

**“So if I use varied sentence structure, I’ll get better marks”?:
Syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding in
Malaysian secondary schools**



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Submitted for degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

February 2020

“So if I use varied sentence structure, I’ll get better marks”? : Syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding in Malaysian secondary schools

Submitted by Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education in 2020

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Abstract

This thesis presents an investigation into the Malaysian secondary school students' syntactic construction and their metalinguistic understanding of writing. Through a mixed-method design, it also examines the relationship between these two aspects and their teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity and how they make judgments about writing quality.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the collection of 120 essays from student participants with different levels of proficiency. Several one-hour writing sessions were administered in three different schools. To examine their syntactic constructions, the essays were manually analysed and coded based on the coding frame, which was divided into several sections consisting specific syntactic measures.

The second phase involved several writing conversations comprising two sections: 1) open-ended questions aimed to elicit perceptions and believes on writing and grading essays; 2) elicitation tasks aimed to elicit metalinguistic understanding among teacher and student participants. Students' essays were also used in the writing conversations to elicit students and teachers' comments on the writing. The 12 student representatives were chosen based on their

proficiency levels and the syntactic structures used in their essays. All six English teachers teaching the students were involved in the writing conversations.

There are two key findings derived from this study. Firstly, the detailed analysis of the essays suggests that syntactic complexity of writing based solely on the presence of syntactic features may not determine essay quality and effectiveness. Secondly, while teachers and students are still not confident of their metalinguistic knowledge and understanding, it was evident that students' perceptions of good writing mirrored their teachers', which are very much focused on accuracy. There was no evidence of students or teachers discussing their linguistic choices in writing, especially in achieving the rhetorical goals. While explicit grammar knowledge may help in improving accuracy, the study also suggests that it should also be used to foster discussion about writing that goes beyond language accuracy.

Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible to write this doctoral thesis without the help and support of the important people around me, to only some of whom it is possible to give particular mention here.

Above all, I would like to thank my husband for his personal support and great patience at all times – you gave me wings, so I could fly and chase my dreams, and for that, I am forever grateful. To my precious children – Ariq and Aleesya – thank you for understanding mommy’s journey, this is for you both and I hope this inspires you to reach great heights in your lives, as both of you have inspired me so. My parents and sister have given me their unequivocal support throughout, as always, for which my mere expression of thanks likewise does not suffice.

I am forever indebted for the support and patience of my principle supervisor, Prof. Debra Myhill, not to mention for her advice and unsurpassed knowledge. The advice and support of my second supervisor, Dr. Ruth Newman, have been invaluable, for which I am extremely thankful. Cheers Debbie and Ruth for the motivation, empathy and friendship throughout this journey!

Finally, thank you to all my friends, participants and everyone else who helped contribute to this project.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1. The importance of writing in second language learning

The development of writing competency among second language learners of English appears to be a more remote concern in the field of second language learning than the development of oral communication. This is because, for second language learners, oral communication is seen as a challenge in both second language (L2) instruction and enquiry (Payne & Whitney, 2002; Ariffin & Husin, 2011; Gan, 2012; Lys, 2013; Mohamed, 2015), in parallel with the fast-paced world and the growing need for English speaking proficiency in education and the workplace. In fact, Riddle (2003) states that in most schools and universities, students may have the idea that they need writing skills less than they need other language skills, thus their interest in writing lessons may be minimal.

However, what people fail to realise is that writing also plays a crucial role in scientific, business, workplace and especially educational domains (Tatcher, 2000; Parks, 2000), similarly in higher institutions, where writing is an indispensable skill for students, as they are required to write numerous papers as part of their assignments. In fact, there are various English language

proficiency tests involving writing – IELTS, TOEFL, CAMLA, MUET – that have been made a requirement for university admission in order to determine if an applicant is eligible to take a certain course. As second language text production involves complex processes, investigating and exploring the factors that encourage or hinder the successful orientation of L2 learners' text production and the underlying theories may provide useful insights for linguists, educators, students and policymakers.

1.2. The difficulty in mastering second language writing

Despite the importance of mastering writing skills, writing is the most difficult and problematic skill to master, especially among second language learners, in comparison to other basic language learning skills (Hyland, 2008). Difficulties arise not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating those ideas into a readable text. Nunan (1999) also states that it is not easy for learners, especially second language learners, to produce a fluent, coherent and extended piece of writing because it is the most difficult task to complete. Writing is seen as a complex process in which students need to consider various elements, such as content, organisation, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and mechanics, in order to produce a good piece of writing. Writing is especially difficult for second language learners or foreign learners because they are expected to create written products that exhibit mastery of all the aforementioned

elements in a new or unfamiliar language (Rass, 2001). This difficulty becomes more noticeable if their language proficiency is weak.

However, it is also important to note that effective writing is about being able to communicate ideas or viewpoints successfully; it is not only about being able to produce perfect texts on paper. According to Heaton (1994), writing skills are complex and can sometimes be difficult to teach, requiring mastery not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgmental elements. It requires the use of specific knowledge that the writer has, the ability to discover and construct meanings, and the ability to put ideas down in writing using clear language (Olinghouse and Santangelo, 2010). Thus, writing is neither an easy skill nor a natural process that just happens. As Tierney et al. (1989) state, writing skills are considered to be complex since writing requires students to apply appropriate cognitive strategies, intellectual skills, verbal information and appropriate motivation.

1.3. Problems with writing in Malaysia

According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2000), because Malaysian students need to master the basic skill of writing in English, the Malaysian English language curriculum was designed with two of its overall objectives focusing on the spoken and written forms: “the English language curriculum enables learners to obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print

sources; and present the information in spoken and **written form**” and “listen to, view, read and respond to different texts, and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and **written form**” (Curriculum Development Centre, 2000, p.2). However, a typical Malaysian university student still struggles to accomplish a given writing task effectively and independently, despite having gone through English language instruction for at least 11 years of their life (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009).

According to a study by Hiew (2012), the methods for teaching English language in most Malaysian English classrooms involves a lot of drilling without any two-way process between teachers and students. Hence, students may not have opportunities to use their metalinguistic understanding, which could help them learn how to express meanings (Halliday, 1993). In addition, Malaysian students' essays seem to be driven by numerous constructs, one of them being assessment criteria. Examination-driven and teacher-centred English lessons in Malaysia have somehow hampered students' learning process (Koo, 2004), which may result in unsophisticated and low quality essays. Apart from the difficulty of mastering writing skills, Malaysian students also face problems in using good grammar and vocabulary in their writing (Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef, 2012). It may be known that students with a lower proficiency level face this difficulty, but more able students tend to have limited grammatical structures

in their writing. This may be the result of the teaching methods employed in Malaysian English classrooms, which are examination-oriented.

1.4. The present study

1.4.1 Syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding enquiries in Malaysia

Given this worrying situation, educators and language teachers have expressed their concerns regarding the poor standard of English among graduates from Malaysian higher institutions and have called for more research in an attempt to improve students' level of English proficiency (Tatar, 2005; Pawanchik, 2006; Abassi et al., 2010; Yahaya et al., 2011). However, studies on L2 writing among Malaysian students are extensively focused on university students, particularly on the types of errors that are common in their compositions (Abdul et al., 2004; Yasin et al., 2010; Mukundan, J. and Khojasteh, L., 2011; Mukundan, J. et al., 2013). Despite the findings of these studies that report on possible ways to minimise errors in L2 writing, the quality of writing among L2 learners in Malaysia continues to deteriorate (Abu Bakar et al., 2007). Error analysis research tends to focus more on students with lower proficiency, hence a more capable student is left without any ideas or suggestions as to how to improve their writing. Also, less focus has been put on L2 secondary school students and their writing development throughout their years of learning English, which may help to

explain the root cause of the bigger problem plaguing L2 learners of English in Malaysia.

Thus, instead of focusing on error analysis, this study aims to investigate the relationship between second language learners' syntactic constructions in writing and their metalinguistic understanding, with special reference to Malaysian upper secondary school learners of English. The present study is particularly relevant and timely as it will not only look at second language learners' syntactic constructions in writing, but also consider the influences that may affect how they produce those constructions. This is so that a better understanding can be achieved concerning questions that relate to the relationship between metalinguistic understanding and syntactical constructions, or the influence of proficiency and genre on syntactic complexity, especially in the field of L2 writing in the Malaysian context, which has received little attention in the literature. Furthermore, this study is important as very little research has investigated learners' syntactic structures based on two variables – proficiency and genre – and linked them to their metalinguistic knowledge and understanding. It is also important to explore and understand the relationship between what second language writers do in their writing and their metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity, and how this relationship relates to teachers' judgments of essay quality and their metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity.

1.4.2 From theory to practice

Another rationale of the study is that, to date, no study has looked at teachers' and learners' voices as another way to approach the research problem. Most corpus-based studies that look at syntactic structures only report statistical findings, without providing a clearer explanation of the problem. The 'voices' of teachers and learners are seen as crucial in this study, as this may help to fill a gap between theory and practice in the language and education field. Instead of conducting the usual open-ended interviews, writing conversations are employed in this study because it is hoped that by interviewing or talking to students and teachers with essays placed in front of them, they will be able to provide sounder explanations of certain actions related to writing or grading essays. The use of writing conversation in this study is adapted from Myhill et al.'s (2012) study, using students' own writing as stimuli in semi-structured interviews. In their study, interviews were conducted to discuss students' writing to explore their metalinguistic understanding of their own and others' writing following class interventions. Although the present study does not involve any interventions, writing conversations aim to reveal students' metalinguistic knowledge and understanding. This method is key to reporting results in this research as it may encourage and help the research participants to give more detailed explanations in answer to questions that put to them, thus hopefully providing more specific answers to the research questions.

1.4.3 *Malaysian written language corpora*

Furthermore, as this study looks at authentic learners' school essays, a corpus of Malaysian upper secondary school students' essay will be collected and may be made available to other researchers in the future. The overall results of this study are hoped to be useful to those involved in the teaching and learning of English language in Malaysia, as well as to increase the awareness among language teachers, linguists, researchers, students, policymakers and curriculum and material developers of the current situation of teaching and learning in relation to writing among Malaysian secondary school students today. Following on from the results of this study, appropriate measures to improve the current quality and situation of L2 writing in Malaysia can be considered, especially in regard to the teaching and learning of writing in the English classroom. English teachers, who are mostly L2 writers themselves, will be more aware of the problems of L2 learners in their classroom and can use this understanding to make their instruction more effective and efficient. A better pedagogical approach may also be implemented so that students experience better and more meaningful learning in the classroom.

1.4.4 *Overall research implications*

The present study has several important implications that can inform the fields of second language writing, second language acquisition and second language

assessment by emphasising the importance and usefulness of syntactic complexity measures that have been used in the field of second language to measure second language proficiency and second language writing quality. However, this study may also be a useful and effective example to examine second language learners' writing by looking beyond statistical results. Although previous corpus-based studies have made several important contributions to the field of second language writing, this study also attempts to challenge previous researchers' simplistic correlations between syntactical complexity and students' performance or essay quality. Furthermore, this study attempts to discuss how certain syntactic structures affect complexity and the rhetorical aspect of essays, so that teachers, especially, may benefit from the statistical findings of previous corpus-based studies. The data gathered from this study are hoped to further our understanding of the important relationship between metalinguistic understanding and writing – how metalinguistic knowledge and understanding can help to improve the quality and effectiveness of writing.

The findings of this study may also have several implications for multiple stakeholders in the field of education and linguistics. Curriculum and material developers may be able to use the findings as guidelines as to what areas to focus on when they prepare textbooks, modules, lectures and related matters for the L2 classroom, especially writing lessons. The emphasis placed on the importance of metalinguistic understanding in the teaching and learning of writing

may also challenge the rigid concept of form-focus pedagogy in Malaysian classrooms. Finally, the outcomes of this study will also benefit educators, parents, students and future researchers wishing to understand the current condition of Malaysian learners' writing competence and the underlying problems that cause learners to produce low quality writing, despite having been exposed to English instruction for almost 12 years.

CHAPTER 2

Background to the Study

2.1. Introduction

This chapter will first discuss the background to the present research, which aims to provide a deeper understanding of the current situation of second language teaching, learning and research in Malaysia. It reviews previous and current situations of teaching and learning writing and looks at previous studies conducted on second language writing in Malaysia. Chapter 3 of the literature review will focus on syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding in second language writing.

2.2. English in the Malaysian context

It is important to first understand the status of English language in Malaysia as far as teaching and learning in Malaysian schools is concerned. Malaysian learners undergo at least 11 years of English instruction at the school level, as English is a compulsory subject taught at all levels in Malaysian schools. Improving English proficiency among Malaysians is a very important aim, so much so that, in 2005, English was used for the teaching of Science and Mathematics related subjects in Malaysian schools. However, it was later revised,

and Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) is now being used to teach Science and Mathematics as there were issues and discrepancies in the implementation of English as the medium of instruction in teaching both of these subjects. In most state universities in Malaysia, English is used as the medium of instruction, although some courses are still conducted in Malay. However, in all Malaysian private universities, courses are taught fully in English.

The Malaysian English language syllabus seems to follow a similar trend to the developments in the field of grammar teaching and learning in general. Previously, the older English language syllabuses for primary and secondary schools in Malaysia comprised traditional grammar-based syllabuses (e.g. The English Syllabus for Use in Standard One to Standard Six of Post-1970 National Primary Schools (1971); The English Syllabus for Form One to Form Three of Secondary Schools in Malaysia (1973)). The English Syllabus for Form One (age 13) to Form Three (age 15) of Secondary Schools in Malaysia was developed as an extension to the English Syllabus used for National Primary Schools to ensure continuity. Both of these syllabuses adopted the structural-situational syllabus. Later, the English Syllabus for Upper Secondary School in Malaysia (Form Four to Form Five) was developed in 1979. This syllabus adopted the Communicative Approach, which emphasises interaction as the means and goal of language learning. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was implemented in upper secondary schools in Malaysia because at that time, there was (1) a vital

need for English communication, (2) a need for a versatile workforce in the service sector in terms of international communication and, (3) an increase of importance of the English language among school leavers. In CLT, language accuracy was given less focus and was not set as the main goal of the learning outcome. Instead, CLT focuses on the ability to communicate in the target language (Savignon, 1997). Since CLT emphasises student-centred lessons, teachers are only expected to be facilitators instead of instructors.

