COMPLEX SENTENCES USED IN ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' ESSAY WRITING: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract:

The research investigates the use of complex sentences in students' essay writing, exploring pedagogical implications for teachers to enhance students' writing proficiency. 212 essays were collected from English-majored students in the last semester for essay learning at Can Tho University, but only 162 essays were qualified for analysis, equivalent to the number of essays in the corpus by Truong & Do (2021). Their complex sentence structures were analyzed and compared with the corpus to identify similarities and differences in the use of complex sentence structures. The findings of this research suggest that there are clear patterns in the types and frequency of complex sentences used by students, which may have implications for the design of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning of writing essays. Implications for classroom practice and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: complex sentences, essay writing, pedagogical implications

1. Introduction

Complex sentences are essential for effective communication and are often used in academic writing. As Cha and Oh (2016) noted, English-majored students in particular are expected to master complex sentence structures to convey ideas, arguments, and critical analyses. However, a growing body of research has suggested that many students, including English-majored students, struggle with using complex sentences proficiently, which can ultimately hinder their academic success. Kim and Lee (2018) found that many students lacked a deep understanding of the grammatical rules and structures that underlie complex sentences. They suggested that addressing these knowledge gaps through targeted pedagogical interventions could help students improve their use of complex sentences in their writing.

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The ability to communicate complex ideas through written expression is a vital component of academic writing in general and essay writing in particular, and complex sentence structures are an integral aspect of this. However, many students struggle to use complex sentences effectively, resulting in simplistic and ineffective writing.

The trend for teaching writing in the time of globalization based on "*data-driven learning*" (Johns, 1991) is that learners acquire the language through the process of applying available sources. Identifying the most common complex sentences used in essays by experts to design and implement writing materials has provided clear guidelines for teachers (Truong & Do, 2021).

Following this, we conduct a study to see which types of complex sentences are used the most by students and what they really lack so that both teachers and students at the collegiate level know what to do to enhance the use of the complexity on clausal levels. In other words, the purpose of this research in need is to examine the use of complex sentence structures in students' academic writing, explore pedagogical implications for both teachers, curriculum developers and students, and make recommendations on how they can support students in their development of complex sentence structures.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Complex Sentences
There are many types of complex sentences employed in writing English, which students prefer such as reason (*because, since, as, now that*), concession (*although, though, even though*), contrast (*while, whilst, whereas*), condition (*if, unless, given that, provided that, supposed that, as long as*), time (*when, whenever, once, before, after, as soon as*), and place (*where, wherever*), one of which is noun clauses – a group of words with a subject and a verb that can be a subject, an object, or an object of a preposition. Common noun clause markers are *that*, *if*, *whether*, and *wh-* question words. Relative clauses, introduced by relative pronouns such as *that*, *who*, *whom*, *which*, and *whose*, are another type. In the following analysis, we will examine popular types of complex sentences in student writing pieces before withdrawing some relevant pedagogical implications.

Truong & Do (2021) found out the most common use of complex coordinators:

> "For adverbial clauses, we found the most frequently occurring adverbial clauses with *because* (86), *although* (38), *while* (58), *if* (221), *when* (215), and *where* (32). Noun clauses with *that* stand out, with 524 occurrences. Besides, relative clauses with *that* rank second, including 178 occurrences, while those with *who* and *which* are also relatively frequent, with 135 and 191 occurrences respectively."

2.2 The Importance of Complex Sentences in Essay Writing
Writing is an essential skill for students in higher education, and academic writing, especially writing essays is particularly important. Many studies have highlighted the

challenges that students, particularly non-native English speakers, face when learning to write in academic settings (Baker & LeClair, 2013; Murphey & Williams, 2013). One key area that has been identified for improvement is the use of complex sentence structures and the teaching of academic writing highlights the importance of preparing ESL students for the demands of academic writing (Baker & LeClair, 2013).

