

## The Analysis of Sentence Structure and Grammatical Features for ESL Writing Texts

Asst. Prof. Mohammed Abed Saleh  
Wasit University \ Education college for Humanities

### Abstract

Analyzing ESL texts for syntax purposes provides an opportunity to learn about and build upon their writing skills. Teachers can also identify students' writing weaknesses and can use different strategies to develop their writing skills. It is noted that the purpose of each text is determined by the language and the means used to express the goals of writing both linguistically and practically. Quantitative and qualitative analysis used in this research to analyze the two texts in order to discover structural and grammatical errors. Where texts of the second and fourth levels were selected from an English language learning center. This research will analyze simple, compound and complex sentences respectively. Some of the results of this research are that both writers face some difficulties in punctuation and complements, and also the second-level learner has difficulties in forming a complete sentence such as subject and verb agreement, while the fourth-level learner has difficulty writing long sentences.

### تحليل بنية الجملة والميزات النحوية لنصوص الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية

#### المستخلص

يوفر تحليل نصوص متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية الثانية لغرض بناء الجملة فرصة للتعرف على مهاراتهم الكتابية والبناء عليها. يمكن للمدرسين أيضًا تحديد نقاط الضعف لدى الطلاب في الكتابة ويمكنهم استخدام استراتيجيات مختلفة لتطوير مهاراتهم في الكتابة. يُلاحظ أن الغرض من كل نص يتم تحديده من خلال اللغة والوسيلة المستخدمة للتعبير عن أهداف الكتابة لغويًا وعمليًا. استخدم التحليل الكمي والنوعي في هذا البحث لتحليل النصين من أجل اكتشاف الأخطاء النحوية والنحوية. حيث تم اختيار نصوص من المستويين الثاني والرابع من احد مراكز تعلم اللغة الانكليزية. سيبدأ هذا البحث في تحليل الجمل البسيطة والمركبة والمعقدة على التوالي. بعض من نتائج هذا البحث هو

يواجه كلا الكاتبتين بعض الصعوبات في علامات الترقيم والتكملة وايضا المتعلم ذات المستوى الثاني لديه صعوبات في تكوين جملة كاملة مثل موافقة الفاعل والفعل بينما المتعلم ذات المستوى الرابع يواجه صعوبة في كتابة جمل طويلة.

## Introduction

The analysis of English Second Language Learners (ESLLs) writing texts for the purpose of syntax provides the opportunity to recognize and build up on their writing skills. Teachers can also identify the weaknesses of students writing and they can use different strategies to develop their writing skills. It is noticed that the purpose of each text is determined by the language and medium which are used to express aims of the writers semantically and pragmatically. English language has a syntactic structure different from some languages like Arabic. For example, English sentence structure is subject-verb-object (SVO) while Arabic sentence is VSO. This makes it hard for Arabic ESLLs for example, to master writing in English language in the early stages of their language learning. According to Fallahi, Wood, Austad & Fallahi (2006) grammar, style and mechanism of writing are the essential skills to produce competent writers. Furthermore, Young and Strauch (2006) argue that students ignore the grammatical rules, simplify their sentences, the use of incomplete application of rules and the native language transfer were the main causes of ESLLs errors.

Thus, these problems will cause some difficulties for ESLLs to identify patterns and tenses. Sentence structure is governed by grammatical rules which produce the pattern and whether the sentence has one clause or two clauses. The analysis of students writing will help teachers to see what pattern students use, what type of problems students might face in constructing their sentences and it is an evaluation for teachers to produce different strategies in teaching writing skills. Therefore, considering what difficulties students might have when they write their essays in constructing their sentences, this essay attempts to investigate two ESL texts from two different stages: Stage two (S2) is beginner level and stage 4 (S4) is advanced level.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis are used to analyze the two texts in order to spot syntactic and grammatical errors. This research will start analyzing simple, compound and complex sentences respectively.

Specifically, compound and complex sentences structures will be examined. Moreover, other grammatical features will be analyzed such as tense, aspect, reference and antecedent in terms of words connection. By doing this analysis it would result in showing the right patterns and grammatical features of both texts. On the basis of S2 and S4 level the writer predicts that S2 writer uses simple sentences and has difficulties in forming a complete sentence such as subject – verb agreement, misuse of coordinators and repetition of some phrases while the writer of S4 text has some problems in using correct aspect of verbs and the use of long sentences. In addition, both writers have some difficulties in punctuation and complement.