However, the change to a CLT approach brought some problems. Learners were so used to rote learning in the structural approach (which also emphasised the grammatical aspects of language) that teachers had difficulties in using CLT to teach English to learners. Because of the negative feedback coming from learners and teachers (see Etherton, 1979; Gaudart, 1986), the new curriculums for both primary and secondary schools, which are now being implemented, were introduced. The new curriculums are the KBSM (new Curriculum for secondary schools) and the KBSR (new curriculum for primary schools. With the new curriculums (KBSR and KBSM), the teaching of English in schools follows what is referred to as a 'notional-functional syllabus' (Mohd-Asraf, 1996, p. 3). In contrast to the older syllabus, the new English language syllabus includes teaching components such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and sound system, to name but a few.

Unfortunately, despite the introduction of the new syllabus, teachers still believe (and probably are still used to) the idea that grammatical proficiency should be the primary focus in language teaching (Mohd-Asraf, 1996). This situation further suggests that, in general, teachers are still focusing on teaching the grammar aspect exclusively, without integrating other aspects as well. Furthermore, teachers and learners may be unaware of the language features that are important for improving or encouraging the development of English skills, particularly writing skills.

It is also frustrating to see that most Malaysians cannot use appropriate English in their spoken and written discourse, even after graduating from university (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2007; Sirat et al., 2008). Most graduates still struggle with academic writing and the “competence in English among learners has been on the decline since a change in language policy was enforced from that of English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970” (Chan and Wong, 2004, p. 33). For English teachers, apart from the belief in teaching grammar to improve fluency, they are left with not many choices, as the books and materials used in the teaching and learning of English do not address linguistic features in depth. Instead, most exercises in those books include sentence combining and cloze passages.

2.3. Second language writing in Malaysian schools and universities

The word 'examination' has an extremely powerful impact on every Malaysian, and it is treated very seriously, especially by students, educators, policymakers and parents. This scenario is seen as quite normal in Malaysia because of its examination-oriented and teacher-centred education system. Examinations are taken very seriously, so much so that the notion of students being *celik ujian* (test proficient) is promoted by the Malaysian government so that teachers will pay extra attention to classes that are taking public examinations. In relation to this, various interventions have been made to supplement students' learning, especially those taking public examinations. These include extra classes, examination preparation camps and talks by examination markers, to name but a few. Furthermore, most parents nowadays are very particular in deciding on schools or universities for their children. They prefer to send their children to schools and universities with an excellent academic record and this has become a trend in Malaysia, with schools and universities competing to be top of the list.

Among all the subjects tested in public examinations, English is seen as one of the 'must-score' subjects as it will determine students' admittance to university. Hence, most lessons, including English lessons, in Malaysian schools are usually seen as very teacher-centred and examination-driven. This is proven by the publication of countless examination revision books that contain past-year

examination papers for students and teachers to use in their lessons. Furthermore, exam preparation camps, extra classes and talks by examination markers usually revolve around topics based on patterns in past year questions. For upper secondary school students, the 1119 English paper is feared as it involves a lot of writing. Furthermore, the 1119 paper determines if students will be awarded an O-level certificate, which can help boost students' applications to local and some international universities.

This situation has contributed to the desperate attempt of the Malaysian government to increase the quality of English among Malaysian students in schools and universities. Particularly in schools, an English curriculum has been developed that is specifically focused on grammar and vocabulary to help improve students' quality of writing. Hiew (2012) investigated the issues of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia in relation to the four general skills taught in class. Generally, her data suggest that students had problems learning English because most lessons do not involve a two-way process between teachers and students. This causes some students to be very distant and ultimately lose interest in learning the target language (Hiew, 2012). The study, which involved former secondary school students, revealed that students found writing academic essays difficult as they were not exposed to some features of academic essays, such as formal language, paraphrasing, citing and synthesizing, during English lessons in secondary school (Hiew, 2012). This can

be supported by referring to the English language syllabus for Malaysian secondary schools, which focuses on directed (i.e. formal letter, report, informal letter and speech) and continuous writing (i.e. narrative, argumentative and descriptive). Hence, there is a clear gap in students' transition from secondary school to higher education, in terms of knowledge of writing. Yet, at university, they are expected to be able to produce good and effective academic essays. Students are expected to exhibit so-called linguistic competence mastered in primary and secondary school in their essays (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009) written at university level. Not only do examination-driven and teacher-centred English lessons in school hamper students' learning process, they are also spoon-fed, which ultimately results in Malaysian students having a passive mental mode (Koo, 2004). In a study by Ambigapathy and Shanti (2005), it was found that rote-learning was evident among students where they were required to memorise sentence structures and model answers.

Tan (2006) found that there are several approaches to writing employed by school students. All of these approaches are affected by numerous constructs, such as assessment criteria and the standard of English in Malaysia, to name but a few. For example, Tan (2006) reported that students often write to meet evaluation criteria because they know that their essays will be marked based on specific criteria set by their teachers. Not only that, it has become a practice for teachers to discuss the writing criteria in class and remind students to always

check their grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and content every time they write (Tan, 2006). Hence, the discourse of examinations and teachers' feedback on writing may shape students' way of writing. Furthermore, these essays are marked based on marking schemes that follow the Malaysian system of grading (Tan, 2006). With teachers drilling students on the format and criteria of 'good' writing, students may already have a 'template' of what is a good essay in their minds. This may be one of the causes that hinders students' writing development and discourages students to develop their writing and become better writers. To them, getting an A is much more important than developing their skills, and this is especially common among more able writers.

Previous studies have highlighted some of the problems plaguing L2 writers, but further study is needed to explore the relationships between all of these constructs: students' linguistic features, students' proficiency, students' metalinguistic understanding, genre and teachers' instructions and feedback on students' writing. Thus, this present study aims to look at upper secondary school students' linguistic features in their essays, in terms of syntactic complexity and sophistication, and relate these to other constructs, such as genre, students' proficiency, students' metalinguistic understanding and teachers' feedback that might affect students' writing development.

2.3.1. *Teaching writing in the Malaysian context*

Apart from international and private schools in Malaysia, there are two other types of schools established in Malaysia, namely, National Schools and National Type Schools. National Type Schools are schools that have a specific ethnic group's mother tongue as the medium of instruction. For example, Tamil type schools employ Tamil language as their medium of instruction, whereas Chinese type schools employ Mandarin as their medium of instruction. On the other hand, National schools use Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. Although the Malaysian government did once specify the use of English language to teach Science and Mathematics in schools to help increase students' proficiency, the policy was later withdrawn because it was not seen as "the answer to the challenges of either raising English standards or uplifting Mathematics and Science proficiency among Malaysian students" (Darus, 2010, p. 24). Thus, today, the use of English between teachers and students can only mostly be observed in the English classroom.

Lim (2014) conducted a study to investigate the teaching strategies in the English classrooms of these different types of schools. Although the pedagogy of each teacher differs, it can be seen that all of the lessons conducted by these teachers are very teacher-centred. Also, the lessons revolve around using the textbook and revision books to complement each lesson. According to Lim's (2014)

classroom observations, writing lessons in each school involved immense time allotted to writing exercises during the week. Moreover, the repetition and memorisation of vocabulary is seen as a fundamental strategy in writing while trying to improve students' writing skills, which is seen as only a surface level approach by Lim (2014), as teachers are supposed to use a deeper level approach in teaching writing to students.

Type of school	Activity
National School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group work • Sentence building aligned with sample questions from standardised examination
National Chinese Type School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictation for vocabulary • Textbook exercises • Revision book exercises • Drills and grammar-based sentence building
National Tamil Type School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-led while students copy • Repetition of sentence building exercises

Table 2.1: Summary of classroom observations in writing lessons from Lim (2013)

In another study by Swanto and Din (2014), which focused on the use of a drilling technique to teach writing to a group of rural Malaysian learners with low English proficiency, the authors revealed that the drilling technique did give positive results in terms of helping the learners obtain better scores for their English essays. After about 16 weeks of drill-and-practice, a Mann-Whitney U test showed a significant difference between the post-test scores of a treatment group compared to a control group. There was also a significance difference in the pre-

and post-test scores of the treatment and control groups, the treatment group obtaining a higher mean than its counterpart. During the treatment, students were asked to write a particular descriptive essay three times in three weeks and list any vocabulary they did not understand. At the end of the three-week drilling session, they were asked to write a similar descriptive essay on a similar topic. This drilling process was repeated until week 16, with the students having to copy the teacher's model essay three times in three weeks (as accurately and as quickly as possible) before producing their own essay on a similar topic. According to Swanto and Din (2014), by employing this drilling technique to teach writing to lower proficiency L2 students, they will finally be able to produce essays because "they are familiar with the formats, especially in terms of descriptive essays" (p. 73). This technique also seems to be employed widely in extra classes or tuition, where tutors or teachers will usually provide students with past-year examination papers so that they can practise writing repeatedly until the end product is as close or as accurate as possible to the model essay.

However, the drilling method used by Swanto and Din (2014) in their study is questionable. This is because, when students were asked to write a similar descriptive essay with a similar topic, they had been primed with the vocabulary they needed for that particular topic. Yet, in the actual examination, the possibility of similar topics being listed in the question paper cannot be determined as

descriptive essay topics can vary quite largely. Hence, the effectiveness of this drilling method to help learners improve their writing skills is indeed uncertain.

Although the study proved that the drilling technique, which is used by many English teachers in Malaysia, may help low proficiency students to improve their writing performance, it did not consider the use of the drilling technique for intermediate, higher-intermediate or advanced proficiency students to help them improve their writing performance. The use of the drilling technique is seen in many English classrooms simply because of the stress placed on examinations as a benchmark of teachers' teaching effectiveness and success (Koo, 2008). Hence, students tend to write what they think their teachers will approve, paying extra attention to marking schemes, especially grammar, spelling and punctuation, in order to achieve A-grade essays. However, what teachers, students, policymakers and others involved in this situation have failed to realise is whether this approach or technique really helps students to improve their quality and sophistication in writing, and particularly their ability to write independently.

Despite Swanto and Din's (2014) claim that memorised language may lead learners "to be able to improvise, once they [have] acquired enough vocabulary and sentence structure", the quality of writing among Malaysian students continues to deteriorate (Abu Bakar et al., 2007). Does this mean the students

have yet to 'acquire' enough vocabulary and sentence structures? When will they finally be able to 'acquire' enough? Is the drilling technique, which is the result of the stress placed on assessments and examinations, really helping our students to develop their writing abilities regardless of their proficiency level? Furthermore, serious attention must be paid to students' writing ability in English when they leave school to attend higher institutions, as English is used in most if not all local universities in Malaysia and international universities. Additionally, the drilling technique may no longer be used in higher institutions, definitely not in international or western universities, and this raises the question of whether students can continue to develop their writing quality and sophistication to meet the standard expected in higher institutions.

2.3.2. *Grammar and vocabulary in the Malaysian English classroom*

According to Weigle (2013), L2 writing involves both language proficiency and writing skills, and based on the current situation in most Malaysian English classrooms, teachers and learners tend to have language proficiency as their goal in writing rather than focusing on the skills of writing. Quite a number of studies have been conducted in the field of L2 writing in an attempt to help L2 learners improve the quality and sophistication of their writing. Most of these studies focused on simple and complex grammatical structures and the

vocabulary used in students' writing and other language production (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005; Hinkel, 2011; Nation, 2009). However, in most Malaysian English classrooms, the teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary often happens separately from writing, in which the process often involves text dictation, memorization, spelling quizzes, grammar-based sentence building and repetition of sentence building (Lim, 2014). According to Hinkel (2002), the teaching of writing and grammar in L2 classrooms may happen separately because of the expectation that L2 learners will somehow apply their grammar knowledge and skills to their writing when they acquire L2 grammar through interaction with and exposure to the target language. Although the Malaysian English language syllabus suggests that the Communicative Language Teaching approach should be employed in the classroom, many teachers still prefer to go back to the traditional way of teaching grammar and vocabulary with the exam marking criteria as their benchmark or 'goal' (Lim, 2014). Furthermore, because of the time constraint, English classrooms in Malaysia tend to be extremely teacher-centred with a chalk-and-talk drilling method (Ambigapathy, 2002), which conflicts with the goals and recommendations of the Malaysian English language syllabus. Hence, students tend to produce outcomes that they think their teachers expect without exploring their potential ability.

When the teaching of grammar and writing is done separately, learners may have problems in effectively making the link between grammar knowledge gained and their writing. This is because the traditional pedagogy of teaching grammar mostly involves the teacher's explanation of grammar forms and functions, followed by exercises that consist of cloze texts and sentence completion that usually has explicit contextual markers to help learners apply the correct grammar (Hinkel, 2002). This method of teaching grammar is also linked to the drilling approach, in which learners are drilled to identify contextual markers and adverbs in order to apply grammar knowledge in completing cloze texts or sentence completion exercises. This may lead to learners being bound to a certain stage of grammar knowledge because they have only been drilled on certain grammar structures and functions, mirroring model essays and marking criteria. This then may discourage learners, especially more able writers, from exploring and using more complex sentences in their writing because they desperately need to 'mimic' the model essay in order to obtain good results. Thus, the question of whether learning to write in Malaysian English classrooms really helps learners develop their writing skills and prepare them for higher education remains unanswered.

Although language experience among L1 writers varies, most of them may not face difficulties in using appropriate vocabulary in their writing, but for L2 writers, who lack experience, explicit learning is encouraged. However, the learning of

vocabulary should not solely rely on English teachers and should not only take place in English classrooms. The teaching of vocabulary in Malaysian English classrooms is also very similar to the teaching of grammar. It is stated in the Malaysian English syllabus that the list of words to be introduced to students is drawn from a sample of common or high frequency words used in daily life (p.3), which may hinder students' effort to use less-frequently used words in their writing. Furthermore, in a study by Lim (2014), her classroom observations revealed that the teaching of vocabulary usually involves the teacher dictating a list of words while students listen and write them down as accurately as possible in their exercise books. She also found that most of the words introduced to students are from the National English textbook, which sometimes may or may not relate to writing tasks. The vocabulary introduced in each unit of the textbook depicts the theme of the unit, hence it may sometimes be inept in helping learners build their vocabulary to improve their writing quality. This situation may also discourage learners from using new words and develop their word bank. The rote-learning method often seen in Malaysian classrooms (e.g. Lim, 2014) may also lead to students struggling to become independent learners in higher institutions (Musa et al., 2012), where teaching vocabulary no longer takes place. Thus, the teacher-centred method of teaching and learning vocabulary may dampen the meaningful learning process so the vocabulary 'learned' by students in the classroom may not be useful for them.