Complex sentence structures are an essential component of academic prose and are ubiquitous in scholarly writing. According to Bi, Yan &Wang (2022), the use of complex sentence structures is closely related to writers' proficiency levels. Students who can use complex sentence structures are better equipped to convey complex ideas in writing. Recent research has indicated that using corpus-based approaches can be effective in teaching complex sentence structures. In their study, Truong & Do (2021) selected a range of complex sentence structures from a corpus of academic texts and provided explicit instruction to students. The study found that students who received this instruction performed better in their writing, indicating the effectiveness of using corpus-based materials to teach writing.

2.3 The Challenges of Using Complex Sentences in Writing

A review of the literature suggests that complex sentence structures pose a challenge for students due to several factors. Research suggests that the use of complex sentence structures is generally low among students in academic settings due to a lack of understanding of grammar rules (Jahin, 2016). One major factor is limited exposure to the structures, either in spoken or written contexts, which can result in unfamiliarity with the structures and their functions (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Another factor is unfamiliarity with academic vocabulary, as complex sentence structures often involve specialized terminology that students may not know (Swales & Feak, 2004). Additionally, many students struggle with syntax, or the rules for combining words into sentences, which can result in errors in relation to word order, conjunctions, and punctuation (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999).

A significant source of difficulty that students experience in using complex sentence structures is a lack of exposure to the structures, which results in unfamiliarity with their use and function (Hyland & Milton, 1997). This situation is often coupled with unfamiliarity with specialized academic vocabulary, which may be essential in constructing complex sentences (Swales & Feak, 2004). Syntax, which is the system for combining words into sentences, has also been identified as a factor that affects students' ability to use complex sentence structures accurately (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). The use of complex sentence structures is essential for effective academic writing (Bhatia, 2010). However, students often struggle to use complex sentence structures due to factors such as inadequate grammar instruction and limited exposure to such structures (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Bi, Yan, and Wang (2022) conducted research on Chinese students' English writing and found that both lexical and grammatical knowledge played a crucial role in their performance.

Research has indicated that a student's writing ability is related to their proficiency in using complex sentence structures (Hyland & Milton, 1997). However, students often lack instruction and practice in using complex sentence structures (Swain & Lapkin, 2002), and as a result, their writing may contain simpler sentence structures (Jahin, 2016).

2.4 Ways to Teach Complex Sentences

Despite these challenges, the literature also suggests that explicit instruction and modeling can facilitate students' development of complex sentence structures (Langan & Goldstein, 2019).

Research also suggests that teachers can facilitate students' development of complex sentence structures by providing explicit instruction, modeling, and giving opportunities for practice. Explicit instruction, modeling, and practice have been identified as effective methods to develop students' ability to use complex sentence structures (Swain & Lapkin, 2002, Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008). Truong & Do (2021) used corpus analysis to identify complex sentence structures used in academic writing and developed a framework for selecting these structures to teach students.

Specifically, teachers can provide explanations, offer examples, and demonstrations that highlight the desired structure and its function, followed by practice and feedback. This can involve providing students with clear explanations of the structures and their functions, as well as with examples that demonstrate the structures in context (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

Additionally, providing opportunities for practice, through structured exercises or free writing activities, can enable students to experiment with these structures and become more comfortable with their use (Biber et al., 1999). Leung and Street (2012) found that English language and literacy development is enhanced when teachers provide a supportive environment and engage in dialogic teaching practices. Furthermore, teachers who participate in professional development programs that provide training in teaching writing have improved pedagogical practices which, in turn, positively affect their students' writing abilities (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Leung and Street (2012) argue that a dialogic teaching approach (i.e., encouraging student-teacher interaction), combined with a supportive learning atmosphere, can help students learn writing skills more effectively. This approach can be particularly useful for non-native English-speaking students, who may need additional support in building their writing skills.

