

EFL University Students' Command of Sentence Patterns

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Abstract

Sentence is a grammatical structure that expresses a complete thought. However, some EFL learners often find difficulties in recognizing and producing grammatically correct sentence patterns. Therefore, the main aims of the current study are to investigate EFL learners' command of sentence patterns in terms of recognition and production. Based on that, two tests were constructed and submitted to a sample of (72) fourth year students. The tests are: recognition test, where participants were required to give the correct pattern for 14 sentences (2 for each pattern), and a production test, where participants were required to give (2) grammatically correct sentences for each pattern. Data were collected and calculated and the results show that EFL learners are unable to recognize and produce all sentence patterns except (SV) and (SVA) only at recognition. Finally, the study ends with some conclusions and recommendations.

Keywords: EFL, Sentence Patterns.

1. Introduction

The proper use of grammar plays a crucial role in writing any text as grammar and writing are closely related. If the writing lacks grammatical accuracy, it can result in misunderstandings and impede effective communication. According to Harmer (2006:1), studying grammar involves analyzing the arrangement and pattern of sentences. It is important to ensure that sentences have a complete thought and are structured correctly. When striving for impeccable writing, it is vital to pay close attention to sentence construction before addressing other aspects such as content, cohesion, and organization. College students, in particular, should focus on sentence types in writing to improve their writing skills.

Byrd and Benson (2001: 37-53) identify four types of sentences, namely simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex, based on

their structure. These four sentence types are fundamental in writing and their combination can result in well-written and captivating content. When appropriate sentence combining techniques are used, students can better link their ideas and showcase the relationships between them. Additionally, using a variety of sentence types can benefit the reader who might otherwise become disinterested with monotonous sentences of uniform length and structure.

Moreover, Christiano (2018) contends that comprehending sentence patterns is crucial to comprehend the structure of each sentence type. The fundamental sentence patterns contain a subject and a verb or predicate. The subject indicates the person or thing to which an action occurs or happens, and the predicate describes what happens. A sentence that contains only a subject or only a verb is incomplete. Therefore, a complete sentence must comprise both a subject and a verb, while more complex sentences include both subject and verb modifiers and complements.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

English has its own patterns and rules for correct sentence structure. However, any difficulty in recognizing and/or producing correct sentence patterns leads writing to become either incomprehensible or improper representation of ideas that someone wants to express or convey. Following that, the problem of the current research can be embodied in that most of EFL students exhibit serious difficulties in recognizing and producing correct sentence patterns in English. Therefore, the current research tries to answer the following research questions:

1. Are EFL university students able to recognize sentence patterns?
2. Are EFL university students able to produce correct sentences for each sentence pattern?
3. Which patterns are more familiar than others to Al-Noor EFL students?

1.2 Hypotheses of the Study

It is hypothesized that:

1. Al-Noor EFL university students are expected to find difficulties in recognizing sentence patterns.

2. Al-Noor EFL university students are expected to find difficulties in producing correct sentence for each pattern.
3. SV and SVC are expected to be more familiar to EFL students than other sentence patterns at recognition and production levels.

1.3 Aims of the Study

The research aims at:

1. Providing a theoretical account on sentence patterns in terms of definitions and classification.
2. Investigating Al-Noor EFL university students' command of sentence patterns at recognition and production levels.
3. Examining which sentence patterns are more familiar to Al-Noor EFL university students.

1.4 Limits of the Study

The present research is limited to investigate EFL university students' command of sentence patterns according to Quirk's (1973) classification (i.e. SV, SVC, SVA, SVO, SVOO, SVOC, SVOA). It is further limited to a sample of (72) fourth year university students in the Department of English/ Al-Noor University College, during the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023.

2. Theoretical Background

This section provides information on the theoretical part of the research topic, as the following sub-sections tackle the details of the topic in terms of concept, definition, types, classifications, etc.

2.1 What is a Sentence?

Verspoor (2000) explains that the term "sentence" originates from the Latin word "sententia," which originally meant "opinion" or "feeling." In the context of grammar, this meaning has evolved to refer to a statement, question, command, wish, or exclamation expressed in a group of words that usually starts with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark in writing. Hornby (1995) further emphasizes that in written English "a written English sentence begins with

a capital letter and ends with a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark". A sentence is an integral part of language, as it is composed of a set of words that convey a statement, question, or command. According to Radford (1997: 527), a sentence is "a free-standing clause which is not contained within some larger expression". Therefore, a sentence can be described as a group of words that form a complete idea. It is divided into four primary types: simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentence.