### **Literature review**

Grammar can be considered as a difficult thing for ESLLs in the early stages of learning process and it can be mastered gradually through learning and practice. Burns and Joyce (1999) indicate that aspects of language may enable people to explain why they choose the right sentence and avoid the wrong one. Some research have been carried out on syntax analysis on ESL writing in which explores some findings are related to incomplete sentence form and repetition which appear in ESLLs writing because of the effect of their native language (NL) (Hinkel, 2002). To avoid the problems in ESLLs writing we should know syntactic structures of clauses, sentences and cohesion devices such as reference and antecedent.

According to Collins and Hollo (2010) a clause can be classified into main and subordinate clauses. They define the main clause as it “can stand alone as a simple sentence and are not embedded with any larger clause” (p.124). Main clause can be divided into simple, compound and complex. They also define the subordinate clause as it cannot stand alone which are embedded within a larger clause (p.124). In other words, the meaning of subordinate clause is dependent to the main clause. In subordination “the clauses have unequal status, with the lower clauses being embedded within the structure of the other” Collins and Hollo (2010, p.124). Subordinate clause can be divided

into six types: complement, adjuncts, relative, comparative, non-finite and verbless clauses. Examples are given in the Appendixes 1 and 2.

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1996) clauses elements can be defined syntactically into subject, direct object, indirect object, complement and adverbial. Subordinate clauses play a significant role in modifying the information given in the main clause or they can add new information about the main clause. McGregor (2010) states that sentence is “the largest linguistic unit showing grammatical structure, the largest unit over which grammatical rule or patterns apply” (p.105). Sentence is a group of words which has an orderly relationship and is governed by rules which expresses writer or speaker message. The elements of English sentence are subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial. The main pattern in English sentence is SVO. Trask (2007) asserts that the subject” is the primary argument of a sentence”. Blake (2008) contends that sentence is formed by two elements subject and predicate. Verb is another intrinsic element which can be classified into two types main (*play, write*) and auxiliary (*can, could*). The former can be transitive verb which requires an object in the sentence or intransitive verb which does not need an object. Moreover, verb can be active or passive and auxiliaries can be divided into pair modal and non- pair modal (see Appendix 1 and 2). Verb takes the role of reflecting the time of action in the sentence in which the verb can take the past (*I stayed alive*) or present forms (*He can speak*). The importance of auxiliaries is because they can come as a main verb or auxiliaries and also we can make questions by placing them in the sentences initially. One of the problems which ESLLs face is the use of auxiliaries and how to form a tag questions (Hinkel, 2002). Object is the third element in the sentence which can take the role of recipient or affected by the action of the subject for example, I have a lot of *friend*. Sentence can be one clause or more and also it can be divided into four types: simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. Simple sentence contains one idea and can be divided into four major syntactic classes: statements, questions, command and exclamations. Compound sentences composed of two independent clauses which they can stand alone, have an important idea, an equal status and connected by coordination conjunction such as *and, or, but* (Collins and Hollo, 2010). Gerard (1996) asserts that

complex sentence can offer dramatic development and extending metaphor in writing. He also states that complex sentences are composed of one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses and it can be marked by subordinating conjunctions such as , if, as, before, because, that... etc. Compound-Complex sentences are composed of two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses (Young and Strauch, 2006).

Nash (1986) contends that the complex sentences are used in writing or continuous speech mostly. Type of discourse and length of writing are considered to play a vital role in the structure of the text. For example, the use of simple sentences would not be helpful to conduct an argument because it needs the elaboration of facts or concepts in greater extent while the structure of the complex sentence permits. Reference is an important element which is related to cohesion and it is needed to be looked at for example, some languages do not have third person singular like Arabic which makes it hard for ESLLs to refer to these expressions in their writing (Blake, 2008). There are groups of words which are used to identify reference called deictic. Blake also divides these expressions into spatial such as demonstrative pronoun (this, that, here), situational such as personal pronoun (I, you, me) and temporal (now, then, yesterday ). Each deixis is needed to link words in the sentence to refer to the antecedent and to avoid repetition which most of ESLLs face some difficulties in joining them in their writing. Modern English uses two terms for tense either past or non-past to refer to the time of the sentence and also it uses two terms for aspect either perfective or progressive (Shokouhi, 2013). For example, the tense in *I go to work every day* is non-past while the aspect is non-progressive and non-perfective.