According to Bennett and Lindemann (2018), writing zones of proximal development can play an essential role in supporting student writing development in higher education and in syntactic awareness and writing quality, Wintergerst and de la Paz (2013) found a positive relationship between the two. Syntactic awareness is closely linked to writing quality, with explicit instruction and modeling found to enhance students' complex sentence structures, leading to an improvement in their writing skills. Murphy and Williams (2013) suggest that activities designed to promote academic integrity and professional ethics should be incorporated into the curriculum as part of the writing instruction process. Furthermore, Bennett and Lindemann (2018) argue that

writing zones of proximal development - the difference between a student's current writing ability and their potential writing ability with the right support - can aid student writing development in higher education.

Recent studies also suggest that corpus-based approaches can be effective in teaching academic writing. Truong & Do (2021) highlight the potential of corpus-based approaches to develop students' awareness of the types of sentence structures used in academic writing.

Finally, Carpenter and Huffman (2016) suggest that seminars designed to provide explicit instruction in academic writing can be helpful for graduate students who are writing theses and dissertations. They recommend including discussions on the writing process, audience analysis, and revision strategies in such seminars. Seminars are designed to teach graduate students how to write for their theses and dissertations. The seminar included discussions on the writing process, audience analysis, revision strategies, and thesis/dissertation structure. The authors found that this seminar improved students' writing abilities and helped them to better understand the demands of academic writing.

3. Material and Methods

The coursebook for students is Mindset for IELTS level 3, focusing on writing essays. The essay prompt was chosen with the topic in the book. Students are required to write essays within 60 minutes. 212 essays were collected from undergraduate students in the last semester learning how to write essays. All the essays were read and the unqualified ones were eliminated, e.g insufficient wordcount (at least 250 words). The essays were chosen with 162 essays, and then analyzed, and the frequency of different types of complex sentences. The results were then compared with the corpus of Truong & Do (2021), which is a widely used academic database, a scholarly database which serves as the standard for measuring writing proficiency.

To identify complex sentences in the corpus, we counted subordinate clauses by highlighting and keying individual subordinators in the essays. For example, we highlighted keywords such as because, since, as, and now that to find the adverbial clause of reason (Truong & Do, 2021). However, the subordinator that, similar to which, can be used to form a relative clause of time, and it can also be a demonstrative pronoun or an adverb of degree.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results from the Study

Table 1: Frequency of adverbial clauses

Clause Types	Subordinators	Frequency (No. of occurrences)
Reason	*because*	86
	as	32
	since	32
	now that	0
Concession	*although*	38
	though	1
	even though	0
Contrast	*while*	58
	whereas	2
Condition	*if*	221
	as long as	8
	unless	5
Time	*when*	215
	before	1
	as	7
	once	3
	whenever	12
	as soon as	0
	after	6
Place	*Where/ in which*	32
	wherever	2

Table 2: Frequency of noun clauses and relative clauses

Clause Types	Markers	Frequency (No. of occurrences)
Noun Clause	that	524
	what	28
	how	7
	why	8
	whether	8
	how much	0
	how many	0
	if	0
Relative Clause	that	178
	who	135
	which	191
	whom	0
	whose	3

After analyzing the frequency and placement of complex sentence structures in the writing of English-majored students by counting the highlighted subordinators, the

findings of this research shed light on the most commonly used subordinators and types of clauses. For adverbial clauses, we found the most frequently occurring adverbial clauses with *because* (86), *although* (38), *while* (58), *if* (221), *when* (215), and *where* (32). Noun clauses with *that* stand out, with 524 occurrences. Besides, relative clauses with *that* and *who* rank second and third respectively, including 178 and 135 occurrences, while those with *which* are also relatively frequent, with 191 occurrences. Significantly, there are zero cases that use subordinators in the writing including even though, as soon as, how many, if for a noun clause and whom. The other less frequently used clauses are shown in Tables 1 and 2 above.

