be one of the most difficult tasks for EFL students. Students are asked to focus on organization, structure, style and, language and content. Academic writing has particular aspects, and addresses a particular audience and a particular purpose. It can allow students to write interesting subjects, convey their message, and attract the audience to read and discover what they write and think.

A. Writing Skills in ELT Classroom

Nowadays, learners should be aware of their language skills along with the writing skill, which is an intellectual activity of brainstorming ideas and how to organize them and write a sentence and a paragraph which will be read by the reader (Nunan, 2003). Writing involves conventional skills such as punctuation, spelling, and grammar, as it requires higher order thinking skills such as planning, verifying, organizing, categorizing, sequencing and expressing ideas. (Berninger et al, 2002). This skill can help students to intellectually build ideas, share their thoughts, and produce good writing in English. As Harmer (2004) claims that writing can offer students longer time to think compared to speaking or listening activities in order to choose the right ideas to express their thought, as they can longer have time to check the use of grammar patterns in their writing.

According to Rivers (1981), writing is conveying knowledge and expressing ideas in a consecutive way in the target language. Brown (2001) suggested that writing involves recognizing the meaning and putting it into language. Harmer (2004) believed that writing can help students use language accurately, as students should consider the language use when they engage in their writing process. Writing in the ELT classroom has complexities because it involves meaningful parts of language, which are words, sentence, grammar, and how to transfer those patterns into written texts. Rivers (1981) believes that students can develop their linguistic competence through using their efficient use of grammar and vocabulary. Bello (1997) claims that: “writing is a productive language skill that plays an essential role in promoting language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and large chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they learn in class” (cited in Heryanti et al., 2017, p.83)

The process of writing is a complicated process, because it involves cognitive abilities in using language and its components to produce a good writing. In the writing process, students can express ideas and interpret them into their texts. Significantly, through writing, the student can reinforce and implement the language they have learned and use grammatical concepts they have already acquired. Evidently, language in academic writing needs to be “precise, impersonal and objective” (Hartley, 2008, p. 03). Language in written texts involves its structure and components including grammar and the construction of the sentence (Weigle, 2002). Therefore, demonstrating these mechanics in writing such as spelling, punctuation, and grammatical skills is highly required. According to Bowker (2007), academic writing is characterized by its rules and practices; it involves a formal structure of ideas and writing mechanics including grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Writing can be a skill of communication in EL learning process (Chastain, 1988, as cited in Simin & Tavangar, 2009). Hence, writing ability can be highly related to the approach of teaching it in the ELT classroom as argued by Hedge (1998) such as the Process approach and the Product approach of Johns (1990), Traditional text-based approach of Tribble (1996), Text-oriented approach, Writer-oriented approach, and Reader-oriented approach of Hyland (2002), and Grammar-syntax-organization approach identified by Raimes (1983).

The Grammar syntax organization approach tempts to put emphasis on the learners' final product, emphasizing the language forms such as grammar, syntax and language mechanics. (Nunan, 1999; Raimes, 1983; Tribble, 1996). This emphasis lies in the quality of writing rather than its quantity, as the emphasis is not on fluency, writing serves as a secondary concern as a reinforcement for oral habits (Nunan, 1999; Raimes, 1983). According to Social Learning theory in Psychology, writing ability is defined as the ability to respond to a given stimulus according to a particular response. Yet, Behaviorism theory emphasizes that learning is habit formation, in which learners can learn through imitating and transforming models in textbooks offered by teachers (Nunan, 1999).

According to Nunan (1999), writing ability is about responding to a particular stimulus. It is “the ability to adhere to style-guided prescriptions concerning grammar, arrangement and punctuation” (Nunan, 1999, p. 59). Along with the characteristics of the writing process including

the audience and purpose, a text can be written explicitly according to given mechanics which can have the same meaning to all readers. (Hyland, 2002) In the same vein, the Product-based Approach, according to (Nunan, 1990) is contextualized within discourse language; it involves the construction of the sentence where the sentence is constructed, and portrays how information is organized and put in a sentence and which grammatical aspects are used. Written texts can serve as a discourse (Hyland, 2002) based on the claim that “there was more to writing than building grammatical sentences” (Silva, 1990, p. 13)

Proving students with discourse samples can help them incorporate their knowledge of grammar into writing coherent texts (Nunan, 1999). They can find out the function of sentences and paragraphs in discourse. Accordingly, writing involves several sentences which are interrelated to write a coherent discourse. Raimes (1998) claims that through this approach, students manage “to discover how writers use patterns of language options to accomplish coherent, purposeful prose” (Hyland, 2002, p.10). Students can improve their grammatical skills in writing by considering writing as the space for implementing grammatical concepts.