As Koo (2008) puts it, “as long as literacy continues to be viewed in terms of narrow utilitarian, decontextualised skills-based discourses ... Malaysian learners will find themselves seriously disadvantaged” (p.31) in English language learning. She further warns that there is a serious gap between teaching practices in Malaysian schools and universities and 21st century expectations of the younger generation of Malaysians.

2.4. The Importance of syntactic complexity in writing

Among successful writers, the ability to use various sentence and syntactical patterns is a crucial skill. This ability is often explained as syntactic complexity in writing. Especially in L1 research, syntactic complexity has been long observed by researchers, linguists and even school teachers, because of the impact of those more complex patterns in expressing complex ideas and improving writing quality. According to Beers and Nagy (2011), it is agreed that “certain syntactic structures, such as subordinate clauses, relative clauses, and complex noun phrases allow writers to express more complex ideas”. Thus, to clearly state one’s ideas effectively, the use of complex sentence and syntactical patterns is seen as important in writing. Furthermore, the ability to use complex grammatical structures also shows effective writing (de Haan & van Esch, 2005; Reilly et al., 2005; Rimmer, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004). The quality of writing may then be related to complex sentence structures.

On the other hand, the over-use of simple sentences is often observed to signal weaker learners. Researchers and linguists have identified them as a weakness in writing and argue that they may result in deductions from writing scores (e.g. Davidson, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Reid, 1993; Vaughan, 1991). In a study by Hinkel (2003), he found that learners used excessively simple syntactic constructions in their writing compared to their native speaker counterparts. The current mainstream teaching pedagogy in writing classrooms may have led learners to overuse simple sentence patterns and have less confidence in using more complex sentence patterns. In most second language writing instruction nowadays, the 'syntax of writing' is given less attention as teachers place more focus on higher levels of the writing process, such as planning and revising (Connors, 2000). In relation to second language writing, the ability to use more complex sentence patterns is seen as one of the key elements of development because of the fact that second language learners may have difficulty in using various English sentence patterns easily.

2.5. Metalinguistic understanding in writing classrooms

The advantages and disadvantages of grammar instruction in the field of second and foreign language pedagogy has been debated for more than a decade. In early research into Second Language Acquisition, Kessler and Idar (1977), Fabris (1978) and Krashen (1987), among others, argued that there is a natural order

and sequence followed by learners, so the acquisition of grammatical structures then advances in an expected manner (Krashen, 1982). This theory has led researchers such as Krashen (1981) and Schwartz (1993) to believe that explicit knowledge of language is not beneficial to learners' acquisition (Ellis, 2008). This debate has also led researchers to investigate the effectiveness of various language instruction in second language learning, and one of it being form-focused instruction.

Long (1991) defined focus on form as the instruction which draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. However, Ellis (2001) mentioned how Long's (1991) definition of focus on form may be problematic. This is because previous research (e.g. Williams & Evans, 1998; Long et al., 1998; Doughty & Varela, 1998) that have used Long's (1991) definition seem to overlook and ignore the second defining characteristic of focus on form - that it should be incidental. Thus, according to Ellis (2001) form-focused instruction contrasts with meaning-making instruction, in which the former is characterised "by a primary focus on form and intensive treatment of preselected forms" in which "learners are required to focus their attention on some specific form intensively in order to learn it" (Ellis, 2001. p.17).

Many second language researchers have argued that form-focused instruction is an effective method in second language learning (Norris and Ortega, 2000). Ellis (2008) also supports the notion, stating that form-focused instruction works by "...enabling learners to progress along the natural order more rapidly" (p. 863). She further explains that if form-focused instruction helps learners in acquiring second language grammatical forms (Nassaji and Fotos, 2010; Ellis, 2001), providing explicit grammar knowledge might also help learners to improve their second language proficiency (Ellis, 2008).

As discussed in **2.3.1**, the teaching of writing in Malaysian classrooms has been observed to be form-focused (Lim, 2014), with grammar and writing often taught separately. With regard to grammar and writing, although previous research has shown positive outcomes from the explicit teaching of grammar knowledge to learners (i.e. Hammond, 2012, Moore and Schleppegrell, 2014), it is also important for learners "to be able to think grammatically about language choices in writing" (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). This concept differs from the view of grammar only focusing on rules and compliance (Becker, 2006). Writing instruction in second language classrooms should also highlight the importance of not only explicit grammar knowledge, but also "the conscious awareness of language in shaping writing" (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). In other words, teachers should be prepared to move students beyond "an abstract knowledge about language to apply that knowledge to their writing" (Chen and Myhill, 2016,

p. 101). This concept is clearly new in regard to teaching writing in the Malaysian context; however, it might greatly help learners' writing development if it were to be introduced.

2.6. Second language writing assessments in Malaysian secondary schools

In the school context, writing assessment may depict three different purposes, as Weigle (2013) describes:

There are three somewhat different purposes for writing tests, each asking a somewhat different, though related, question about writing performance: (1) Assessing writing (AW)—does the student have skills in text production and revision, knowledge of genre conventions, and an understanding of how to address readers' expectations in writing? (2) Assessing content through writing (ACW)—does the student understand (and display knowledge in writing about) specific content? (3) Assessing language through writing (ALW)—Has the student mastered the second language skills necessary for achieving their rhetorical goals in English? (p. 89).

Writing tasks in proficiency tests have become very common and L2 learners are usually required to take these tests and meet certain criteria in order to be

accepted into programmes at university. Also, in higher learning institutes, students are often given assignments in the form of written essays and academic texts as part of degree requirements, which reflects all of the purposes mentioned by Weigle (2013). However, the first two purposes (AW and ACW) may apply only to native-speaker writers, but the third purpose of writing (ALW) definitely applies to L2 writers.

Based on the Malaysian English syllabus, upper secondary school students will need to master three types of writing as they are tested in the 1119 paper: summary, continuous and guided writing. Although there is a standardised marking rubric used to assess the national examination, teachers teaching Malaysian secondary school are not given a standardised marking rubric or scoring strategy to be implemented to assess school tests (Ahmad Shah & Othman, 2006). Hence, the essays are usually marked based on the teacher's experience and preferred method. Some teachers may prefer to use a holistic approach when assessing students' essays. This involves teachers viewing students' essays in the round without further consideration of specific components. Another method used by teachers to assess students' essays is the analytic method, which involves teachers viewing students' essays in a more specific way and raising problems with students. The analytic method usually uses a scoring rubric with a list of specific components assessed in the essay so that students are aware of any problematic areas in their writing. However, as

mentioned previously, because teachers are under pressure to prepare students for examinations, they may use an analytic method with a rubric that mirrors the one used for the national examination.

According to Shaw (2002), one of the advantages of using an analytic scoring method is that teachers can give specific feedback to students, which is key to evaluating students' achievement and placing them in certain ability groups. Furthermore, it allows teachers to assess various aspects of writing, such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, content and organisation, which serves the best interests of L2 examiners. As the analytic scoring method shows students' performance in writing, it allows teachers to identify students' language ability. This shows that not only do Malaysian secondary school students have to master writing skills as a whole, they also have to master various specific aspects of writing, such as grammar and vocabulary, to mention but a few.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has offered an account of the current provision for the teaching of writing in Malaysia and other research studies which have addressed second language learners' problems with academic writing. Earlier studies highlighted that second language learners' essays often lack academic text characteristics and these learners tend to use more linguistic features that are related to conversation (Lorenz, 1998; Hinkel, 2003, 2004, 2009; Aijmer, 2002). Some of

the reasons found to be the cause of the problem are students' lack of academic writing experience and the social and cultural effects related to certain topics (Aijmer, 2002; Hinkel 2009). However, in Malaysia, despite being exposed to different types of writing, including academic writing, it is still found that Malaysian students, especially Malay students, continue to have difficulties in performing satisfactorily or making minimal improvements to their writing (Azman, 2016). Also, there is a need to explore if different types of genres with different topics that may be related to sociocultural values in Malaysia affect students' syntactic construction and why, despite years of writing instruction, students are still struggling to master writing skills.

Most importantly, many studies in Malaysia have discussed how some of the many problems plaguing second language writers are an ineffective teaching and learning approach, first language interference, language learning anxiety and lack of academic writing experience (Ambigapathy, 2002; Marlyna Maros, Tan Kim Hua, and Khazriyati, 2007; Mat Awal et al., 2007; Lim, 2014), name but a few. However, it is also crucial to explore the relationships between these important constructs: learners' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity in writing; teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity in writing and their judgement of students' writing quality as to date there is not a study that considers the relationships between these multiple constructs in a single study. It is important to look at Malaysian learners' syntactic

constructions as this issue has not received enough attention in terms of investigating problems in academic writing among them. Hence, this study will not only aim to provide statistically significant results for syntactic complexity among Malaysian learners but also the 'voices' of these second language learners and their teachers to generate a more in-depth understanding of the current issue. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the next chapter will address issues specifically related to syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding among L2 learners.

CHAPTER 3

Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

The issue of low literacy attainment in English language among Malaysians have been investigated quite extensively. The Malaysian government has desperately tried to increase the quality of English proficiency among Malaysian students, so much so that in 2011, 375 native-speaking teachers were brought into the country to teach English in schools (Musa et al., 2012). However, despite the government's attempt and 12 years of English education, Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable English literacy (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008). Malaysian students are not exposed to the multiple features of academic writing (Hiew, 2012), and they were also found to have limited vocabulary knowledge and weak at understanding long sentences or sentences with difficult words (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007; Nambiar, 2007; Zaira Abu Hasan, 2008). Furthermore, several studies have shown that students face difficulties to shift from school learning culture to the university culture where learners are found to have very limited conventions of academic writing in order to write well in an academic discipline (Krishnakumari, Paul-Evanson, & Selvanayagam, 2010). Not

only is there clearly a gap in students' transition from secondary school to higher education in writing, but also, it has been observed that they are expected to be able to produce good and effective academic essays in universities (Musa et al., 2012). The examination driven and teacher-centred English lessons in schools may shape students' development and sentence construction in writing, but it somehow discourages students to develop their writing to become better independent writers.

In the attempt to understand Malaysian students' problems in writing, many previous researchers have tried to look at Malaysian students' essays in the hope of finding a solution to eradicate the problem. However, studies in L2 writing among Malaysian students are extensively focused on university students, focusing on the types of errors that are common in their compositions (Abdul et al., 2004; Yasruddin et al., 2010; Mukundan & Khojasteh, 2011; Mukundan et al., 2013). Although the findings of these studies suggested possible ways to minimise errors in L2 writing, the quality of writing among L2 learners in Malaysia continues to deteriorate (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). These error analysis studies also tend to focus more on students with lower English language proficiency. The syntactic development of L2 writers, especially among school students, has not been receiving enough attention in Malaysia, and this calls for a more thorough and in-depth investigation on how school students construct and develop their writing.

Despite the large number of corpus studies in the area of second language learning, syntactic complexity is a construct that has been very controversial as researchers often produced contradictory results. One of the main reasons is because the term 'complexity' has been defined very vaguely and poorly (Bulte and Housen, 2012). Using very limited or too many syntactic complexity measures may also affect the quality of the study. Many previous studies fail to choose relevant measures to look at syntactic complexity in writing. Another issue that should be raised is the method of reporting statistical data in most corpus-based studies. Research on syntactic complexity has always focused on statistical results and treated their sample as a whole group. This may be one of the strengths of corpus study - to look for generalised patterns evidenced through statistical analysis; however, at the same time a limitation of corpus studies is that this generalisation also misses the particularity of individual student writing and how particular linguistic structures are used in context. Most corpus studies tend to support the idea of 'more' (e.g. longer sentences, longer clauses, higher frequencies of certain syntactic elements) means more complex or more sophisticated, which is not always the case. This could be proven if a more thorough and in-depth essay analysis is conducted.

Finally, it is also crucial to discuss the importance of metalinguistic understanding in the teaching and learning of second language writing in classrooms. Previous studies such as by Roehr (2008) and Ellis (2005) suggested that the development

of metalinguistic ideas might help students to have a better understanding of how grammatical structures make meaning in written text. Therefore, students' syntactic complexity and their metalinguistic understanding should be discussed and explored in a single study to provide results that are more useful for teachers and students.

For the purpose of this study, considering the issues discussed above, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of complexity as a broader idea and syntactic complexity is discussed. This chapter then discusses the measures that have been used in previous first and second language writing research. Thus, the aims of this chapter is to discuss and provide explanations to several key subjects related to this research: 1) The conceptualisation of complexity and syntactic complexity in L2 writing, 2) The measures used in previous second language writing research in measuring syntactic complexity, 3) The possible measure that may be applied to the sample or data of the present research and 4) metalinguistic understanding in writing.

3.2. Conceptualisation of complexity

Among the usual three language constructs that are usually studied: complexity, accuracy and fluency, language complexity is the most ambiguous and multi-defined among researchers. In L2 research, complexity has been investigated as either a dependent or independent variable. Complexity is investigated as a

dependent variable, often with fluency and accuracy, to measure L2 performance or L2 proficiency (Bulte & Housen, 2012). Usually, L2 complexity of learners' performance or proficiency is measured to show the effects of other variables such as age, learning contexts, different instructions, et cetera on L2 learners' attainment (e.g. Bygate, 1996, 1999; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Collentine, 2004; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Previous studies that investigated complexity as a dependent variable have reported mixed and inconsistent results (cf. Robinson 2007; Skehan 2009; Spada & Tomita 2010). This happens because of the way most studies defined and operationalised L2 complexity – they either defined the term 'complexity' vaguely or did not define it at all (Bulte & Housen, 2012). As an example, Skehan (2003) defined complexity as "...the complexity of the underlying interlanguage system developed" (pg. 8). On the other hand, Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) defined complexity as "Grammatical and lexical complexity mean that a wide variety of both basic and sophisticated structures and words are available to the learner" (pg.69). In Ellis's (2003) paper, complexity is referred to as "the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied" (p. 340). Thus, it is not surprising why there are discrepancies in results reported by previous studies given such general and vague definitions of complexity by other researchers. Furthermore, most researchers failed to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of complexity, which is another reason for the discrepancies. There are multiple layers and types of complexity that are interconnected in a single framework which makes it

difficult for researchers to define or explain what they are actually measuring. Thus, there is one important question that needs to be acknowledged: What does 'more complex' mean? In previous research, 'more complex' was always referred to as 'more proficient', 'more mature', 'difficult to acquire or produce', 'of higher quality' or 'better' (Bulté and Housen 2014:45).