In addition to the defined subordinators, there are still some cases that need to be taken into consideration, shown as follows. Students want to write complex sentences based on their prior knowledge. However, due to some reasons, they fail to write correct complex ones or they use other subordinators to write. Some of the words they use are *so that*, *whilst* and *while* (time purpose) to write complex sentences. Some reduce or omit *that*.

Table 3: Frequency of other complex sentences

Clause types	Markers	Frequency (No. of occurrences)	Extracts from essays
Purposes	*so that*	10	*"Furthermore, it allows us to save time so that we may work and make money while also caring for our families."*
Contrast	*whilst*	3	*"Whilst some people still travel to their place of work each day, others have the option to work from home."*
Time	*while*	8	*"While people are working and being bothered by other factors such as crying children, neighbors are searching and noisy family space."*
Omitted	*that*	15	*"It is true a lot of people tend to work from distant places by using computers, the internet and smartphones these days."*
Reduced	*who/ whom/ which/ that*	34	*"There are more and more people using support tools to work from home instead of traveling to their place of work."* *"Because if they create laziness, do not work on time, the work will be stagnant, causing stress and pressure in your house."*

As can be seen, students like to use reduced relative clauses in their writing. Relative clauses are used to establish complex sentences. Students still like to omit *that* in their sentences. Besides those mentioned in the corpus by Truong & Do (2021), there are some other ways to write complex sentences as stated above.

4.2 Comparison with the Corpus
To better understand the similarities and differences between the corpus by Truong & Do (2021) and students' corpus, a table is drawn. Upon looking at the table, we can see

similar results and differences that could give us implications for teaching, learning and even designing the course.

Table 4: The corpus – students' frequency of adverbial clauses

Clause Types	Subordinators	Corpus Frequency/Students'
Reason	*because*	84/86
	as	51/32
	since	8/32
	now that	1/0
Concession	*although*	45/38
	though	17/1
	even though	6/0
Contrast	*while*	67/ 58
	whereas	7/2
Condition	*if*	145/221
	as long as	8/8
	unless	3/5
Time	*when*	61/215
	before	15/1
	as	12/ 7
	once	8/3
	whenever	2/12
	as soon as	1/0
	after	2/6
Place	*Where/ in which*	44/32
	wherever	3/2

Table 5: The corpus – students' frequency of noun clauses and relative clauses

Clause Types	Markers	Corpus Frequency/ Students
Noun Clause	that	667/ 524
	what	54/28
	how	37/7
	why	36/8
	whether	26/8
	how much	5/0
	how many	0/0
	if	0/0
Relative Clause	that	254 / 178
	who	153/135
	which	104/191
	whom	1/0
	whose	3/3

Compared to the corpus by Truong & Do (2021), there are some similarities in students' use of complex sentences when writing essays. The most used subordinators in the clause types are *because, although, while, if, when,* and *where*. Noun clauses with *that* stand out, with 524 occurrences. However, *which* is used for relative clauses accounts for the most instead of using *that*. This is the difference. Students are inclined to use *if, when* and *which*

in their writing. In the corpus by Truong & Do (2021) these three subordinators are counted fewer than those in students' writing (145, 61 and 104 in the corpus respectively). Students do not like to use that for the relative clauses, only 178 times compared to 254 times in the corpus. Also, based on the corpus, students use the most common subordinators for their writing. For example, for noun clauses, they want to use that only. However, the corpus shows *that, what, how, why* and *whether* are still popular. Students should learn to use them more in future essays.

4.2 Discussion

The results were then compared with the corpus of Truong & Do (2021), which is a widely used academic database, a scholarly database which serves as the standard for measuring writing proficiency.

The results of this study support the findings of previous research, which have shown that explicit instruction, practice, and feedback can improve the use of complex sentence structures in academic writing (Wintergerst & de la Paz, 2013; Truong & Do, 2021; Bi et al., 2022). The use of corpus-based approaches is also supported by the findings of Truong & Do (2021), who found that corpus-based instruction improved students' use of complex sentence structures.