## Method

This essay will analyze S2 and S4 texts according to quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis will present the outcome of syntactic structure and grammatical features calculations in relation to types of sentences, clauses, sub-clauses, tenses, aspects, verbs, subject, objects, references, and antecedents in each text. In addition, numbers of each component which appears in S2 and S4 texts will be presented in tables and

are attached in the Appendixes 1 and 2. On the other hand, qualitative method will be used to demonstrate the result of quantitative method in details, to show the syntactic and grammatical differences between the two texts. The use of both methods will help us to understand the difficulties that both writers face and to give a clear picture of the analysis.

The participants in this analysis are two ESLLs who were asked to write composition text. S2 learner is 15 years old who will be ready to go to year nine. His narrative writing is about 'travelling in the sea'. On the other hand, S4 learner studies in year 10 at standard level. He was under exam condition in computer room and his argumentative writing is about the introduction of identity card in Australia.

### **Analysis**

The aim of this analysis is specifically to give guidance for teachers in presenting a good pedagogical strategy in improving students' writing ability by developing their awareness on syntactical structure. This analysis is focused on the syntactical categories. Starting with the analysis of types of sentences, then it is illustrated through main and subordinated clauses. Other elements, which form subject-verb agreement, are also spotted. Then tree diagram which illustrated the differences between types of sentences that are joined by difference of conjunction are presented. See Table 1 for more details.

**Table. 1. Frequency of occurrences for syntactic structures and grammatical features**

Item of analysis	Frequency	
	Text 1	Text 2
1. Types of sentences		
• Simple	16	4
• Compound	7	None
• Complex	11	6
• Compound complex	5	None
• Passive (complex)	None	3
• Passive (compound)	None	1
• Passive (simple)	None	2
• active	39	10
2. Clauses		
• Main clause	16	10
3. Subordinate clauses		
• Relative clause	6	3
• Adjunct	6	3
• Complement	5	3
4. Complement left out	5	4
5. Tense		
• Past	24	3
• Non-past	26	22
6. Aspect		
• Simple (non-progressive+non-perfective)	40	25
• Progressive	4	None
• Perfective	None	None
7. Subject	68	22
8. Verb		
• Transitive	30	24
• Intransitive	32	10
• Copula	12	5
• Modal auxiliaries	4	13
• Non modal auxiliaries	9	12
• Passive modal	None	5
9. Direct object	31	14
10. Non-finite	-	6
11. References	12	17
12. Antecedent	12	12
13. Presupposition	3	None
14. Compounding	None	2
15. Embedded question	None	None

## Discussion

### Verb Analysis

Based on the qualitative result, it is identified that there is no dramatic differences in number between the present of verb transitive and intransitive in text written by S2 see Appendix 1. In S2 verb transitive can be linked to the direct object that appears in the text. It is noticed that the writer of S2 text has problems in placing the write verb in the sentence, see sentences 19, 20 and 27 in Appendix 1. Link to modality, the use of pair modal is only found four in text S2, and the modal is not various, only *can* and *will* are identified. In contrast, S4 has dramatic differences between verb transitive and intransitive in S4 see Appendix 2. In addition, the use of pair modal is more advance. It is not only used in active form, but it is identified the present of passive modality is relatively significant. It is because several complex sentences in passive voice are modified by passive modal. The total number of occurrence shows that 13 modals are present, and 5 of them are passive modals, see sentence 2 in Appendix 2. This sentence shows the present of passive modal which indicates the need of auxiliary *be* and the verbs are transformed in participle form. The use of copula verb indicates the level of S2 writer which he relies on copula verb to construct his sentence rather than using different varieties of verb while S4 writer uses less copula verb as an indication of his advanced level. It seems that the writer of S2 text lacks the syntactic structure for English sentence (NP cc VP or NP aux VP) in which he does not mention the verb in the following sentences 21 and 24, see Appendix 1. The gist of English sentence is the verb in which the teacher has to work a lot with learners to know that these sentences are incomplete and they cannot be considered as proper ones.

Furthermore, other categories of verb forms are also noticed in the two texts, it is classified as non- pair modal such as *do*, *have* and *be* forms. In S2 text for example, *they didn't look like me because they were another animals*. Another category is also detected in S4 for example, non-finite form is counted about 6 times present in the text. Non-finite form is signaled by *to* infinitive and (*ing*, *ed*) participle and it has no tense, see sentence 13 in Appendix 2. In addition, the writer of text 2 lacks the use of the **inflection** –



s for subject verb agreement, plural and possessive such as *These places is our place, They are dog, cat, bird, snake, frog and others.* Therefore, it becomes teachers' job to identify these errors and give explanation to the students about the syntactical structure.