In addition, a sentence is a complete meaningful unit. During speaking, one may use complex sentences, but can still convey the intended message through different means such as body language, facial expressions and tone. However, when we write, these devices are not available, therefore; it becomes important to structure and punctuate the sentences carefully. Frank (1972) categorizes sentences into two types based on their meaning and function. From a meaning perspective, on the one hand, a sentence is a complete thought. From a functional perspective, on the other hand, it includes a subject and predicate, and its role depends on the sentence pattern.

2.2 Types of a Sentence

Types of sentences can be classified into four major types: simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentence (Steffani, 2007: 45). Each type is described as follows:

The first type is the *Simple Sentence*, which is composed of a subject and a predicate, and expresses a complete idea as an independent clause. It consists of only one independent clause and no dependent clauses. It may contain phrases and more than one subject or verb, and is considered the smallest sentence-unit (Brandon, 2012; Oshima and Hogue 2008). For instance, "Ahmed is an engineer."

The second type is the *Compound Sentence*, which consists of two simple sentences joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), (Sundari, Febriyanti, and Hendrawaty, 2017: 22-59). For example, "I enjoy playing tennis, but I hate playing golf."

The third type of sentence is *Complex Sentence*. It consists of an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. An independent clause can function as a sentence on its own and express a complete thought, while a dependent clause cannot stand alone and require an independent clause. Noun clauses, adjective clauses, and adverb clauses

are examples of dependent clauses that can be part of a complex sentence (Sundari, Febriyanti, and Hendrawaty, 2017: 22-59). For instance, "Before he went to work, the man was attacked." is a complex sentence.

The fourth type of sentence is *Compound-Complex Sentence*. It consists of two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses. The sentence can be a statement, question, request, or exclamation (Bornstein, 1977: 52). For instance, "even though I wanted to travel after finishing high school, I had to work in my family's business".

2.3 Elements of a Sentence

According to Lado (1977: 142), the grammatical structure of a sentence refers to the arrangement of words and their respective elements to produce a cohesive meaning and intonation pattern. The sentence is formed by combining two or more words to create a complete idea, and it includes constituent elements that contribute to the meaning of the sentence. The sentence elements are:

1- Subject

According to Biber et al. (1999: 125), the subject is a constituent element of a clause that appears before the verb phrase and signifies the main topic or theme of the sentence. It is found in all finite clauses except for those in the imperative mood. While the subject usually conveys some semantic meaning, it can sometimes function as a grammatically necessary element with no semantic content.

2- Verb Phrase

The verb phrase conveys a broad spectrum of meanings, including actions, feelings, or existence. It plays a vital role in the clause as it frequently appears in the middle position, and the number of arguments that a verb requires determines the occurrence of other significant clause components such as objects and complements (ibid: 126, 141).

3- Complements

In the structure of a sentence, complements provide additional details about either the subject or object. A subject complement, or subject predicative, is used exclusively with copular verbs to describe or identify the subject. An object complement, or object predicative, is used to describe the preceding object. (ibid: 128).

4- Object

The objects in a sentence indicate the person or thing that has been impacted by the action of the verb. The direct object can only be found with transitive verbs and comes directly after the verb phrase, unless there is an indirect object that comes first. In contrast, the indirect object appears between the verb phrase and the direct object and is only found with di-transitive verbs. (Biber et. al, 1999: 129). An illustration of this is in sentences like "He gave Carrie a ring (IO)," or "He gave it to me (PO)."

5- Adverbials

Adverbials provide additional information about the action, such as when, where, or how it occurred. They are not necessary for the sentence's grammatical structure and can take on a variety of forms. There are three types of adverbials: circumstance adverbials, which answer questions like when, where, or why the action occurred; stance adverbials, which express the speaker's attitude towards the message; and linking adverbials, which show the relationship between clauses (Biber et. al, 1999: 134).

All of these elements form sentence patterns in English and each one has a specific function and location within a sentence. The following section tackles these elements in forming correct sentence patterns.

2.4 Sentence Patterns in English

Sentence pattern pertains to the structural organization of words, phrases, and clauses within a sentence. Having a diverse range of sentence patterns in writing can prevent monotony and effectively convey the message. According to Fitri (2017: 71), "sentence pattern is the arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence. The grammatical meaning of a sentence is dependent on this structural organization, which is also called syntax or syntactic structure".

To put it simply, English sentences usually follow a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, meaning the subject comes first, followed by the verb and then the object. When reading a sentence, we anticipate that the first noun is the subject and the second one is the object, and this is commonly referred to as the canonical sentence strategy in linguistics (Clark, 2011).