Our findings also highlight the usefulness of the concept of the writing zone of proximal development (Bennett & Lindemann, 2018). By identifying students' writing ZPD and providing targeted instruction based on their needs, teachers can help students develop their writing skills more effectively.

Further analysis of the complex sentence structures used by English-majored students in their writing reveals an interesting pattern - a preference for reduced relative clauses. Reduced relative clauses, also known as participle clauses, are clauses that act like relative clauses but have the relative pronoun and auxiliary verb omitted.

The corpus analysis revealed that students frequently used reduced relative clauses in their writing, which made up a significant proportion of the relative clauses found. This preference for reduced relative clauses could be attributed to the desire to simplify complex sentence structures, or to create a more natural flow in their writing.

While the use of reduced relative clauses can bring some benefits to students' writing, it is important to note that it could also lead to errors and ambiguity if not used correctly. Reduced relative clauses are commonly used in spoken English but are not typically favored in academic writing. Therefore, it is important for English-majored students to be aware of the conventions and best practices in using complex sentence structures in academic writing.

Overall, the preference for reduced relative clauses among English-majored students highlights the importance of providing targeted pedagogical interventions to help students master complex sentence structures effectively, not only in terms of grammatical accuracy but also in creating a coherent and professional writing style.

5. Implications

The study by Truong & Do (2021) suggests that teachers should use appropriate subordinators to teach complex sentences, and students should focus more on these subordinators in order to learn. The use of subordinators plays an important role in building complex sentences and expressing complex ideas in English. However, students' use of complex sentences is still unmatchable with the corpus. Given that many students experience difficulty with complex sentences, it is important for teachers to use effective teaching methods that emphasize the correct use of subordinators.

In terms of teachers, they should put more emphasis on teaching and including subordinators in the English language curriculum. With teacher-led instruction that is focused on subordinators and a curriculum that has subordinators embedded in it, students will have more opportunities to practice using them in context. This will help them to become more proficient in their use of complex sentences. Research also suggests that teachers can facilitate students' development of complex sentence structures by providing explicit instruction, modeling, and giving opportunities for practice. Explicit instruction, modeling, and practice have been identified as effective methods to develop students' ability to use complex sentence structures (Swain & Lapkin, 2002, Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008). Truong & Do (2021) used corpus analysis to identify complex sentence structures used in academic writing and developed a framework for selecting these structures to teach students. For example, with *that* in the relative clauses, students often use *which*, so teachers should raise their awareness of using *which* instead of *that*.

For curriculum designers, the study suggests that subordinators need to be given more attention in the English language curriculum. This could involve providing specific guidance on the use of subordinators within complex sentence structures, and ensuring that teaching materials focus on the recognition and use of subordinators. The study highlights the importance of designing language assessments that take into account the role of subordinators in the construction of complex sentences. By including tasks that require the use of subordinators, language assessments can provide a more accurate reflection of students' language abilities and help to identify areas of weakness that may require further attention.

With respect to students, they should focus more on subordinators to learn how to use them correctly. This could involve targeted exercises and activities that help students to practice using subordinators in context. By actively engaging with subordinators in this way, students will be better prepared to use them in their own writing and speaking. In addition, the study implies that students need to be more aware of the role that subordinators play in the construction of complex sentences. This could be achieved through targeted teaching and practice exercises that enable students to recognize different types of subordinators and use them more effectively. Students should limit the use of reduced clauses with *that* or have wrong uses of subordinators. Students should learn how to use "less common" subordinators in the correct way. Some subordinators are not mentioned in the corpus and should be added to students' use.

Furthermore, our findings support the idea that creating environments that support writing can also be effective in improving complex sentence structures (Leung & Street, 2012). The results of this study show that peer feedback can be a useful technique for supporting students in developing their writing skills. Peer feedback provides students with opportunities to learn from their peers and also helps them to better understand the expectations of academic writing.