### Clauses Analysis

Qualitatively, it is found in the text written by S2 student that clauses are relatively comparable between relative, adjunct and complement clauses as well as it is identical in S4 learner's text. The result shows that the present of adjunct, relative and complement are three in each clause respectively see Appendix 2 for clauses examples and evidences. The teaching of clauses will benefit students to use different vocabularies, relate different ideas in one sentence and the readers will understand the text quickly. Complement left out is found five times in total for example, *I saw a people come to my place.* Complement left out normally occur because of the interference of spoken language. However, in the written form, complement left out is considered inappropriate. It is however, slightly different from S4, where he still has a problem with the complement left out. It is identified 4 times appeared in the text. *Australians could be forced to pay about \$100 each for new ID if they are introduced.* This sentence is considered incomplete because the object is missing. It supposed to be *...if they are introduced to it.*

Overuse of clause, coordination conjunction and subordination conjunction are obvious in S2 text, for example, in sentence 16 the student uses the coordinators *and, but* and subordinators *because* and *who* to connect five clauses. This shows that he misuses the coordination rules which imply that the two clauses are either of equal rank or for comparison between two ideas, see sentences 25, 30, 31, 32, 33 in Appendix 1. As a result of this, the writer uses a run-on sentence in which he does not know where he can end his clause or his sentence. Furthermore, the writer shifts tenses in sentences 25 and 36 where he should use the same tense for main and subordinate clauses unless he wants to talk about past or future events which permits shifting tenses. In sentence 14 the writer does not use the comma for the adverb of time (*sometimes*) and he does not finish his clause appropriately so a

reader will be confused whether the writer finds gold or ship. Moreover, the writer seems to lack the knowledge of punctuation for example, he ends paragraph 6 with comma.

The proficiency in written text can be clearly identified in S4 text, a sentence *Up to five percent of cards are lost, stolen or damaged each year, and the result can be denial of services and benefits, and loss of identity* reveals the advance level of compound sentence structure. The sentence consists of two dependent clauses; if each clause is separated it will be two main clauses which have complete meaning. Moreover, the sentence is constructed in passive voice which shows the maturity of writing style. This correlates with Peck and Coyle (2005) who claim that more compound and complex sentences present in writing, it shows the maturity of writing skill.

### Sentence Analysis

Based on the analysis, it reveals that the text written by S2 student is predominantly marked by simple sentences. Other types of sentences, such as compound, complex and compound-complex are also found but all sentences are expressed in active voice form. Contrary to S4 text, there is only four simple sentences are structured and the rest of sentences are constructed in complex and complex passive form. Thus, it verifies the prediction made before that the sentences structured by S2 is simpler than S4's. S4 student's text however, is dominated by complex sentences conveyed in passive voice. Mostly, Simple sentence in both texts is a category of simple sentence called declarative. In S2, the simple sentence is written in uncomplicated form, the use of the verbs is not various, mostly the student use repetitive verbs, for instance, *I have a lot of friends, I have one eye and one leg*. It shows that the student still lacks vocabulary building. However, looking closely on S4 text, the simple sentences written, mostly using more various and quite advance verb and some of them are constructed in passive form, for example, *Cards must be processed centrally*.

Moreover, it is found in S2 text, there are seven sentences constructed in compound form. The compound sentence such as sentence 37 in Appendix 1 is joined by coordinated conjunction "and". If this sentence is divided, there

will be three main clauses in complete form and meaning in equal rank. Peck and Coyle (2005) state that constructing more simple sentences in writing is definitely easy, but this tendency will turn into monotonous and repetitive work and shows the weakness of writer expression in his/her writing. Furthermore, in S2 text, the complex sentences are totally found 11, and there are five sentences are in the complex-compound form. In S4 text, however, most complex sentences are in passive form modified by modal auxiliary verb, for instance, sentence 2 in Appendix 2. The clause *ID card can easily be lost and be found by peoples* is a main clause, but it turns into complex by the present of relative clause form, explaining the noun phrase **people**.