Thus, despite much interest in the study of L2 complexity, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term. However, at the most basic level, complexity can be defined as "a property or quality of a phenomenon or entity in terms of (1) the number and the nature of the discrete components that the entity consists of, and (2) the number and the nature of the relationships between the constituent components" (Bulte & Housen, 2012). According to Kramer-Dahl, (2004) and Miestamo et al., (2008), the notion of complexity can be divided into two approaches: relative and absolute approach (Figure 3.1). Relative and absolute complexity refer to properties of language features (i.e. items, patterns, constructions, rules), of (sub-) systems thereof, or of the uses to which these features are put.

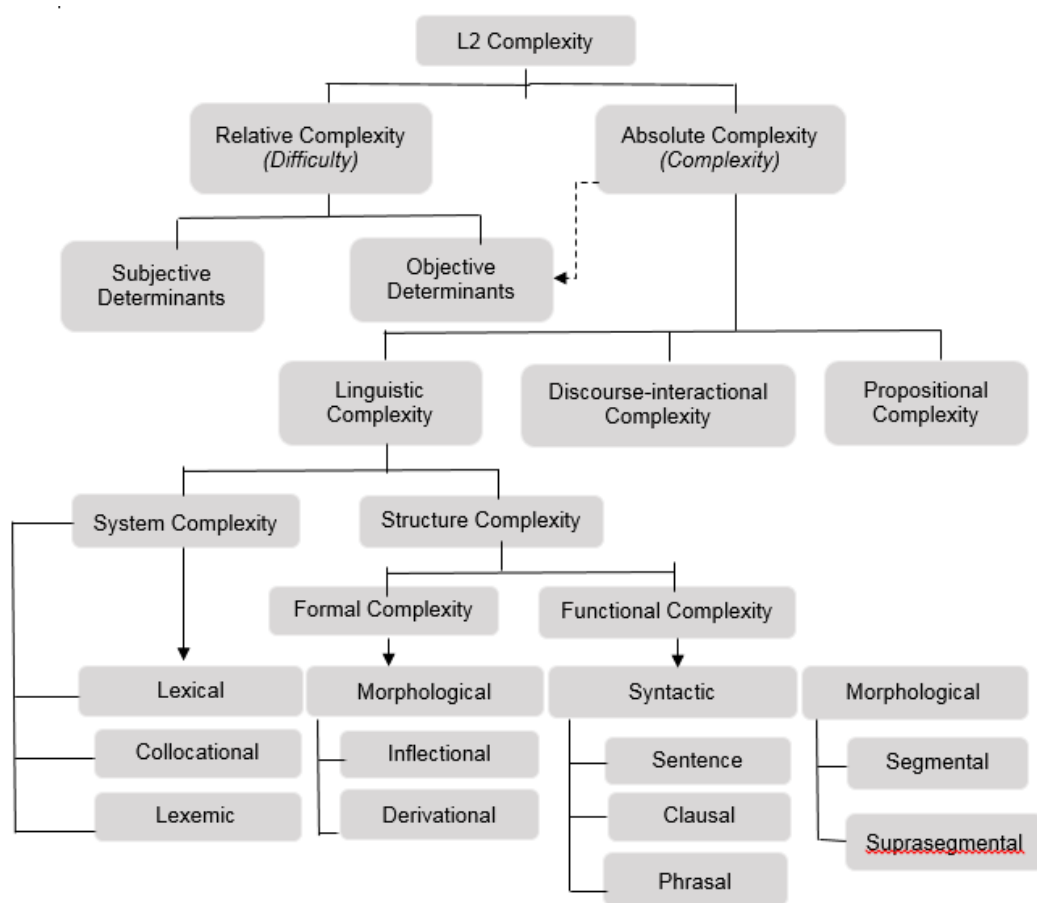


Figure 3.1: Taxonomy of Complexity Constructs (Bulte & Housen, 2012)

However, both relative and absolute approaches define complexity differently. The relative approach defines complexity from the perspective of language users: a language feature or system of features is seen as complex if it is somehow costly or taxing for language users and learners, particularly in terms of the mental effort or resources that they have to invest in processing or internalising the features. Thus, Hulstijn & De Graaff, (1994) wrote that relative complexity refers to the mental ease or difficulty with which linguistic items are learned,

processed or verbalized in the processes of language acquisition and use. As an example, according to research in psycholinguistics, certain embedded structures (e.g. relative clauses) develop later (than other structures such as active structures) in language acquisition, and passives are harder to process (Byrnes & Sinicropo 2008; Diessel 2004). The difficulty of a language feature is, however, learner-dependent. A language feature that is hard or costly for some learners, may be less hard or even easy for some other learners, as it all depends on individuality factors such as their level of L2 development, language ability or skills, memory capacity, L1 background, motivation et cetera. Other than these learner-dependent factors, there are also more objective, learner-independent factors that may contribute to the difficulty or ease of learning and processing L2 features. These objective factors include the perceptual saliency and frequency of occurrence of L2 features in the input (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001), their communicative load and also their *absolute or inherent complexity* or *complexity* for short.

The absolute approach defines language complexity in a more objective, quantitative terms as the number of discrete components that a language feature or a language system consists of, and as the number of connections between the different components. Absolute approach suggests that *difficulty* is a broader notion than *inherent complexity*, which is only one of the factors that may contribute to the ease or difficulty of learning or processing L2 features. It also

follows that there is not necessarily a one- to-one relationship between the *inherent complexity* of a language feature and its processing or learning difficulty (Rohdenburg, 1996). This notion of relative and absolute approach is illustrated in Figure 3.1, adapted from Bulte and Housen (2012).

This distinction in defining complexity is very important and previous researchers have failed to clearly discuss or explain this in their studies. As an example, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) defined complexity in their study as “learner’s preparedness to use a wide range of different structures.” Thus, to avoid further inconsistencies, the conceptualisation and definition of complexity must be explained clearly based on a framework such as the taxonomy of complexity constructs by Bulte and Housen (2012).

For the purpose of this study, the focus will be positioned on the notion of *absolute* or *inherent complexity* as it has been applied to the characterisation of L2 performance and L2 proficiency as described in Figure 3.2.

3.2.1. Complexity in second language

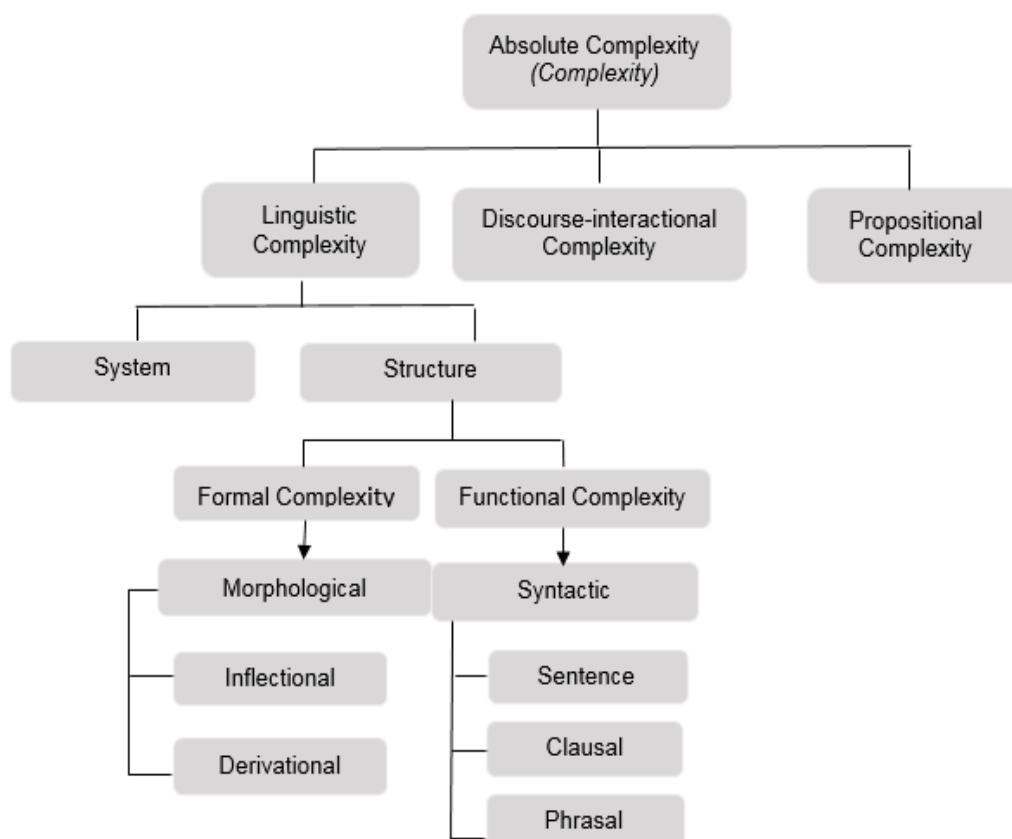


Figure 3.2: Taxonomy of Complexity Constructs: Absolute complexity (Bulte & Housen, 2012)

Based on Figure 3.2, adopted from Bulte and Housen (2012), the broad concept of L2 complexity under the absolute complexity approach can be divided into three parts: propositional complexity, discourse-interactive complexity and linguistic or grammatical complexity. Discourse- interactive complexity is a notion that is still vague and new. It has been introduced in analyses of learners' dialogic studies such as in Gilbert, Barón & Llanes (2009) and Pallotti (2009),

where the discourse- interactional complexity of learners' L2 performance has been characterised in terms of the number and type of turn changes that learners initiate and the interactional moves and participation roles that they engage in. On the other hand, Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005) propose that propositional complexity refers to the number of information or idea units in which writers or speakers translate in a given language task to convey a given message. As an example, a speaker's L2 performance who translates or converts 55 idea units in writing a story or in describing a picture will be propositionally more complex than a speaker who can only convert or translate 25 idea units. Both propositional and discourse-interactional complexities are still new and much less focused compared to grammatical complexity in the L2 literature.

Grammatical complexity has been defined in the L2 literature in two different ways: either as a dynamic property of the learner's L2 system at large (global or system complexity), or as a more stable property of the individual linguistic items, structures or rules that make up the learner's L2 system (local or structure complexity). A learner's system complexity is "the degree of elaboration, the size, breadth, width, or richness of the learner's L2 system or 'repertoire'" (Bulte & Housen, 2012, p. 25). In other words, this is the ability of the learner to master a small or a wide range of different words and different grammatical structures and the ability to control all or only some of the L2 sound system et cetera.

A learner's grammatical complexity at the local level refers to the structural complexity of the individual's linguistic features (Figure 3.2). Structure complexity refers to the depth of the linguistic features rather than the range or breadth. In other words, structure complexity may be investigated by looking at the form or functional complexity of a structure on different levels such as lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological. According to Figure 3.2, structural complexity can be divided into two sub-categories, which are the functional and the formal complexity of the L2 language feature (DeKeyser, 2005; Housen et al., 2005). Functional complexity looks at the "the number of meanings and functions of a linguistic structure and to the degree of transparency, or multiplicity, of the mapping between the form and meanings/functions of a linguistic feature" (Bulte & Housen, 2012, p. 25). As an example, the present –s in English is a structure that is straightforward with one-to-one mapping of meaning onto form. This kind of structure is functionally less complex than structures where there is no direct mapping between form and function or meaning.

On the other hand, formal complexity has been defined in several ways in several studies. Formal complexity can refer to the number of operations to be applied on a base structure to arrive at the target structure. An example to this is the number of operations to be applied in the derivation of passive clauses from underlying active structures. Formal complexity can also refer to the structural 'substance' of a linguistic feature as determined by the number of discrete

components of a linguistic form (e.g. simple past vs. present perfect forms in English). In addition, some have argued that formal complexity relates to the dependency distance between a form and its nearest head or dependent. Thus, L2 complexity can be evaluated across various language areas and their sub-areas. L2 complexity can be explored either in terms of the systemic complexity of learners' morphological or lexical system, or in terms of learners' local functional and formal complexity of individual syntactic, lexical, morphological or phonological features that make up L2 learners' system. Based on the taxonomy of complexity constructs by Bulte & Housen (2012), the present study aims to explore second language learners' formal complexity, which includes within syntactical complexity; sentence; clause and phrase.

3.3. Conceptualisation of syntactic complexity

Research in syntactic complexity has been reconised as one of the key constructs in second language writing, teaching and research (Ortega, 2003), as development in syntactic complexity is a primary part of a second language learner's overall development and attainment in the target language. Despite various studies throughout the years, syntactic complexity is a construct that has been very controversial as researchers often produced contradictory results. As discussed in 3.1, one of the main reasons for this inconsistency is because of the

vagueness of definitions, which were often related to various different features or aspects that can be measured (Bulte & Housen, 2012, p. 22).

Bulte and Housen (2012) also explained that in order to measure complexity in a meaningful way, the link between these different levels of construct specification must be as transparent as possible.

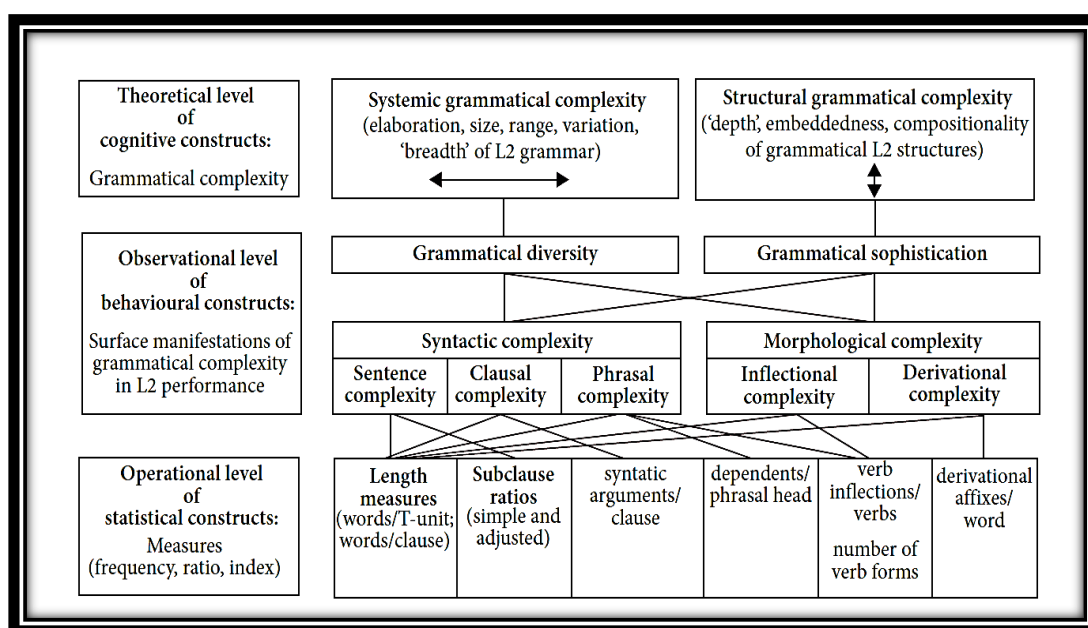


Figure 3.3: Grammatical complexity at different levels of construct specification (Bulte & Housen, 2012)

According to Bulte & Housen (2012), syntactic complexity is a sub-set of grammatical diversity, which includes sentence, clausal and phrasal complexity. The multi-level of complexity constructs exemplified in Figure 3.3 shows that linguistic complexity can be observed on at least three different levels. It is crucial

to distinguish these three different levels explicitly so that more sound research findings can be achieved. Thus, before determining valid measures for linguistic complexity, “it has to be established first what complexity is (theoretical), how it can be manifested in actual language performance (observational) and how these behavioural manifestations can be somehow quantified (operational)” (p.27). However, most second language research only defines linguistic complexity at the operational construct, which may be problematic when reporting results (Bulte & Housen, 2012).