Christianto (2018) emphasizes the significance of comprehending sentence patterns, which is necessary to understand the structure of each

type of sentence. Basic sentence patterns require a subject and a verb or predicate. A subject means to whom or something happens, a predicate is what happens, while the predicate is usually a verb that describes what the person or object does or has done. A complete sentence must have both a subject and a verb, while more complete sentences include a subject, a verb, and a complement or complement subject and predicate. A sentence usually contains additional information about the subject and predicate. Sentence patterns are like a map of a sentence, showing how the different parts fit together to make sense. The subject and predicate are the most critical parts of written text since they allow written sentences to make sense when they stand alone. Additionally, some basic phrases, such as an object and a complement, may be necessary to complete a sentence (Fitri, 2017).

Different sentence patterns exist in English to combine clauses in different ways. If writers consistently use the same sentence pattern, their writing may become dull and monotonous. According to Sundari, Febriyanti, and Hendrawaty (2017: 22-59), nine structuralists have discussed patterns in syntax. These scholars include Al-Hamash and Abdullah (1979), Close (1978), Eckersley and Eckersley (1966), Gleason (1961), Quirk and Greenbaum (1983), Nasr (1985), Onions (1980), Roberts (1956), and Stageberg (1981).

Focusing on the necessary elements, seven types of clauses can be identified and labeled with abbreviations, as explained by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 167-168).

S = Subject

Vt = Transitive Verb

Vi = Intransitive Verb

A = Adverb

Lv = Linking Verb

Cs = Subject Complement

Co = Object Complement

Oi = Indirect Object

Od = Direct Object

3. Previous Studies

Several prior studies have investigated the mastery of sentence patterns from different perspectives and levels, and most of them reveal that mastering sentence patterns is challenging. For instance, according to Long (1996, cited in Steffani, 2007: 44), many students struggle with identifying basic English parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, and adverbs. In EFL contexts, learners may also encounter difficulties in recognizing and producing sentence patterns due to the fact that they only study English as a subject in school. Yano's (2012) study found that EFL learners at the school level find basic English sentence patterns too challenging. Therefore, while students may comprehend the meaning of English sentences, they may not have the ability to accurately recognize or produce the patterns.

However, the current study tries to investigate EFL university students' command of sentence patterns at recognition and production levels. The following sections describe the practical part to this end.

4. Methodology

To achieve the aims and verify hypotheses of the current research, sentence patterns test was conducted to investigate the participants' command of sentences patterns. The following subsections clarify the practical steps that have been followed.

4.1 Population and Sample:

Population of the study included all of 4thstage students who are (150) students in English Department at Al-Noor University College. Students of fourth stage were chosen on purpose because they have studied sentence patterns and supposed to be familiar with this topic. Moreover, the sample of the study included (72) participants from the population who were chosen randomly from the research population.

4.2 The Tests

For the purpose of measuring the participants' command of sentence patterns, the researchers constructed two tests namely recognition and production tests. To this end, Quirk's (1973) classification of sentences patterns was adopted as the instrument of the test.

Based on that, the recognition test included (14) sentences to give the correct pattern for each sentence and all of the sentences were presented in random order of patterns. As far as the production test is concerned, it included (14) sentence patterns to give a correct sentence for each pattern.

4.3 Procedures

Before implementing the test, the sentences have been presented to jury experts to judge on the suitability and relevance of the test items to measure students' command of sentence patterns. Remarks concerning modifications, suitability and relevance of the items have been approved by the jury members to be suitable, relevant, and valid for the purpose of the current research.

After that, the tests have been demonstrated inside the classroom at Al-Noor University College under supervision and control. The participants were directed and asked to give the correct pattern for each sentence. Then, after two days, participants were asked to give two correct sentences for each pattern. In addition, students were not allowed to use books, dictionaries or collaborate with each other.

5. Results and Discussion

Data were calculated and analyzed by the researchers statistically and the results are displayed in the following tables:

Table (1) Results of Recognition Test

| No. | The Sentence | No. of Correct Answers | % of Correct Answers | No. of Incorrect Answers | % of Incorrect Answers |
|--------------|---|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | Her dress appears new. | 18 | 25% | 54 | 75% |
| 2. | No one in the street has ever given the blind woman any help. | 28 | 38.89% | 44 | 61.11% |
| 3. | You must put the toys upstairs. | 28 | 38.89% | 44 | 61.11% |
| 4. | We are in a bit of a mess. | 36 | 50% | 36 | 50% |
| 5. | My mother is looking after my baby sister. | 22 | 30.56% | 50 | 69.44% |
| 6. | She made me happy. | 19 | 26.39% | 53 | 73.61% |
| 7. | The restaurant served three kinds of barbeque. | 24 | 33.33% | 48 | 66.67% |
| 8. | It is raining. | 45 | 62.50% | 27 | 37.50% |
| 9. | My brother speaks English very well. | 21 | 29.17% | 51 | 70.83% |
| 10. | The boys are playing in the garden. | 38 | 52.78% | 34 | 47.22% |
| 11. | The country became totally independent. | 21 | 29.17% | 51 | 70.83% |
| 12. | Most people consider this book rather expensive. | 16 | 22.22% | 56 | 77.78% |
| 13. | Students asked the teacher many questions. | 26 | 36.11% | 46 | 63.89% |
| 14. | The thief ran away. | 40 | 55.56% | 32 | 44.44% |
| Total | | 382 | 37.90% | 626 | 62.10% |

As far as the recognition test is concerned, results in the preceding table show that students encounter difficulties in recognizing all sentence

patterns except (SV) and (SVA) which have high correct answers percentage i.e. more than (50%). However, some of these high results are almost 50% (sentence number 4 and 14) which is still not satisfactory as a command of a sentence pattern. Furthermore, some patterns were highly difficult to recognize like (SVOC) in sentence number (12) which is (22%) and sentences number (1, 6, 9, and 11) which are all lower than (50%). In addition to that, the total percentage of incorrect recognition of all patterns (62%) which indicates students' poor command of sentence patterns.

Table (2) Results of Production Test

| No. | The Pattern | No. of Correct Answers | % of Correct Answers | No. of Incorrect Answers | % of Incorrect Answers |
|--------------|--|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | SV _{intrans} | 27 | 37.50% | 45 | 62.50% |
| 2. | SV _{mono-trans} O _d | 30 | 41.67% | 42 | 58.33% |
| 3. | SV _{intens} C | 18 | 25% | 54 | 75% |
| 4. | SV _{complex-trans} O _d A | 26 | 36.11% | 46 | 63.89% |
| 5. | SV _{intens} C | 12 | 16.67% | 60 | 83.33% |
| 6. | SV _{complex-trans} O _d C | 6 | 8.33% | 66 | 91.67% |
| 7. | SV _{mono-trans} O _d | 22 | 30.56% | 50 | 69.44% |
| 8. | SV _{di-trans} O _i O _d | 13 | 18.06% | 59 | 81.94% |
| 9. | SV _{intens} A | 21 | 29.17% | 51 | 70.83% |
| 10. | SV _{complex-trans} O _d A | 15 | 20.83% | 57 | 79.17% |
| 11. | SV _{intens} A | 15 | 20.83% | 57 | 79.17% |
| 12. | SV _{complex-trans} O _d C | 5 | 6.94% | 67 | 93.06% |
| 13. | SV _{di-trans} O _i O _d | 11 | 15.28% | 61 | 84.72% |
| 14. | SV _{intrans} | 18 | 25% | 54 | 75% |
| Total | | 239 | 23.71% | 769 | 76.29% |

As for the production test, the results show that students have difficulties in producing all sentence patterns since results of all patterns are lower than 50%. Moreover, the total percentage of incorrect production of all sentence patterns is (76%) which is very high percentage that indicates students' deficiency in producing grammatically correct sentence patterns. Hence, students do not have the level of proficiency that enables them to command sentence patterns. Thus, the first and second hypotheses which read "EFL university students are expected to find difficulties in recognizing sentence patterns" and "EFL university students are expected to find difficulties in producing correct sentence for each pattern" are proved.

Furthermore, the third hypothesis which reads "SV and SVC are expected to be more familiar to EFL students than other sentence patterns at recognition and production levels" is rejected due to the results showing that (SV) and (SVA) are more recognizable in terms of recognition level only. Accordingly, the results of the current study are compatible with the results of the previous studies discussed in the current study. The following table shows the total results of two sentences for each pattern in recognition and production tests.

Table (3) Total Percentage of Command of Sentence Patterns

| No. | The Pattern (Recognition) | % of Correct Answers | The Pattern (Production) | % of correct Answers |
|-----|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. | SV | 59.03% | SV | 31.25% |
| 2. | SVA | 51.39% | SVA | 25.00% |
| 3. | SVC | 27.08% | SVC | 20.83% |
| 4. | SVO | 31.94% | SVO | 36.11% |
| 5. | SVOA | 34.03% | SVOA | 28.47% |
| 6. | SVOC | 24.31% | SVOC | 7.64% |
| 7. | SVOO | 37.50% | SVOO | 16.67% |

For more illustration, the following figures display these results:

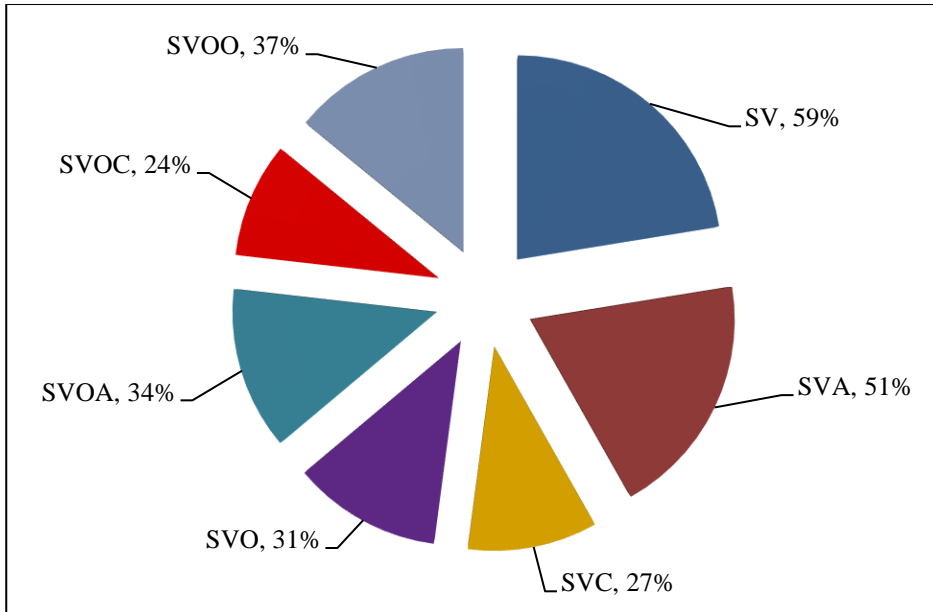


Figure (1) Total Results of Recognition Test of All Patterns

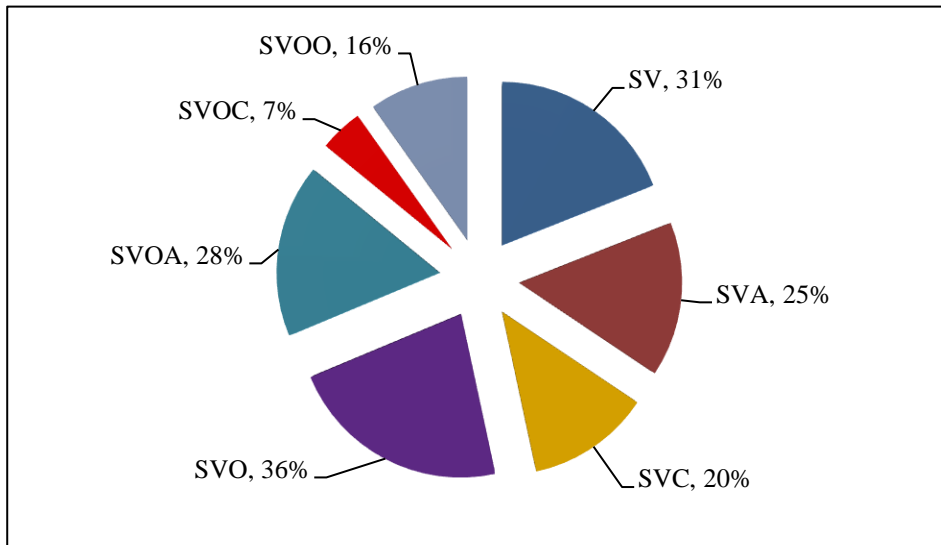


Figure (2) Total Results of Production Test of All Patterns

6. Conclusions

The current research aims at investigating EFL university students' command of sentence patterns at recognition and production levels. It has been found that the majority of students are unable to recognize or

produce the correct sentence pattern. However, the patterns (SV and SVA) were the most easily recognized patterns among the other patterns. Moreover, (SVOC, SVOO and SVOA) were the most difficult patterns to recognize and produce. This might be due to the confusion related to the direct and indirect object as well as complement and adverb. Accordingly, this gap might be due to the grammar curriculum in EFL classes since this topic (sentence patterns) has only been taught in their fourth stage or that students cannot distinguish between different parts of speech and have poor vocabulary knowledge.

7. Recommendations

Based on the theoretical research and the results obtained, it is recommended that:

1. Sentence patterns require more attention and students need to be assisted to develop awareness concerning the importance of sentence patterns.
2. Students need to be involved in activities and exercises that make them practice recognizing and producing sentence patterns.
3. Teachers are recommended to give more attention to sentence patterns in all stages.

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