Overall, if we notice the structure of sentences in both texts, the number of sentences varies significantly with the present of four types of sentences; simple, compound and complex sentences, and some modification of compound and complex forms in S2. There are several structures of writing seem remain problematic, such as some sentences lack verb copula, missing object and wrong use of preposition see sentence 13 in Appendix 1. Certinaly, we can understand the errors which are made by S2 writer such as repetition of phrases, clauses and sentences for example, *Then we're going to started fighting again* and *Then we started fighting* but it is the teachers job to work on how to improve learners writing skills. Further, the writer of S2 text uses the pronoun *we* to refer to the antecedent noun phrase *I and my friend* in some sentences and then repeat the same noun phrase again. Moreover, the writer of text 2 unable to separate between some sentences lead to make this text harder to be followed by the reader. He also uses unrelated and uncompleted sentences in which it may be one of the features of spoken style (Paltridge, 2006). In contrast, in S4 text some sentences are small especially (sentence 5,6,7) where he should make one sentence into compound and complex form. Overuse of coordinate conjunction (*and*) in one sentence is noticed where he should put comma in sentence 4 Appendix 2 Further, although some problematic issues are on board for example, the writer refers to the singular word *ship* by the plural pronoun (*they*). This is a common problem for ESLLs writers as Collin and Hollo (2010) argue that the ESL writers tend to misplace reference to the antecedent but it can be concluded that the student is in the level of trying to modify sentence to be

more advance. The use of articles is also considered as one of main problems for ESL writers (Miller, 2005). For example, in S2 text the student misuses the singular article *a* and use it for plural noun in the sentence *I saw a people come to my place*. In S4 text, the student seems experience in writing style. It seems his language development is in progress. The modification of sentence form into passive voice is the evidence. However, there still problematic structure found in the text, such as there are ideas mentioned in earlier sentences and the he repeats them again.

### **Tense and Aspect Analysis**

In term of grammar, the difference between S2 and S4 text are significant. This difference can be triggered by the types of genre. Like S2 text is a narrative form, obviously the tense is mixing between the past and non past. The aspect, however, is divided into three categories, progressive, perfective and simple, which is non-progressive and non-perfective. In S2, it is found that the number of tense is slightly different, about 24 tenses are in past and 26 forms are in non-past. The number of aspect is dominated by simple with 40 times occurrences, whereas, only four progressive aspect is identified.

On the other hand, S4 student writes an argumentative genre which can clearly be guessed that the tense is in non-past form. It is approximately counted that 40 times of tenses are in non-past. However, still, there are three tenses are in past form. This is a modification of modality used to emphasize the argument; *The concentration of such data on all Australian in a single location **could** prove disastrous if it was attacked by hackers*. Could in a bold type is to show that the argument made is important and the writer emphasize it. Moreover, the aspect is dominated by simple, which is 25 times of occurrences.