3.4. Previously used syntactic complexity tools and indices

A very important issue that many L2 language development studies have been trying to address is how valid and reliable are the variety of syntactic complexity measures as indices to L2 language development level or proficiency in general. This question is in fact very important as the validity of the syntactic complexity measures directly stands upon the validity of the research results obtained using them. Thus, in order to fill this gap, many researchers have attempted cross-sectional studies to examine syntactic complexity in L2 language production in regards to different proficiency levels. As interest continue to increase in L2 language development, researchers also begin to conduct longitudinal studies to track the learners’ developmental changes in syntactic complexity of second language production over an extended period. There are several commonly used

syntactic complexity measures employed in previous studies and reviewing and outlining these measures seems crucial in order to understand why there are inconsistencies in the results of L2 syntactic complexity studies.

3.4.1. *The Biber Tagger tool*

Biber (1988) created The Biber Tagger, which is a text analysis tool that measures a hundred lexical and lexico-grammatical indices and is used to conduct a multidimensional analysis (MDA) of language variation (Biber & Finegan, 1988; Biber et al., 2004). Biber et al. (2011) conducted a study to compare the frequency of a number of clause and phrase-based features between a corpus of informal spoken conversations and a corpus of academic journal articles. With regard to structural type, they found that the spoken texts contained more finite dependent clauses, while the written academic texts contained more dependent phrases. With regard to syntactic function, they found that spoken texts contained more constituents in clauses while written academic texts contained more constituents in noun phrases. This result suggests that traditional clause-based measures of syntactic complexity may not be suitable for academic writing but more suitable for informal speech because clausal complexity is a feature of informal spoken texts and not of academic written texts. However, Yang (2013) argued that the L1 reference corpus used in Biber et al.'s (2011) study did not answer research questions on L2 language development. Yang (2013) further claims that learners' language development (both speech

and writing) needs to be measured cross-sectionally or longitudinally. However, Biber et al. (2013) refute that in order for learners to be proficient language users in English academic community, they will have to develop language skills that mirror the community. Hence, for learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), complex noun phrases need to be emphasised in their learning, instead of clausal subordination as demonstrated in L1 writing samples. Despite Yang's (2013) arguments, researchers such as Ortega (2009) and Biber et al. (2011) have encouraged other researchers to conduct a study of comparison between clausal and phrasal-based features. Some of these studies (e.g., Crossley & McNamara, 2014) have considered Biber et al.'s (2011) proposal on indices that are important to indicate the development of L2 academic writing.

Biber et al. (2014) again conducted a study to compare the frequency of a number of clause and phrase-based features in speaking and writing tasks of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The results from this study is very similar to Biber et al.'s (2011) study in regards to the differences that existed between L2 texts, in which were also found in L1 text used in their previous study. As an example, there were more complexity at the phrasal level found in the written texts and there were more verb + to constructions and finite clauses found in the spoken texts. In terms of development, the results showed that only two indices significantly interacted with holistic score: high scoring written integrated texts included more attributive adjectives and verb + that clause constructions. In

addition, the combination of spoken and written index (derived from a multi-dimensional analysis) demonstrated small and positive relationships between the integrated spoken and written tasks and holistic scores. Overall, despite Yang's (2013) rebut, this study supported Biber et al.'s (2011) study. However, this study lacked strong evidence to claim that phrasal features are indicators of writing development.

Taguchi et al. (2013) conducted another study to explore the difference in L2 writing using six clause-level complexity measures and nine phrase-level complexity measures. Based on their holistic scores, the study involved learners from a high group and a low group of L2 writers. The results showed that there are similarities in clausal complexity shown in the written production of the high and low groups. Despite this similarity, it is evident that subordinating conjunctions and that- relative clauses were used more often by the low group and that- clause verb complements were used more by the high group. On the other hand, in terms of complexity at the phrasal level, it can be seen that post-noun-modifying prepositional phrases and attributive adjectives were used more by the high group. However, it is important to emphasise that although there were differences at both clausal and phrasal level, there were no inferential statistics stated by the authors hence, limiting the conclusions noted by the authors.

Finally, a study by Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) concludes the inconsistencies of results found in various previous studies conducted to compare the frequencies of features at phrasal and clausal level. Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) conducted a study to examine the writing of 21 upper-intermediate international English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students and 16 MA TESOL international students. Considering Biber et al.'s (2011) proposed notion of writing development (that complex noun phrases are the characteristics of academic writing), Parkinson & Musgrave (2014) examined the differences in the use of 20 noun modifier types between the EAP and MA TESOL students. The result showed that the MA students displayed features of higher levels of development (e.g. phrasal modifiers) in their writing. On the other hand, the EAP students displayed features of lower levels of development, such as relying on attributive adjectives, in their writing. Although Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) conducted the study while considering Biber et al.'s (2011) proposed notion of writing development, the results from Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) contradicted with the results of Biber et al.'s (2014) in which reported that attributive adjectives were found in highly scored integrated essays. One of the reasons why the results may be inconsistent is because the genre, proficiency and the writing prompts were not controlled in neither of the studies.

3.4.2. Coh-Metrix: Related studies

Another commonly used tool to measure syntactic complexity in L2 writing development is the Coh-Metrix. The Coh-Metrix tool is an online text analysis tool (can be easily accessed via cohmetrix.com) originally designed to measure textual cohesion in reading comprehension studies (McNamara et al., 2014). Crossley & McNamara (2014), however, have used the Coh-Metrix in their study to investigate the features of writing quality and the development of writing among L2 learners. In previous studies, there are a number of indices of syntactic complexity that have been measured using the Coh-Metrix. As an example, the modifiers per noun phrase, which its concept is comparable to complex nominals per T-unit. The operationalisation of noun phrases in Coh-Metrix includes determiners, adjectives, and nouns as modifiers, but does not include relative clauses or prepositional phrases as modifiers. In a study by Crossley and McNamara (2014), a positive relationship between modifiers per noun phrase and combined scores ($p = .023$, $r = .213$) and a longitudinal increase in M/NP ($p = .007$, $\eta^2 p = .122$). However, there was no positive relationship found between modifiers per noun phrase and language use scores (Crossley & McNamara, 2014). Another Coh-Metrix index is the number of words before main verb. In Coh-Metrix, the main verb refers to the main verb in the first independent clause in a sentence. In Coh-Metrix, sentences that contain less complex subject (sentences that lacks adverbial clauses before the main verb) would make lower

scores, hence would be considered as less complex sentences. Sentences that contain more complex subject and /or subordinated adverbial clauses before the main verb would earn high scores, hence would be considered as more complex sentences. The higher the scores, the more complex the sentence is and vice versa. In their study, Crossley and McNamara (2014) used this index to investigate the phrasal and clausal features and their relation with writing quality and L2 writing development over the course of a semester. Based on the results, they found a small, positive relationship between the number of words before main verb values and analytic scores for language use ($p = .204$, $r = .120$) and combined analytic scores ($p = .065$, $r = .174$). Notably, there is also a significant growth in the number of words before main verb values between the essays written at the beginning and end of a semester ($p = .024$; $\eta^2_p = .088$).

Apart from the modifiers per noun phrase and the number of words before main verb, Coh-Metrix also includes the syntactic structure similarity indices that measure the average similarity between all sentences and the average similarity between adjacent sentences. These syntactic structure similarity indices are measured by counting the proportion of intersecting syntactic nodes between sentences. Crossley and McNamara (2014), in their study, found negative relationships between the index and language use score ($p = .074$, $r = -.169$) and combined scores ($p = .097$, $r = -.157$). Guo et al. (2013) and Crossley and McNamara (2014) reported several syntactic complexity indices that were not

available online. In their study, Guo et al. (2013) measured the number of past participle verbs and found that writers who used more past participle verbs and fewer third person and base form verbs tended to earn higher marks. In addition, Crossley and McNamara (2014) also measured syntactic complexity using additional indices such as the number of subject relative clauses in a text. Crossley and McNamara (2014) found that as learners developed, their writing included more features attributed to clausal complexity, but that essay raters tended to award higher scores to essays that included more features of phrasal complexity.

3.4.3. *Popular indices in second language syntactic complexity studies*

In previous L2 syntactic complexity studies, there have been a number of commonly used indices employed by researchers such as Ortega (2003), Cumming et al. (2005), Norris and Ortega (2009), Lu (2011), and Knoch, Rouhshad and Storch (2014), just to name a few. Previous studies on L1 and L2 syntactic complexity of writing share a common goal of identifying the features of a sentence that are considered syntactically complex by using various syntactic complexity indices. This has somehow led to various syntactic complexity indices being employed in the attempt to explore different issues in regards to syntactic complexity. Although this variety has been helpful in some ways, it has, however, made a general description of L1 and L2 writing development in terms of syntactic

complexity difficult. With the lack of definition on what complexity is and the abundance of syntactic complexity measures used previously, the outcomes from previous studies in addressing issues in syntactic complexity were inconsistent. According to a systematic review conducted by Jagaiah (2016), there were 52 measures that have been used to study syntactic complexity across 36 studies. Generally, the previously used measures represent a complete range of features used to analyse sentences. Jagaiah (2016) categorised these measures into six groups: T-units, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, and combined measures. She further separated these groups of measures into two more classes: measures that analysed length – T-units, sentences, clauses and phrases – and measures that analysed frequency count – number of T-units, clauses, phrases and words.

Many previous studies have employed the T-unit to measure certain features in syntactic complexity. The most frequently measured is the mean length of T-units (e.g. Armstrong, 2010; Brown, Iwashita & McNamara, 2005; Nelson & Van Meter, 2007). The Mean Length of T-unit was first proposed by Hunt (1965) to measure L1 child's development before Larsen-Freeman (1978) adopted the index into their SLA study. T-unit consists of an independent clause and any dependent clauses attached to it. Hunt (1965) also argued the three most reliable measures of syntactic complexity were clauses per T-unit, mean length of T-units and words per clause. Since then, there were an overwhelming number of studies that

supported his argument. Even in recent studies, mean length of T-unit is still widely used as the major measure to indicate syntactic complexity. Several studies have indicated that there is definitely a positive significant relationship between mean length of T-unit and level of proficiency, in which the length of T-units tend to increase with the level of proficiency (e.g. Ortega, 2003). However, some linguists questioned the use of T-unit as an indicator of syntactic complexity (e.g. Biber, Gray & Poonpon, 2011; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Lu, 2011). There are several reasons for this argument: 1) Some useful features in writing such as the coordination and embedded noun clausal in noun phrases are disregarded when T-unit is used as a measure; 2) T-unit impose “uniformity of length and complexity on output that is not present in the original language sample” (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, p.391); 3) T-unit measures were found incapable of indicating syntactic complexity because longer T-units were not necessarily produced by more proficient learners (Smart & Crawford, 2009). In addition, it is also important to note that there is still no theoretical rationale in using T-unit despite its popularity in previous research.

Despite its popularity, measuring the length of production of unit and subordination may not provide a full understanding of syntactic complexity. This is because it only provides certain quantitative information, which may not be useful in making specific judgements, which may be caused by some misinterpretation of data. In other words, length of production does not

necessarily increase in parallel with age, proficiency or levels. Lu (2010) also stated that advanced learners may produce longer T-units but this may be caused by an increased use of coordinate phrase or complex nominals and not subordination. Advanced learners may also use more compressed structures rather than longer ones, which results in shorter production units (Kern & Schultz, 1992). Thus, syntactic complexity should not only be measured by length-based measures, but also more specific measures to capture phrasal features and subordination-based measures. Features such as complex nominals and phrasal features can provide better insight of syntactic complexity. In previous studies, phrasal features were found to be one of the indicators of writing quality and thus was suggested to be included as one of the measures of syntactic complexity (Biber et al., 2011; McNamara, Crossley & McCarthy, 2010; Rimmer, 2006). Hundt, Denison & Schneider (2012) also found that complex nominals often function as the alternative to relative clauses and may indicate the complexity of sentences (Halliday & Webster, 2004). Biber et al. (2011) in his study compared syntactic complexity features of spoken language and academic writing and found that complex phrases and complex nominals were also found to be common in academic writing. In contrary to mean length of T-Unit, the Mean Length of Clause (MLC) does not differentiate between clause types and measure the average number of words per clause. A clause is defined as a subject and a finite verb, though some studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989) include clauses with non-finite verbs. Based on previous studies (Cumming

et al., 2005; Ortega, 2003), there is a significant positive relationship between MLC and proficiency levels, in which clause length tends to increase with proficiency level, but a recent study by Knoch, Rouhshad, and Storch (2014) prove otherwise, where the results show that proficiency level did not influence the development of their L2 learner participants.

Another commonly used index to measure syntactic complexity in L2 writing development studies is the Mean Length of Sentence (MLS). The MLS is considered very straightforward and easy to use as it measures the number of words in a sentence. MLS is commonly used, as it is not only straightforward but also easy to use and reliable. In a study by Ortega (2003), it is found that there is a positive significant relationship between MLS and learners' proficiency. Lu (2010), through her study, reported that there is a correlation between MLS and MLTU, but the problem with MLS being the substitution for MLTU is that there can be multiple T-units per sentence. Apart from using MLS, Lu (2010) also employed the Complex T-units per T-unit. The Complex T-unit per T-unit measures T-units that consist dependent clauses (Lu, 2011). However, Lu (2011) reported that there is no significant relationship between Complex T-units per T-unit and language development. Clauses per T-unit were also employed in Cumming et al. (2005), Lu (2011) and most recently, Knoch et al. (2014). The Clauses per T-unit measures the amount of clausal subordination in a text but does not distinguish between types of subordination. However, these three

studies did not find any significant relationship between learners' language development and Clauses per T-unit.

