

AN INVESTIGATION OF CLAUSES IN ESSAY WRITING BY ESL UNDERGRADUATES AT A STATE UNIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA: A CRITICAL STUDY FOR ENHANCING TEACHING PEDAGOGY

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Essay writing is crucial in Sri Lankan education, especially in the state examinations such as the GCE Ordinary and Advanced Levels. The essay is a compulsory question which typically carries fifteen marks based on specific criteria: content, five; language, five; format and organisation, two; and writing mechanics, three marks. These benchmarks emphasise the significance of essay writing in evaluating students' writing skills from a scholarly perspective. It is a mandatory assignment, assessment, and evaluation practice across all levels of education in Sri Lanka. Despite a decade of learning English as a second language (ESL) in school, first-year students at the University of Vavuniya continue to face significant challenges in correctly using finite and non-finite clauses in their essay writing. Students are expected to demonstrate an academic-level formal writing style typical to universities and scholarly contributions since they follow the degree programme in English in addition to ESL courses. Students often rely on simple, clichéd constructions to lower proficiency levels as they lack knowledge of a variety of clauses. The structural complexity expected in university writing is habitually absent, preventing students from demonstrating the sophistication required in academic essays. Using clauses is a challenge for ESL students, even for those who scored better overall marks. Previous studies have focused on other aspects of improving essay writing, but little attention is given to the complexity of using non-finite clauses in Sri Lankan contexts. This study examines the extent to which second language learners use clauses in English essay writing to help teachers refine their teaching methods. The study signifies the necessity for greater emphasis on syntactic complexity in essay writing at the tertiary level. The thirty-three essays were randomly selected from sixty students enrolled in the Faculty of Business Studies, and mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative, were used to analyse the data. The findings reveal that if-clause 14%, that-clause 14%, wh-clause 24%, to-infinitive 42% were used while participial and bare infinitive clauses were not used; 87.3% relied on simple sentences, and 12.3% used complex sentences. Errors in using clauses were observed, providing insights into challenges the students faced and how to improve the structural knowledge to enhance the quality of essay writing. The study recommends that the proper use of clauses improves academic essay writing, language maturity and authenticity of the text. It emphasises training students on operating the process with deliberate learning of Chomsky's transformations, setting the goals for raising their analytical and higher-order thinking skills, as Bloom's Taxonomy outlines.

Keywords: Academic essay, ESL, clause complexity, undergraduates