It has been argued that teaching punctuation, sentence structure in writing is more vital than putting emphasis on other writing skills. In grammar teaching, teachers start with what students already know about grammar, as they can use this prior knowledge in their writing. By relating prior knowledge of oral language to written language, students can have more linguistic competence. Thus, in order to communicate and express ideas and meaning effectively, students should be aware of grammatical concepts for improving writing skills.

Words and sentences of language are organized and arranged through grammar. The native speakers of any language are able to communicate with each other because they are consciously aware of the sentence structures and grammar of that language. Native speakers of English language can understand the language spoken in different contexts and use the intrinsic grammatical rules. They can write different words and construct meaningful sentences; as native students as speakers of that language should learn good grammatical skills to be effective writers also by transferring the data of grammatical concepts from verbal to written language. Therefore, knowledge about grammar can enable students to employ those skills in improving the writing skills.

Writing in the ELT classroom can be essential for many students. Students need to emphasize the basic grammatical concepts which are required for expressing meaning. They are taught grammar as a separate subject in the classroom and not taught with writing, which will not be efficient for developing students’ writing competence (Braddock et al, 1963). Evidently, transferring grammar teaching to writing is not implemented in all language educational streams. Shaughnessy (1977) believes that there are four grammatical concepts: the sentence, inflexion, tense, and agreement. Also, students should be aware of the grammatical errors in their writing.

In order to have an efficient writing performance, students also should be aware of parts of speech, sentence structure, types of sentences, subject-verb agreement, clauses, transformation of sentences. Students not only use these grammatical aspects or components at a theoretical level but also can formulate them into their writing practice. Students should use valid ideas of writing as teachers can put emphasis on syntax-based activities and give some hints and ask students to develop a short story using grammatical rules they have already seen in class. The aim of this kind of activities is to have adequate understanding of how sentences are structured and how they affect the meaning of the text.

After being aware of the rules of grammar, this will make the students aware of making the sentences more concise, accurate, and comprehensible. Sometimes the sentences may be too long or complex for the audience to understand while the writer can formulate them in other different and easy ways. In a language classroom, students can employ these processes in learning basic grammar skills to promote their writing skills. Students can also use writing strategies and apply them in parallel with advanced grammatical concepts when appropriate. The students should be aware of the formal and informal types of written communication and recognize the synthesis of note-taking and verification through learning grammatical rules.

B. Background to Linguistic Theory

Human language has been a matter of interest throughout the decades, and the scientific study of language is called linguistics. Linguistics can investigate the structure of human language, its use, its history and its role in society. In theoretical linguistics, individuals can possess the forms and structure of linguistic knowledge, and its characteristics and aspects cognitively. This is known as the theory of grammar in linguistics. Generative Linguistics and linguistic theory as referred to by Chomsky (1955) in his *Linguistic Theory of Logical Structure*. Chomsky put emphasis on the nature of linguistic knowledge in the human mind treated as cognitive grammar. It refers to what individuals are aware of the speech they speak and what they understand. The production and comprehension of speech is referred to as performance, which is related to linguistic competence.

Individual learners should be aware of language structure to connect sounds with meanings and to have a comprehension of spoken utterances and to express thoughts through speech or signs. In effect, linguistic knowledge from a cognitive perspective is called grammar because linguistic theory is concerned with representing the nature of the cognitive grammar in the speaker's mind, which represents their knowledge about their language. Therefore, grammar can be identified as the mental representation of the individual's linguistic knowledge, which is related to the theory of grammar. Grammar portrays everything about the structure of language, its lexicology (vocabulary in the mental dictionary), its semantics (the meaning of words and sentences), and its phonetics and phonology (the sound system or patterns), its morphology (the structure of words), and its syntax (the structure of sentences). Generally, we are not aware of the unconscious knowledge of our language.