Apart from the indices discussed above, there are indeed many more indices used in previous L2 writing development studies such as T-units per Sentence, Clauses per Sentence, Dependent Clauses per Clause, Dependent Clauses per T-unit and Complex Nominals per Clause, just to name a few. Notably, large-grained indices such as the MLTU and MLC tend to have a positive relationship with L2 writing development in which syntactic structures tend to get longer and more complex as writers develop. Previous studies have also indicated that many of these indices are somehow related with one another. However, many of these large-grained indices do not provide specific information about the syntactic structures that emerge as language learners develop. Therefore, one can relatively confidently say that writers will include more information in each clause or T-unit, but know very little about the types of information/structures included (e.g., adverbials, noun-phrases, noun-phrase modifiers, et cetera) and whether learners at a particular proficiency level are using a consistent set of structures.

Furthermore, compared to subordination and length-based measures, measures related to phrasal complexity and complex nominals were used less in previous studies because they did not receive enough attention. The popularity of length

and subordination-based measures overshadowed the importance of considering phrasal and complex nominals in the study of syntactic complexity.

3.4.4. *Previous corpus-based studies on syntactic complexity*

Syntactic complexity measures should be chosen carefully as some measures can be too general to reveal the language occurrence thus failing to describe and represent specific information. As an example, Vaezi and Kafshgar (2012) used only two measures to study the syntactic complexity of sentences – average sentence length and ratio of subordination – and these two measures alone were too general to report on syntactic complexity of writing. To use very limited number of syntactic complexity measures to examine such construct is problematic because syntactic complexity itself is very complex and sophisticated (Biber et al., 2011). Although using limited number of complexity measures can raise questions, researchers should also avoid using too many measures in their studies as too many measures may result in redundancy when some measures are examining the same exact thing (Norris and Ortega, 2009). Thus, it is important to consider a wide range of measures is used to examine syntactic complexity while carefully removing redundant measures to ensure the reliability of the analysis.

The method in reporting statistical results in previous corpus-based studies is also another important issue that should be addressed. Most corpus-based

studies tend to treat their sample group as a whole, disregarding the individual difference among the samples – a key theme in Second Language Acquisition research (Dornyei, 2005). The individual differences of learners may be neglected when researchers compare corpora as wholes, which eventually lead to misleading results (Durrant and Schmitt, 2009). Furthermore, higher in frequencies in certain syntax elements does not always mean more complex and sophisticated. As an example, higher mean number of sentence length does not always mean more complex because some learners may have written longer sentences but one must also consider that longer sentences can also sometimes reduce the effectiveness of the writing. Some learners tend to write long, winding sentences, which sometimes leads to more errors or readers losing focus of the writing. Suitable statistical method is still necessary in reporting syntactic complexity in writing: t-test is used to report differences among samples. However, individual differences should be examined qualitatively to complement the statistical findings where necessary. As Reinhardt (2011) highlighted, “a mixed corpus and qualitative approach to the analysis of learner language” (p.95) should be used so that more detailed features of the learners’ language could be described to support the statistical findings of the analysis.

3.4.5. *Learners’ sentence types and syntactic order in writing*

In previous research, the types of sentences were analysed to measure the syntactic complexity of the essays. As an example, Blair and Crump (1984)

analysed sentence types used among three grade levels writers in descriptive and argumentative essays. They revealed that simple sentences were used more in descriptive essays compared to argumentative essays. Another study done by Moran (1981) looked at the types of sentences used by students with learning disabilities and low-achieving students in grades seven through ten in argumentative, descriptive, and explanatory genres. The study revealed that although both groups used all sentence types, students with learning disabilities used more complex sentences and averaged lesser simple, compound and compound-complex sentence in their writing. The study also reported that more run-on sentences and fragments occurred in the essays of students with learning disabilities. This important finding highlights the importance of looking at the 'effectiveness' and not merely relying on the 'presence' of syntactic features when measuring complexity.

Blair and Crump (1984) also examined syntactical order of main and subordinate clauses used by students in three different grade levels in their descriptive essays. The study reported that there were two syntactical order patterns that were used frequently across all three levels: subject-verb and subject-verb-object. There were also syntactical orders that were used differently in terms of frequency among the students. The frequency of subject-verb-complement (noun) patterns was higher in argumentative essays across three levels. In more recent studies, researchers have started to include phrasal complexity as one of

the measure in syntactic complexity. This was done by computing the length of phrases in sentences (e.g. Ravid & Berman, 2010; Crossley, Weston et al., 2011). These studies highlighted the importance of measuring phrasal complexity because sentences with more phrases were found to be syntactically more complex.

3.5. Second language syntactic development in summary

Based on previous studies reviewed above, it seems fair to claim that L2 learners' development in writing is parallel to the length of clauses, sentences, and T-units (Lu, 2011; Ortega, 2003). Biber et al. (2011, 2014) also reported that academic writing seems to have more phrasal elaboration, but how writers develop over a period of time does not necessarily correlate with the features of academic writing (Crossley & McNamara, 2014). Most importantly, with the development of computational linguistics, there has been a surge in the use of automatic tools in investigating the development in L2 writing (Biber et al., 2014; Crossley & McNamara, 2014; Lu, 2011), which has made the analysis of larger data or texts samples possible. However, there are still discrepancies in results reported by various L2 writing development studies as there are inconsistencies in the operationalisation of syntactic complexity (apart from the vagueness of metalinguistic definition and the use of unclear large-grained indices).

3.6. Syntactic construction in second language writing

In 2003, through a corpus-based analysis comparing essays of L1 and L2 university students, Hinkel revealed that essays of L2 learners contain more spoken register than academic register, which makes the essays appear to lack quality and sophistication. The spoken register features that could be found in most of L2 writers' texts include public verbs (verbs with meaning suggest the idea of 'speaking', often in that-clause to express factual ideas e.g. confirm, declare), private verbs (verbs with meaning suggest an intellectual state, often in that-clause e.g. realise, understand), predicative adjectives and 'be' as the main verb, which was found in statistically higher median frequency rates in L2 essays compared to its counterpart (Hinkel, 2003). In addition, Hinkel (2003) also found that the it-cleft, which is a common structure found in academic texts, is seen far less in L2 learners' texts. Their range of syntactic structures used in their writing is also much smaller (Hinkel, 2003).

In terms of Verb-Argument-Construction (VAC), Ellis et al. (2014) conducted a study to investigate L2 learners' verb-argument construction (VACs) and the ways in which their access is sensitive to statistical patterns of usage (verb type-token frequency distribution, VAC-verb contingency, verb-VAC semantic prototypicality). The participants consist of 131 German, 131 Spanish and 131 Czech advanced L2 learners who have to generate the first word that came into

their minds to fill the V slot in 40 sparse VAC frames such as ‘he ___ across the....’, ‘it ___ of the....’, et cetera. The results revealed that all these three advanced L2 learners of English “showed independent effects of frequency, contingency, and prototypicality” (p.17), a pattern that mirrors the native speakers of English. The findings of Ellis et al.’s (2014) study suggest that the learning of constructions as form-meaning pairs, like the associative learning of cue-outcome contingencies, are affected by factors relating to the form such as type and token frequency; factors relating to the interpretation such as prototypicality and generality of meaning, and factors relating to the contingency of form and function.

Hinkel (2004) conducted another study to compare the use of English tense and aspect across seven L1 groups and the results revealed that L2 English learners from Arab countries used fewer past tense verbs as there was more present tense in their writing in making arguments. Additionally, she also found that L2 English learners from East and Southeast Asian countries tend to overuse past tense when making arguments through personal narrative. Most importantly, it was obvious that all groups of L2 English learners either underused or ignored complex verb structures such as the modal would, perfect tense and passive voice, which are key structures of academic texts. These results highlight the difficulties and challenges faced by L2 writers in producing depersonalized and objective academic writing despite having received academic writing training.

According to Hinkel's (2003) study, all L2 writers from different L1 background used emphatic and amplifying adverbials at a higher median frequency rates than their L1 writer counterparts. These linguistic features, which are more common in spoken register (Biber, 1999), are used to portray a sense of "heightened feeling" in the essays. Biber's (1999) claim was also supported by Lorenz (1999) who conducted a study comparing of German and British students at other school and university levels. Similarly, the study revealed the German high school students used these intensifier adverbs at the highest frequency rate, followed by German university students, British high school students and was least used by British university students. German high school and university learners overused this linguistic feature because they lacked academic writing instruction and experience hence causing the learners to overemphasise the importance of assertion. In comparison to British students, the German students used intensifier adverbs in the theme of the sentence, which led to a heavy subject noun complex, whereas the British students used intensifier adverbs in a more reader-friendly theme position, "where one would expect to find the elements that are new, relevant, and noteworthy enough to be intensified" (Lorenz, 1999, p. 62).

Apart from that, Hinkel (2009) also looked at how essay topics affect the frequency of modals in L1 and L2 learners' writings, and the study showed that, in comparison to L1 students' writings, writings by L2 English learners from China,

Japan and Korea has a higher frequency rate of necessity and obligation modals such as 'have to', 'need to', 'must' and 'should' in four of the six essay prompts given to them (Hinkel, 2009). The four topics required students to discuss socio-cultural values whereas the other two topics were less related to cultural background. Hinkel (2009) suggested that the reason behind the high frequency rate of necessity and obligation modals in L2 English learners from these Asian countries is the rigid hierarchical family structure of East Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism. This suggests that culture may also influence one's choice of certain linguistic features. A similar study by Aijmer (2002) also showed that Swedish students overused necessity modals in their English essays, "adopting a direct and emphatic style of persuasion" (p. 65). Furthermore, the study also highlighted that L1 British and L2 Swedish students used the modal 'must' differently in which, the use of must as personal obligation is seen four times more in Swedish students' essays. Aijmer (2002) also noted how the usage of these necessity modals were used differently by these Swedish students in different topics, with high frequency rates of 'must' and 'should' found in Swedish students' essays about environmental policies and immigration as the students used these modals to convince readers of the values of certain actions, depicting the "cultural norms of behavior or a moral code" of the writer (p. 65).

Based on previous studies discussed above, L2 learners of English tend to use more linguistic features that are related to conversation. Apart from that, the

overuse of necessity and obligation modals by L2 learners of English is related to cultural properties. The studies also highlighted the lack of characteristic of academic text in L2 learners' essays as some suggested the lack of exposure to academic texts. However, there is a serious gap in the literature review as there is very little research that has looked at this matter in the Malaysian context. As discussed above, one of the reasons behind the low quality of academic writing produced by L2 learners is because the lack of exposure to academic writing instruction, which in the Malaysian context may not be true. Thus, this suggests for a further investigation to explore and understand the reason behind the similar problems plaguing Malaysian learners of English in the Malaysian high schools.

3.6.1. *Sentence features and proficiency*

In second language acquisition (SLA) literature, syntactic complexity has always been strongly related to the level of targeted language proficiency. Many researchers such as Norris & Ortega (2000), Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998) and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) argued that syntactic complexity is developed through three different stages: 1) complexity by coordination; 2) complexity by subordination; and 3) complexity by the noun phrase. As discussed in Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998), second language syntactic complexity is expanded from coordination to subordination and finally to phrasal elaboration as the level of proficiency increases. There have been quite a number of studies that look into L2 sentence features in writing but most studies tend to disregard the relationship

between students' proficiency and syntactic measures. As an example, studies by Carter and McCarthy (2006) and Purpura (2004) suggest that the use of subordination in students' writing is viewed to be more complex than coordination. However, these studies did not consider the fact that the correlation between students' writing proficiency and students' syntactic complexity is not necessarily strong. In her paper, Ortega (2003) synthesized 25 other studies that looked into L2 learners' syntactic complexity and overall proficiency in the target language. It was found that across all of the 25 studies, the relationship between L2 writing syntactic complexity and L2 proficiency varied depending on "whether a second or a foreign language learning context was investigated and whether proficiency was defined by program level or by holistic rating" (p.492).

Since then, numerous researchers have looked into L2 learners' linguistic features to identify the differences between L2 proficiency levels (e.g. Jarvis et al., 2003; Lu, 2011; Ortega, 2003). However, all these researchers approached L2 learners' linguistic features from different viewpoints in efforts to find valid and reliable indices of L2 learners' writing proficiency by using different measures in characterizing L2 writing proficiency. As an example, Grant and Ginther (2000) used computerized tagging to identify the linguistic features of 92 ESL students' essays at three different level of proficiency. Their study revealed that L2 writer with higher proficiency level tend to use less-frequent words, modals, subordinators, demonstratives, nominalizations, emphatics, diverse verb tense,

conjuncts, passive constructions and they produce longer essays. They have also concluded that linguistic features used in the study were related to L2 writing proficiency levels. Much later, Becker (2010) replicated Grant and Ginther (2000) to look at linguistic variables such as grammatical features, lexical and clause-level in 43 L2 learners' essays at three different proficiencies. The study showed that the frequency of the linguistic features in the study increased as the level of students' proficiency level advances, hence verifying Grant and Ginther's (2000) study. There were also longitudinal studies conducted to compare learners' syntactic complexity development over time (e.g. Knoch, Rouhshad, and Storch, 2014; Knoch, Rouhshad, Oon, and Storch, 2015). In a study by Bulté and Housen (2014), they found that there was an increase in scores for all syntactic complexity measures and the increase was significant for all but three sentential complexity measures: complex sentence ratio, compound-complex sentence ratio, and sub-clause ratio. Furthermore, the results also showed significant increase in clausal coordination and phrasal elaboration but not in subordination.

Syntactic complexity and language proficiency have also been explored in relation to sentence length and sophistication. In studies done by some researchers such as Rousseau, Bottge, and Dy (1993), Crowhurst (1980), Wagner et al. (2011) and Haswell (2000), their results reported a steady increase in sentence length over time at advanced grade levels in every elementary, middle school, and high school, as well as at post-secondary level. Results from

these studies proposed that as students mature, they tend to have increased length of sentences as the number of words used in their writing also increases. In terms of sentence sophistication (usually measured by mean number of clauses per T-unit in most studies), Ravid and Berman (2010), Beers and Nagy (2011) and Wagner et al. (2011) found that students tend to write more sophisticated sentences using subordination structures as they proceed to higher grade or level in school. Hunt (1970), Prater and Mayo (1984) and Houck and Billingsley (1989) also found that students who are typically achieving tend to produce more sophisticated sentence structures and longer sentence compared to students who are low-achieving. Their studies also showed that high-achieving students were more able to manage syntactically complex sentences, compared to their counterparts. However, it is difficult to compare the results of all these studies because of the different latent variables investigated by each study, and the various levels of complexity indicated by each measure that could be impacted by grade levels. Nevertheless, most of these studies supported Hunt's (1970) hypothesis – sentence length and sentence sophistication are both reliable measures to signal increasing maturity in writing.