Tree diagram analysis

Figure 1. Tree diagram of a compound sentence

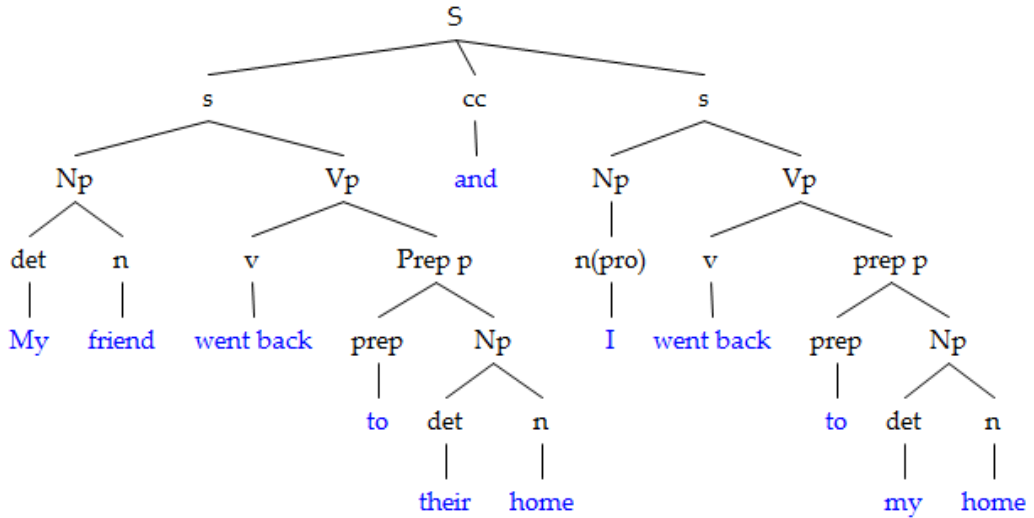
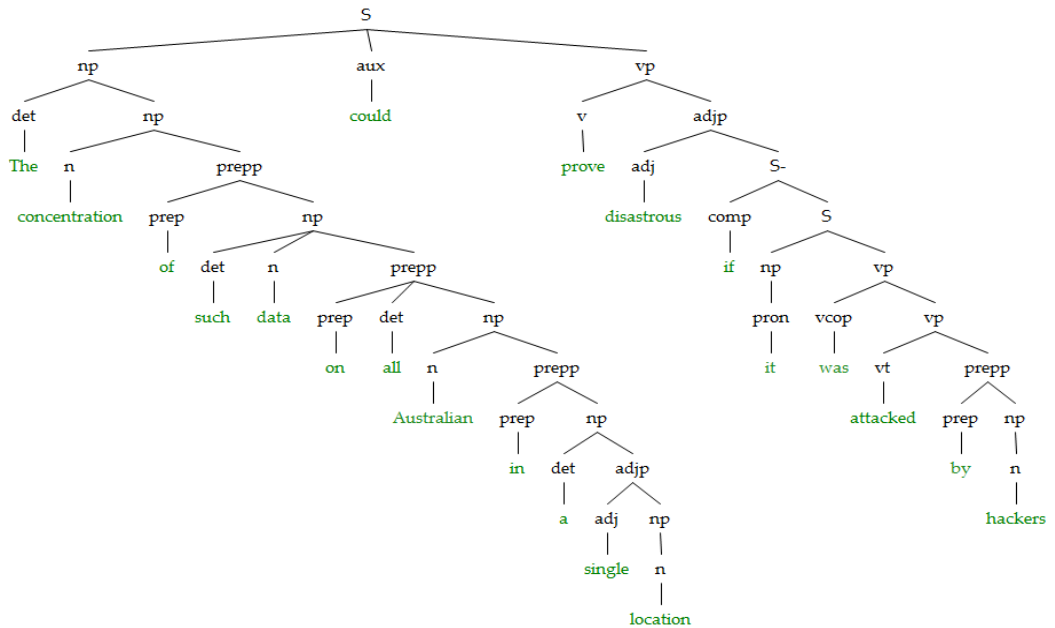


Figure 2. Tree diagram of a passive complex sentence



Both prior tree diagrams illustrate the sample of simple sentence and complex passive sentence. The differences of the structure clearly can be seen through the diagrams. Figure 1 shows how simple sentence is constructed with only np and vp as family and the derivation of vp into adjp. There is no conjunction that joins clauses, because there is only one main clause. In Figure 2 however, the construction of the sentence is complex. The subordinate clause is depended on main clause which forms a complement clause. From these illustration students can clearly see the differences of two types of sentences and its syntactical rule. The tree diagram can be an appropriate alternative in which students can easily differentiate and notice the position of clauses and syntactical categories and also the use of conjunction which later leads to a better composition.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis conducted reveals some evidence that ESL students face several problematic issues related to syntactical rules and grammatical features. In S2 writing text it can be clearly seen that repetition, misplace of pronouns, missing subject, object, main and auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement and forming right clauses are remained problematic. In contrast, S4 text still has some problematic issues such as phrases repetition, use of either long sentence or very small ones and aspects of time. As there are always some problems in writing, especially for ESL students, the result of this analysis is expected to give and inspire teachers to provide appropriate instruction in teaching syntax. Moreover, the analysis of S2 text has revealed that the writing of this student is very speech-like in which he should distinguish between spoken and written language. Knapp and Watkins (1994) state that it is crucial for the learners to recognize “how English operates and function as writing” (p.16).

Richard et al (1992) asserts that there are studies which are conducted in relation to errors in ESL writing in order to spot their causes and to acquire relevant information on common difficulties as an aid to teaching materials. It can be assumed that teaching of language cannot be separated from the finding of error analysis. Errors are considered to be an important part of

teaching process since errors cannot be avoided in the early stages of learning process. ESL Teachers have to correct their students errors by making the learners identify and correct errors themselves. In addition, teachers should be better equipped with the knowledge of linguistic features since they are considered as role models for their students. Pedagogical policy makers should include error correction strategies, devote more time for writing practice and include materials about different cultures writing in the curriculum in order to overcome the problems above. Teachers should test their students by constructing their tests according to these errors in order to measure the development of their students. To sum up, the prediction of the writer proves to be true according to the findings of the analysis.

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