Syntax, a part of our linguistic knowledge, identifies the stream and combination of words, how they are put together to form sentences (Fromkin, *et al*, 2000). In writing, grammar has become something that cannot be separated from it. Grammar is a set of rules that decide how the words are arranged into formation of a meaningful unit. According to Harmer (1998), learners who learn a language should learn its grammatical structure to be linguistically competent in using language components such as verbs, nouns, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, and pronouns. Therefore, students can get grammatical knowledge for the sake of effectively conveying the message of their writing. This can be through the correct structure of sentences which will provide a meaningful text.

Word order involves the number and sequence of the words in a sentence as it can influence the meaning of the sentence. Alexander (1998) believes that a correct sentence can be structured of the basic word order as follows: Subject+ Verb + Object + Adverb. Rages (1978) claims that students can learn about the form, function, and the use of words which represent the

sentence structure and they can understand word order, and how to write correct sentences in English both in spoken and written discourse through grammar.

II. Methodology

The study used a particular design which best fits its empirical nature. It attempts to adapt a mixed methods design which integrates both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) identified mixed methods research as: “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (p.05). Prior to the use of both research methods, we have opted for an experimental test to achieve the aim of the research which is to diagnose the significance of achieving good writing performance through students’ syntactic awareness, and to analyze the level of students’ awareness of common grammatical aspects. Fifty six (56) second year EFL students who study writing online on Edmodo application, and who represent the whole population of the study, have been considered for participation in the study. Data were collected from the writing assignments of the students which were submitted to the teacher via Edmodo application. The writer corrected those assignments by identifying the extent to which students have taken into consideration the grammatical aspects and being aware about in their written production.

The study used the test and documenting as instruments to collect the data, which were collected from students’ written paragraphs. Word order awareness, misused words, clarity, syntactic accuracy, and other aspects have been considered and analyzed. The researchers wanted to see whether participants really applied grammar rules, especially word order and sentence clarity, on their written paragraphs. The investigation highly supports the fact that the more the grammatical aspects are not considered, the less students’ grammatical competence and writing performance will be. The number of the items within each piece of writing was marked, categorized, and interpreted and analyzed in the form of numbers.

The qualitative data collected from the test are presented and interpreted statistically, to investigate empirically the extent to which respondents’ written productions are efficient. The tables show the mean and the Standard Deviation for each item and the data was obtained from the students’ writings via SPSS software. Students were asked to respond to a writing task, with a careful consideration of grammatical and written aspects which have been taught in grammar and writing the previous sessions and academic years such as unity and coherence and parts of speech. The treatment variables involve the effective use of grammar aspects in writing, and aspects of writing competence and performance.

Fraenkel & Wallen (2003) assert that qualitative research aims at becoming more familiar with natural phenomena, afford new insights, and identify more specific research problems. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to elicit information about a phenomenon to describe authentic conditions in the classroom. Evidently, throughout the study, we attempted to foreground the common grammatical aspects which can be approached by students in writing a paragraph; Denzin & Lincoln (2005) referred to the qualitative approach as:

An activity in which the researcher studies a phenomenon in a natural setting focusing on the qualities of individuals, group, or organization that are not experimentally measured or examined, it involves the collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational,

historical, interactional and visual texts that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (p.03-04)

As they believed that: "the word qualitative implies an emphasis on the quantities and entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (p.08)

On the other hand, quantitative research involves phenomena which can be explored and investigated in quantity through collecting and analyzing numerical data. It is an approach which determines facts and identifies the relationship between variables. In this study, we attempt to examine the validity of the research hypothesis and determine the extent to which syntactic awareness can be effective in producing an efficient written assignment. According to Hancock & Algozzine (2006), quantitative research often requires using tools to measure particular variables such as surveys and tests, which can provide useful data in a short period of time while qualitative research uses interviews, observations, documentations, which may result in a particular time and in prosperous information.