Although there have been numerous studies that looked into the relationship between L2 writing linguistic features and L2 writing proficiency, there are still discrepancies in the linguistic features that distinguish L2 writing proficiency level (Jarvis et al., 2003). Furthermore, the small number of measures used in previous

and limited aspect of linguistic features studies suggests the need to explore and investigate a larger number of potentially relevant features.

3.6.2. Syntactic structure and writing tasks

There have been quite a number of studies that investigate the effects of writing tasks or prompts on the linguistic features of the written product in both L1 and L2 writing body of literature. Based on results reported in previous studies, generally, the mode of discourse (e.g. expository, argumentative and narrative) affects syntactic complexity in learners' writing, with potentially different effects for different syntactic complexity dimensions (Lu, 2011; Ravid, 2004). In assessment settings, the investigation of essay topic is believed to be as important and as exciting as other task variables since much is to be explored about topic features that may affect similarity or patterns of writers' linguistic and writing performance across different topics, a condition for the reliability of an assessment. In their study, Yang et al. (2015) investigated the relationship among syntactic complexity, writing topic and writing quality and found that the relationship between syntactic complexity and writing topic varies at local complexity levels - clausal coordination, finite subordination, overall elaboration at the finite clause level, non-finite subordination, phrasal coordination, and noun-phrase complexity.

Some language features tend to vary depending on genre because of the distinctive ways of unfolding ideas in each genre (Beers & Nagy, 2011; Ravid, 2005). Generally, written genres that are being taught in schools are narrative, which focus on people and their action in a specific time frame, and non-narrative, which focus on making arguments or discussing ideas or beliefs in a logical way (Berman & Slobin, 1994). Although there are several studies that have looked into the effects of essay genres on language production, most studies have focused on L1 instead of L2. For example, Crowhurst and Piche (1979) noted differences in syntactic complexity across different genres in L1 written texts, where T-unit length was found significantly greater in argument than in narration essays. Crowhurst (1980) also argued that argumentative essays tend to have greater use of subordination and longer T-units as argumentative essays requires the logical structuring of prepositions, compared to narrative essays. More recently, Beers and Nagy (2009) in their study of L1 texts reported that clause length correlated positively with writing quality for persuasive essays and clauses per T-unit correlated positively with writing quality for narratives. However, clauses per T-unit negatively correlated with writing quality of persuasive essays.

On the other hand, Wood and Struc (2013), who looked at syntactic complexity in L2 writing, reported that there were statistically significant differences on nine measures of complexity and fluency between essays written in two different genres. Way, Joiner and Seaman (2000) investigated the effects of different

writing tasks and prompts on essays written by French learners of English, measuring syntactic complexity using mean length of T-unit. They suggested that syntactic complexity was highest in the expository texts than in narrative or descriptive texts. Furthermore, Way et al. (2000) also found that the expository task was the most challenging for L2 learners, as proven by lower scores of accuracy (percentage of error-free T-units), fluency, and holistic writing quality in this genre. Lu (2011) supported Way's (2000) study by examining 14 syntactic complexity measures using his automatic Syntactic Complexity Analyser. In his study, Lu (2011) investigated the different dimensions of language - sentence complexity, coordination, subordination, length of production and particular structures – and found that 13 of the 14 measures were higher in usage in argumentative essays than in narrative essays.

Based on previous studies, clearly, narratives and non-narratives essays have different purposes, and these communicative functions may simply require different language features. In other words, the differences may not be related to cognitive factors such as cognitive load or attention like those discussed by Skehan (1998) and Robinson (2001). Biber and Conrad (2009) did a comprehensive study on genre differences outside of the realm of L2 learning and stated that different genres have different communicative or functional requirements, which result in different language use by learners. For example, a narrative essay would probably necessitate more use of the past tense and third

person pronouns, while an expository essay might contain more relative clauses and attributive adjectives. However, Biber and Conrad (2009) did not directly compare narrative and argumentative essays; but rather, they compared different written genres such as newspapers and academic prose.

Another study by Brossell (1983) investigated the effects of differences in topic and rhetorical specification. In the study, six essay topics with three different levels of information were given to research participants, and the study reported that the essay “did not themselves affect the quality of student’s writing on a timed examination” (p. 172). However, more recently, a number of studies have been carried out in the ESL and EFL contexts regarding topic familiarity. For example, in Cheng’s (2003) research, which looked at rhetorical specification, she conducted an interview with some participants concerning a number of factors affecting their writing, one of which being topic familiarity. The students revealed that familiarity with a topic in a writing task was of a greater importance to their writing production than the amount of topic information provided in the task. This was also explained in Hinkel’s (2002) study on L2 text, in which she reported that texts tended to be simple if the topic was familiar to the writer and was easy to write. In addition, based on the results of a questionnaire administered to college students, Xu (2006) concluded that there are five factors that could affect writing task difficulty, which were, in the order of descending importance, topic familiarity, topic abstractness, topic relevance, topic scope and affective reaction. Although

clearly, these five topics-related variables might all affect the writing quality, Xu (2006) did not conduct any empirical study to verify the effects.

One of the dominant constructs of task complexity is Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis. According to Robinson (2001), task complexity is the result of the "attention, memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task to the language learner" (Robinson, 2001b, p.28). Robinson's (2011) notion claims that greater development of complexity and accuracy of language production will be pushed with more complex tasks along resource-directing dimension, but the fluency will be negatively affected (Robinson, 2003, 2011). Conversely, when writing task is made complex along resource dispersing dimension, accuracy and complexity of production can be expected to decrease. Hence, manipulating the cognitive demands of task complexity is important.

Although it is unknown if linguistic development would happen in the same manner across genres, clear expectations about genre differences is possible because of previous studies. Nevertheless, the present study aims to investigate and explore the possible reasons of genre differences in ESL writing, specifically focusing on these two genres (narrative vs. argumentative) as they are being taught in Malaysia English classrooms and probably most ESL classrooms around the world.

3.7. Syntactic complexity in summary

Ortega (2003) has defined syntactic complexity as the degree of sophistication and the range of the forms that appear in language production (writing). Researchers from second language and second language acquisition field have employed this idea to measure changes in learner language over time or across proficiency levels and to assess learner's performance in language learning. Since then, syntactic complexity has also been the key factor in the second language and foreign language assessment field as the construct has always been seen as important in describing grammatical competence.

In the last five decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of syntactic complexity, but many studies only employed individual or limited number of syntactic complexity measures (SCMs). Although collectively, these studies have looked at various syntactic complexity measures, each study provided inconsistent results. Hence, there is still no consensus regarding the measures that could examine syntactic complexity at different levels: phrase, clause and sentence. Furthermore, the lack of clear definitions of the term 'complexity' or 'syntactic complexity' may also contribute to this discrepancy. Thus, it is important to provide a clear conceptualisation of syntactic complexity in order to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of complexity.

As argued by Bulte and Housen (2012), complexity can be investigated in terms of the systemic complexity of learners' morphological or lexical system, or in terms of learners' local functional and formal complexity of individual syntactic, lexical, morphological or phonological features that make up second language learners' system. The review of the conceptualisation of syntactic complexity has directed this study to look at second language learners' functional complexity, which includes within syntactical complexity; sentence; clause and phrase.

3.8. The development of metalinguistic understanding

Although previous studies on syntactic complexity provided useful insights to language development, they are commonly text focused, providing very little evidence that could be used to help improve the teaching and learning of second language writing. Writers' awareness of syntactic complexity is often neglected in many corpus-based studies. Even though there were studies that looked at learners' language awareness and metalinguistic development, both syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding were rarely discussed and explored in a single study. Thus, it is crucial to explore how learners' metalinguistic understanding affects their linguistic-decision making in writing and if this can be seen through their writing. Furthermore, the present study also aims to highlight how teachers' metalinguistic understanding facilitates their judgement of writing quality.

Psychologists and linguists have used the concept of metalinguistic differently in their studies (Clapham, 2001; Gombert & Gombert, 1992; Renou, 2000,). The concept of metalinguistic is used by linguists to discuss language as an artefact, focusing on metalanguage of linguistic description, i.e. the terminology used to describe language (e.g. Roth et al., 1996). On the other hand, psychologists are more concerned with the cognitive processes that accompany text production, placing less focus on spoken or written input. However, these two concepts of metalinguistic are equally important for theories of writing and teachers of writing because “writers need to understand how language functions in text, both to observe appropriate linguistic conventions and to understand how language mediates communicative messages to their intended reader” (Myhill, 2012, p. 250). This notion also highlights that it is important for writers to be able to manipulate written language so that their rhetorical goals could be achieved.

Myhill (2011) in her study, defines metalinguistic understanding as “the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artefact and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings” (p. 250). According to Bialystok (1999), the developments of two elements in language processing – analysis and control – are responsible for metalinguistic understanding. She further defined analysis as the ability to represent conscious knowledge, whereas control is “the ability to selectively attend to and apply knowledge” (Bialystok, 1999, p. 636).

Thus, Bialystok's (1999) framework of analysis and control provides a means with which learners' development of metalinguistic understanding can be described.

Much earlier before the concept of metalinguistic understanding surfaced in the field of language learning, Gombert and Gombert (1992) suggested a model of metalinguistic development to discuss the development of oral language in young learners. They explained metalinguistic development through five subdomains: metaphonological, metalexical/metasemantic, metasyntactic, metapragmatic, and metatextual. This model suggests the development of metaphonological, metalexical and metasyntactic understanding precedes metapragmatic and metatextual understanding. Gombert (2003) also differentiated epilinguistic and metalinguistic which are two levels of one's cognitive control of linguistic knowledge. Epilinguistic is an automated control of linguistic processing by the linguistic organisations, whereas metalinguistic involves one's conscious control of linguistic decision-making. He further argued that there is a developmental hierarchy between these two levels, suggesting linguistic competence precedes conscious linguistic control (i.e. metalinguistic understanding). However, Gombert's (2003) study, as well as many other studies on metalinguistic development, focused on children's first language acquisition. While this argument in which epilinguistic precedes metalinguistic knowledge may be true in first language acquisition, it may not be as valid in terms of formal education: a learner who 'knows' grammar rules may not be able to apply them. As an

example in Malaysia, or any other language speaking countries, a learner may know the past tense of 'go' is 'went', but there is also a possibility of them not being able to apply the rule in their output. This situation also sometimes may be true for English teachers who are also speakers of other languages.

Another study by Karmiloff-Smith (1992) proposed a three-stage model of awareness that develops once children can recognise processes that they experience in language learning. This model distinguished implicit representations and developing representational explication. Karmiloff-Smith (1992) explained in the first stage, the elements of a process are internally unidentifiable and cannot be individually operated, although the process can be run as a whole. The second stage consists of clear knowledge of elements, but they remain below the conscious level. This suggests that clear and conscious knowledge develop much later. Children advance through these levels for morphology, phonology and lexicography – making them linguistically complete (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992). One important point highlighted by Karmiloff-Smith (1992) on this theory is that the development through these stages is not age-dependent, so a child may be in different stages concurrently, depending on his or her internal processes.

Both Gombert (2003) and Karmiloff-Smith (1992) supported the hypothesis: Children's language awareness develops gradually and they only become able

to express this awareness once it exists (Veldhuis, 2015). In addition, the general capabilities of abstraction results in the development of children's meta-awareness (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992). As their cognitive maturity occurs, children tend to 'distance' themselves from their linguistic product (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992) and conscious metalinguistic awareness of a variety of linguistic forms may then develop (Veldhuis, 2015).

Previous studies on metalinguistic knowledge/awareness/understanding have always tended to be focused on oral development, young learners or second language learners. This has resulted in very limited body of literature of metalinguistic understanding in relation to writing. Because this process is cognitively demanding and is expected to be related to higher levels of cognitive development, it is important to address the nature of metalinguistic understanding of learners and teachers in relation to learning and teaching writing, as well as teachers' judgement of writing quality.

3.8.1. *Metalinguistic understanding in writing*

The concept of metalinguistic has been explored by both linguists and psychologists for quite some time. The term is used by psychologists to refer to the cognitive processes involved in writing, so less focus is placed on the written input. On the contrary, linguists use the term metalinguistic to refer to metalanguage of linguistic description, focusing more on texts. In the theories of

writing and for teachers of writing, however, both of these concepts are equally important. This is because, in order for writers to be able to use language to communicate their messages, they need to understand the roles of different elements of language in a text. Apart from that, it is also important for writers to be able to use, manipulate and shape their written language so that their rhetorical goals could be achieved.

In the field of linguistics, the term 'metalinguistic' is usually used before nouns such as 'knowledge', 'awareness', 'discussion' and 'understanding'. Depending on the noun used with the adjective 'metalinguistic', the term itself may project different concepts, and this raises theoretical question when one is distinguishing, for example, 'metalinguistic knowledge' from 'metalinguistic awareness' (Camps and Milian, 1999). The term 'metalinguistic' may be used as a synonym to grammatical knowledge or as an over-arching knowledge set in which grammatical knowledge is a subset (Fontich and Camps, 2014). In the field of linguistics, there have been more studies that used 'metalinguistic knowledge' to explore the explicit grammatical knowledge that could be consciously articulated (e.g. Elder et al., 2007; Ellis, 2005; Hu, 2011; Hulstijn, 2005; Roehr, 2006). In his research, Andrews (1999c) defined metalinguistic knowledge as "explicit knowledge about language systems and of the terminology used for labelling linguistic features" (p. 144). However, this research aims to illuminate the important role of, not only articulated explicit grammar knowledge but also

“conscious awareness of language shaping in writing” (Chen and Myhill, 2016, p. 101). Thus, metalinguistic understanding is used in this research to refer to Myhill’s (2011) definition of the term: “the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artefact and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings” (p. 250). However, it is important to note that in this research the terms metalinguistic understanding, metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic discussion (further discussed in **3.8.3**) are used interchangeably and the meaning to each term is as shown below.