Overall, the research by Truong & Do (2021) has important implications for how we teach and learn complex sentences in English. By prioritizing the use of subordinators in both instruction and curriculum development, we can help students to become more proficient in their use and ultimately improve their English language skills. Focusing attention on the role of subordinators in the construction of complex sentences can help teachers, students, and curriculum designers work together to enhance language learning outcomes and improve overall proficiency in English language use. The findings support the idea that interventions aimed at improving writing skills can be effective (Carpenter & Huffman, 2016). The results of this study show that the use of a peer feedback intervention helped students improve their use of complex sentence structures.

6. Limitations and Further Studies

The study conducted by Truong & Do (2021) provides important insights into the use of subordinators within complex sentence structures among English language learners. However, there are some limitations to this study that could be addressed through further research.

One limitation of this study is that it relies solely on written responses from students, and does not incorporate insights from interviews or other qualitative data sources. Conducting interviews with students could provide a more detailed understanding of the reasons why students use subordinators inaccurately, and could help to identify factors such as lack of exposure or confidence that may hinder their use of complex sentences.

Furthermore, the study also does not examine the causes that hinder the use of complex sentences in English in general. Future research could explore the underlying factors that impede the acquisition of complex sentence structures in English language learners, such as students' prior language exposure or the influence of native language structure.

Another limitation of the study is that it focuses solely on the use of subordinators and does not address other aspects of complex sentence structure, such as sentence length, punctuation, and clause order. Further research could investigate how these factors interact with the use of subordinators in the overall complexity of sentences in English language learning.

One limitation of our study is that it was conducted with small sample size. Further research on larger samples is needed. Additionally, future studies could explore the potential of other interventions, such as using instructional technology, to improve

complex sentence structures in academic writing. Specifically, the findings of this study suggest that further research is needed to explore the role of subordinators in the development of complex sentence structures in English language learners. Future research could explore the relationship between subordinators and other factors that affect second language acquisition, such as age, proficiency level, and first language background. Additionally, studies could examine whether certain types of subordinators are more difficult for English language learners to master than others and whether some teaching strategies are more effective than others in helping students to learn how to use them correctly.

In conclusion, while the study by Truong & Do (2021) uses Antcont software and provides valuable insights into the use of subordinators among English language learners, it also highlights the need for using that software for further research and to fully understand the factors that influence the acquisition of complex sentence structures in English.

7. Conclusion

In terms of adverbial clauses, the findings suggest that the most frequently occurring subordinators are *if* and *when*, with 221 and 215 occurrences respectively. The subordinators *because, while*, and *although* also frequently occurred, with 86, 58, and 38 occurrences respectively. Additionally, the subordinator *where,* which is less commonly used in academic writing, showed 32 occurrences.

The analysis of noun clauses revealed that clauses with the subordinator that were the most frequently used. In fact, *that*-clauses had a total of 524 occurrences in the corpus, indicating their significance as a crucial component of complex sentence structures.

Looking at relative clauses, the findings indicate that clauses with that and who were the most commonly occurring with 178 and 135 occurrences respectively. Relative clauses with which were also relatively frequent with 191 occurrences.

Overall, these results suggest that certain subordinators and types of clauses are more commonly used in the writing of English-majored students than others. These findings provide valuable insights into the challenges that students face in mastering complex sentence structures and highlight potential areas for pedagogical interventions to address these challenges. The results of this research demonstrate a need for students to develop their ability to use complex sentence structures effectively in academic writing. Explicit instruction, modeling, and practice are recommended for teachers to support students in the development of complex and compound-complex sentences. Through these methods, teachers can provide students with the skills needed to write more sophisticated, effective, and compelling academic texts. There is also a need for improved instruction and practice in the use of complex sentence structures to improve the sophistication of university-level writing. Teachers and curriculum developers need to be aware of the current patterns in the types and frequency of complex sentence structures used by students and create instructional materials that address students'

needs. Future research may investigate the effects of explicit instruction and practice on the improvement of students' use of complex sentence structures in academic writing.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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