Bowen (2005) states that "descriptive quantitative research involves collecting numerical data to test hypotheses or answer questions concerning current status conducted either through self-reports collected through test, questionnaires, and interviews, or through observation" (p.23). In other words, the data were analyzed and the findings of data analysis have the form of descriptive phenomena through nominal scale measurement. The researcher used quantitative descriptive method to count and describe the level of syntactic awareness in the students' written assignments.

III. Results and Discussion

This research seeks to investigate a situational input and eventually describe quantitatively and qualitatively the data which have been collected through documenting and an experimental test. The methods of research have been used to answer the research question. Document analysis is a methodical procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents. It requires the data to be examined and interpreted in order to obtain meaning, and gain empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The document is usually related to the social world. In our study, we have opted for a written instrument which is a document and which is the paragraph of students. It has been analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, as the paragraphs which have been taken for the data were the writings of thirty students.

To proceed with the test, the quantitative data collected and interpreted from the test and presented in Table (1) reveal the students' proficiency level of syntactic awareness and show the collected data. The means brought from the answers of students in the test regarding their awareness of Grammatical Concepts are introduced as follows:

Table (01): Students' Awareness of Grammatical Concepts

Grammatical Concepts	Word order	Clear correct sentences	& Syntactic accuracy	Organized sentences
Mean	4.2	3.7	3.00	2.6
Standard Deviation	3.19	1.2	1.13	1.16

The table above shows the Mean, and the standard deviation of the participants' answers. When calculating the mean of the participants, we gathered all their scores (from 1 to 6) and divided them into the number of the sample (n=30) or the students who submitted their answers, and the standard deviation is the square root of the variation. The highest level of students (4.2) of the test is intermediate in writing a paragraph, and they need to improve it. So, the students' scores can nearly reach the average score.

According to Table (2), the relation between sentence meaning and syntactic elements is revealed through the Mean through which problematic in the writing of the students diverges. The students who submitted their answers were (n=23) as the highest level is for grammar knowledge (5.84), which represents the students awareness of grammar use in their writing. Then, the Mean of using formal and informal grammar is (3.75) which indicate the students' use of informal grammar, as for effective use of language is revealed through the Mean (2.25) and the Mean (2.5) for the impact of students' first language.

Table (2): sentence meaning through manipulating syntactic elements

Sentence Meaning	Using informal grammar	Effective use of language	Impact of first language	Grammar knowledge
Mean	3.75	2.25	2.5	5.84
Standard Deviation	2.665	1.504	1.85	2.989

Table (03) involves the extent to which the students are aware of the process of writing and the writing parts and its characteristics such as coherence, cohesion, clarity, morphemes and unity. This is shown through Mean scores. most of the students' paragraphs were coherent and have logical order M (3.42), as for sentence clarity M (2.25), misused morphemes or diction M (3.72) and writing unified paragraphs are shown in the Mean (1.12).

Table (3): Writing Process Attention

Item	Coherence	Sentence clarity	Misused morphemes	Unity
Mean	3.42	2.25	3.72	1.12
Standard Deviation	2.186	1.508	2.654	0.353

Based on the Mean scores of the students concerning their awareness of grammatical concepts, sentence meaning, writing process attention, and the number of students who submitted their answers in the assignment tasks are 30 and 24 students. After gathering the number of Mean scores for each significant element, we got the general result of students' syntactic awareness in their written assignment, which is about "the benefits of studying English". The students' scores who are highly aware of language syntax which contributed to developing their level of writing performance are (n=18, 54%) while those who were less aware of syntax in their writing are (n= 12, 46%) as shown in table (4).

Table (04): Level of Students' Syntactic Awareness in their Assignments

High level	Low level
N= 18 (54 %)	N= 12 (46%)

The findings show that some students are facing some difficulties in writing assignments in terms of language use, writing techniques and skills, and grammar awareness along with sentence use. The test the students have been familiarized with requires grammar use and aims at investigating the significance of considering grammatical elements. Among the reasons the students face in grammar use are the methods of teaching grammar separately from writing. Also, in grammar classes, students are directed through tasks in which they can respond to questions about grammar reasonably and easily because they are not complex and are included within sentences or short paragraphs. Whereas in long assignments, students try to provide meaningful ideas and sentences which are logically related and connected.

Students also need to link paragraphs through constructing appropriate sentences. They need to build a sentence using certain skills as they should master every language aspect. Further, students may not be able to think in English, as they can construct their ideas and write them correctly in meaningful sentences and use correct grammar; and because they usually learn grammar separately and not in the writing context. Therefore, students may not be able to construct sentences and paragraphs to make an assignment. Indeed, word order is part of grammar which emphasizes the organization of sentences. Lack of awareness of students in recognizing the right structure of sentences and being unaware of the word order rules may result in inefficient writing performance (Alexander, 1998). Table (2) shows that the students might be influenced by their first tongue ($M= 2.5$) and it can affect their writing in the target language, and writing unstructured sentences is due to lack of word order.

The weak findings in the written assignments of students can be due to their lack of awareness about grammatical aspects of the English language. Some students write correct separate sentences but are not well structured and not linked to form a coherent paragraph. As some write incomplete sentences, others write few lines and non-coherent paragraphs. Some students' language is highly influenced by their second language which is French as they include French words either consciously or unconsciously. Some students did not make efforts and training to write, others are already weak in language grammar. Hence, the students who succeeded in writing good assignments with good language grammar use scored high in the average in the test because of training and practicing well in writing skills, or even reading to learn vocabulary and use appropriate diction to have a good writing performance. Also, these students have been highly self-trained to write assignments and subsequently became highly aware of grammatical aspects of the English language.

IV. Implications

In writing any assignment, students need to make continuous practice and training in grammar in order to write correct sentences. They need to relate their awareness of grammar use to writing their paragraphs. Indeed, using students' writing as the basis for teaching grammatical concepts can highly promote their grammar in writing. Therefore, teaching grammar separately from writing may not improve students' writing competence. Students usually learn grammar rules theoretically in grammar classes which may not encourage them to use these rules when speaking; they should make more practice on using grammar rules practically in writing. Therefore, students will be more aware about understanding the use of correct word order in a correct context. Hence, there are two approaches for teaching the rules of grammar which are the deductive approach which involves teaching through rules which are given by the teacher before following up those rules with examples for the students in order to have adequate understanding of the grammar rules. The other approach is the inductive approach which emphasizes teaching through examples as the teachers provides students with examples for each grammatical item or rule.

Conclusion

The results of the study proved that most students have been aware of incorporating good amount grammar knowledge into their written discourse. Although some students struggled to transfer the English grammar into the target language writing there was a low level of scores for the students' writings who were unable to use grammatical concepts correctly. The study provided valuable data about the significance of making students aware of grammar knowledge in their writing. The analysis of both and qualitative and quantitative data signified that the majority of the students are aware of grammatical aspects which they have learned in prior language contexts. Also, the highest mean scores regarding word order and grammar use revealed that most students are aware of grammatical parts without having further feedback or guidance to learn them in their writing class. With regard to the question of the research, the findings proved that learning grammar separately from writing can to some extent help students produce a good writing performance, as they should be more aware of the ways of learning grammar effectively. Students should also make practice and efforts to train themselves in writing pieces by incorporating all what they have learned in grammar classes; as their grammatical awareness proved to be deeply related to the quality of their writing.

The study can set the agenda for further research in grammar and writing correlation in the EFL classroom, as it offered fundamental practical implications for learners to develop grammar competence in their writing classes. Further research can, therefore, be conducted on how this linguistic issue can be discussed and practiced in higher college education. Ultimately, being aware of how to write, organize, order, and relate words and sentences is necessary, but not sufficient if the student does not have control over the writing techniques and features such as unity, cohesion, style of writing, purpose, and planning. Regarding the good use of sentence structure, textuality and text format, students should be aware of cohesion and coherence which characterize each piece of writing. It refers to a straight line of development, and through which ideas are clearly related to each other in orderly sequence. Each main idea can be developed

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