Term	Meaning
Metalinguistic knowledge	“...explicit knowledge about language systems and of the terminology used for labelling linguistic features” (Andrews, 1999c, p.144).
Metalinguistic understanding	“...the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artefact and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings” (Myhill, 2011, p.250)
Metalinguistic discussion	Metalinguistic discussion involves using language to reflect on language use which help enable and develop students’ metalinguistic understanding of grammatical choices in writing (Myhill et al., 2011)

Table 3.1: Key terms and meanings

Previous studies (e.g. Gordon, 2005; Fogel and Ehri, 2000) that explored the impact of embedded grammar teaching (i.e. meaningful connection made between grammar point and writing) on students' writing indicated a significant improvement in writing attainment of the intervention group. While these studies considered native speakers school children, the challenge of learning to write for second language children may be greater as they need to learn the language as well as writing skills (Hyland, 2013). In writing assessment, Weigle (2013) wrote that there are three different purposes for writing test and one of it, which applies to second language writers – assessing language through writing (ALW) – aims to test if the student has mastered the second language skills necessary for achieving their rhetorical goals in English. Thus, it is important to address if metalinguistic understanding of writing enables second language writers to manipulate language and convey meaning to fulfil the communicative purposes of academic writing.

3.8.2. *Metalinguistic understanding in teaching L2 grammar*

Previous studies (e.g. Andrews, 2003; Cajkler and Hislam, 2002; Elder et al., 2007) highlighted the importance of teacher's subject knowledge in their professional development. The teacher's subject content knowledge is one of the three important components of teaching expertise (Shulman, 1987). He defined subject content knowledge as the knowledge teachers have of the subject matter they are teaching. Another component is the pedagogical content knowledge,

which is the integration of subject content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of how to teach) (Shulman, 1987). In other words, pedagogical content knowledge is a teacher's knowledge about how and when to teach what in order to address learners' needs. Following this, one important point highlighted by Shulman (1987) is that 'knowing that' is as important as 'knowing how'. Shulman (1999) and Andrews (2008) maintained that it is important for second language teachers to teach based on this in-depth subject content knowledge.

According to Hinkel (2002), the teaching of writing and grammar in second language classrooms happens separately because of the expectation that second language learners will somehow apply their grammar knowledge and skills to their writing when they acquire second language grammar through interaction with and exposure to the target language. This means, the teaching of grammar in second language classrooms is extremely form-focused, disregarding the importance of communication and meaning-making in writing. This is supported by Schultz (2001) who notes that teachers often prefer a form-focused approach, because maintenance of grammatical knowledge is crucial in which is especially true in the Malaysian English education context.

By applying Shulman's (1987) theory of teaching expertise – pedagogical content knowledge – second language teachers should not only be able to use grammar

terminology to explain rules, but they also need to be able to talk about the concept clearly to help learners improve their understanding about the language. Johnston and Goettsch (2000) believe that metalinguistic knowledge is important to second language teachers because “the conscious awareness of grammar structures is as much a part of the teacher’s knowledge base as the ability to use them in practice” (p. 446). In his paper, McNamara (1991) wrote that teachers’ metalinguistic knowledge is key in achieving the goal of their classroom teaching (i.e. enhance learners’ language ability) and determining teachers’ classroom pedagogy. He also pointed out that teachers with limited subject knowledge tend to teach in a didactic manner to minimise learners’ participation while avoiding complex aspects of the language (McNamara, 1991).

This subject knowledge is important to second language teachers so that they can respond to learners by giving more extended grammatical explanations as the context requires (Andrew and McNeill, 2005). A study by Borg and Burns (2008) that looked at English teachers from 18 countries found that teachers tend to integrate grammar and skills in their teaching, so grammar was taught in context and teachers were able to draw learners’ attention to various grammar aspects in relation to errors or text on skills teaching. Svalberg (2012) pointed out how this kind of approach places high demands on teachers’ grammar knowledge because of its responsive character and the need to put things in context.

Andrews (2005) highlights that teachers with extensive grammatical knowledge is in better positions to support developing young writers. This is because limited grammatical knowledge would restrict teachers to identify learners' language development and this may create problems for teachers when discussing grammar aspects in classrooms (Andrews, 2003). This notion supports an earlier study by Gordon (2001) who looked at English teachers in New Zealand and found teachers with limited grammatical knowledge "would be unable to see language development in the writing and speaking of their own pupils" (p. 61). Limited grammatical knowledge among teachers also tends to generate confusions and misconceptions in students' learning. As an example, Myhill et al.'s (2013) study found that teachers tend to explain word classes using semantic rather than functional definitions – a verb as a 'doing' word, or a noun as a 'naming' word – and this results in misconceptions and confusions. Thus, teachers' understanding of the language is key to the effectiveness of their instruction (Andrews, 2008).

3.8.3. *Metalinguistic discussion about writing*

Brown (2001) compared writing skills with the skill of swimming, which is only acquired if one is taught. He further explains that even when one may learn to write, this does not suggest that the skill is mastered despite being proficient in the language. Nunan (1999) viewed writing as 'the most difficult thing to do in language' (p.227) because it is not acquired easily nor is it a spontaneous skill.

Although metalinguistic knowledge is important in second language teaching and learning, it does not necessarily facilitate effective writing. Being able to vocalize grammar terms and rules may help increase accuracy but it may not help learners in achieving their rhetorical goals in writing. Many previous second language learning studies only focused on the importance of metalinguistic knowledge – how explicit grammar knowledge aid in language teaching and learning (e.g. Borg, 1999; Johnston and Goettsch, 2000; Tsang, 2011).

While explicit grammar knowledge is key in second language learning, learners still need to be aware of their linguistic choices – how this explicit knowledge could be used effectively to shape their writing. The idea of metalinguistic discussion about writing, a concept which is fairly new in first and second language writing, has been the focus in several studies by Myhill et al. (2011, 2013, 2016). Their study discussed how dialogic classroom talk (about writing) during writing lessons helped enable and develop students' metalinguistic understanding of grammatical choices in writing. Instead of focusing upon grammatical accuracy, their study was set upon the theory of grammar that is functionally oriented and is a resource for meaning making. Thus, the teaching focus for the intervention group was set upon the grammatical choice that may help writers understand the linguistic choices made by published authors in their text, and the range of choices available for themselves when they write. In the intervention group, the teaching was emphasised on making connections

between grammar and its meaning-making effect in writing to avoid teaching grammar or writing in isolation.

There are three key findings in Myhill et al. (2016) that highlights the importance of metalinguistic discussion about writing. Firstly, the results show that metalinguistic discussion about writing helps students in identifying grammatical form and its meaning in writing, however, most importantly, the study highlights the importance of teachers' skills in managing metalinguistic discussion and their grammatical subject knowledge in determining the success of metalinguistic talk in their lessons. Bearing in mind that their study only considers L1 writers, it may be helpful to adapt this concept to see how dialogic classroom talk combined with teachers and students' grammatical subject knowledge could help L2 writers develop their metalinguistic understanding of writing.

3.9. Metalinguistic knowledge in first language and second language

Learners' metalinguistic knowledge has always been the focus of many language and literacy studies, which mostly aimed to discuss the role of implicit versus explicit grammar knowledge to support native language as well as second or foreign language teaching. The importance of metalinguistic knowledge, or knowledge about language, has emerged in the UK since early 1980s, amidst the controversial issue of grammar teaching in British English classrooms. In present,

there is still much debate over the issue of using implicit versus explicit knowledge to aid language teaching, especially in second language classrooms.

In 1986, Bloor conducted a test to investigate the metalinguistic knowledge of native British university students who were entering Modern Languages or Linguistic degree courses and those who were from other non-linguistic departments. As the results showed that first year undergraduates had low level of metalinguistic knowledge, Bloor (1986) claimed that British school leavers were less informed of grammar knowledge than their forebears were and that it is “a bad thing”. Later on in 1992 and extended in 1994, the same metalinguistic knowledge test was again conducted with 682 undergraduates in different British universities by Alderson et al., aimed to explore the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency and aptitude. The results showed a significant decline in the level of metalinguistic knowledge among undergraduates since 1986, which confirmed the claim made by British university lecturers that British school leavers entering the university have very little knowledge about language, following to the promotion of communicative teaching. However, the results from the study did not find a direct relationship between explicit knowledge and language proficiency in L1 language learning.

In 2010, Corona and Mur-Duenas employed the same test designed by Bloor (1986) to conduct a contrastive analysis study of metalinguistic knowledge of

English between native and non-native first year university students. The non-native Spanish students were divided into two groups: 1) those entering English degree courses and 2) those entering Nursing and Engineering courses. The test consisted questions that require native and non-native participants to identify parts of speech in a sentence and different elements (i.e. subject or predicate) of several sentences. The results between English and non-English major Spanish students showed that the error rate was higher by non-English major Spanish students compared to their English-major counterparts. Most interestingly, the results between native and non-native students showed that the Spanish students did better in the test with lower error rate, compared to their native English counterparts. Even when the results between native students and non-English major Spanish students were compared, the non-English major Spanish students did better in identifying the parts of speech and sentence elements in the test. The results may suggest the different role of metalinguistic knowledge in supporting the teaching of first language and second or foreign language. As Cots (2008) describes, in the first language classroom, metalinguistic knowledge “contribution involves the explication of intuitive knowledge”, while in second language, metalinguistic knowledge “work consists of noticing and understanding the difference” between what they know and what they need, “in terms of capacity to manipulate and understand language” (p.25).

However, none of the studies above discussed using metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding in assisting the teaching of writing in first or second language classrooms. Although technical knowledge may not guarantee second language learners' competence in producing the language (Krashen, 1987), the present study stresses the idea that in second language writing, there is a gap between this technically learned knowledge and the teaching and learning of writing. This is largely caused by the second language classroom pedagogy, which tends to isolate grammar knowledge from writing skills. Grammatical accuracy is important in second language learning as it somehow measures learners' proficiency; however, it should not be the only focus, especially in the teaching and learning of writing. Writers should also be exposed to the idea that their grammar knowledge could assist them in making linguistic choice to shape their writing so that their rhetorical goals could also be achieved.

3.10. Metalinguistic understanding and the approaches to writing

As written language is complex and complicated, it cannot be acquired by simply observing others as such as speaking is developed. Thus, in order to develop writing skills, specific instruction is required (Brown, 2002). Different methods have been designed in order to address the issues in teaching writing, but the two approaches that are commonly used by teachers and often receive attention from researchers are the functional and form-focused approaches. These two

approaches differ from one another, with one focusing on language features and the other focusing on the presentation of meaning in written text.

3.10.1. *Form-focused teaching approach*

The more traditional approach to writing, 'a focus on form' approach is centred on the grammatical rules of language and the use of correct forms (Mohan & Slater, 2005). This approach requires writers to concentrate on grammar tenses, parallel structure and other specific language features. It is also common for writers to focus on the language and sequence used to start and end their piece of writing. When teachers evaluate writings using the form approach, the focus is placed on language accuracy rather than meaning. As Silva (1990) states, "it is basically a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns" (p.14). She further explains that through form-focus approach, writers are "learning to write, then becoming skilled in identifying, internalising and executing these patterns" (Silva, 1990, p. 14).

The form-focused approach also often emphasises on the final piece of writing, in which teachers measure the quality of the writing by looking at the vocabulary and grammatical use, and other mechanical considerations such as spelling and punctuation, as well as content and organisation (Douglas, 1994). Form-focused approach was greatly criticised because of its concern with sets of rules that

determine correct and incorrect grammar in a text. Raimes (1983) highlighted several very important points about form-focused approach in writing:

The product approach has received much criticism because it ignores the actual processes used by students, or any writers, to produce a piece of writing. Instead, it focuses in imitation and churning out a perfect product, even though very few people can create a perfect product on the first draft. Another criticism is that this approach requires constant error correction, and that affects students' motivation and self-esteem. The product approach does not effectively prepare students for the real world or teach them to be the best writers. Nevertheless, the product approach still has some credibility because at some point there will be a final draft that requires attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation.

(Raimes, 1983, p. 45)

Because of its nature, a two-way communication between teachers and students seldom take place in classrooms. Furthermore, using this method, teachers may find teaching grammar trough context and hand-in-hand with writing difficult.

Despite these issues, Ellis (1994) explains that the form focus approach is important and necessary to language learning, especially for second language learners, as it focuses on the foundation rules and structures of grammar to help

convey meaning through language. This approach is somehow important to second language learners because they need to be able to understand meaning of words (semantics) and how to put these words together (syntax). Rodgers (2006) also stated that learners tend to develop expressive language skills as a result of syntactic language processing in the classroom. These expressive language skills are key in literacy tasks, especially in reading and writing. One of the important building blocks to be integrated in learners' writing is the 'communicative forms' (Serna, 2009). This was supported by Laurent and Martinot (2010) who explained that learners need to be aware of phonological rules and syntactic structure or form in order to truly understand the complexity of written language.

3.10.2. *Functional teaching approach*

Another approach to writing is the functional approach, which focuses on the functional content of language within different contexts (Mohan & Slater, 2005). The functional approach views the language system as "a set of options available for construing different kinds of meanings" (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 7), instead of just a set of rules. Schleppegrell (2001) argues that learners who lack social experience with the way language is used in school may still struggle to make linguistic choices despite the broad set of options that a language offers as a whole. This may explain the challenges that are faced by second language learners, especially when they have very limited chance to experience or use the

target language outside of the classroom. Through functional approach, Schleppegrell (2004) also promotes the importance of “active pedagogy”, in which teachers discuss visible grammatical choices that construe advanced school text in order to enhance students’ command of those texts.

In functional teaching approach, syntactic or grammar instruction are usually planned around learners’ interactive experiences in order to maximise their functional language in different contexts (Mohan & Slater, 2005). Teachers who follow the functional approach in language teaching do not focus on correcting grammatical errors; instead, they use this method in order to improve learners’ linguistic complexity and clarity (Mohan & Beckett, 2003). Using functional approach, writers are taught to have not only grammatically correct sentences, but they must also consider if their writing addresses the subject matter and uses appropriate tone (between reader and writer) and mode (Gibbons, 2010). In contrast to form-focused study, learners who are taught using functional approach tend to focus systematically on the clarity, complexity and suitability of their language used in their writing.

In writing, the functional approach requires writers to consider the audience to which the ideas are being addressed, so writers tend to reflect how to use appropriate language in order to communicate the ideas to the readers. Grabe

and Kaplan (2014) also discussed several key points of functional approach in writing:

Most writing is usually undertaken to communicate with one or more readers for a variety of informational purposes. When there is no other anticipated reader, and the writing is truly personal and private, one could argue that the writer serves as a reader, and thus the writing remains as a communicative act. Starting from the position that writing is a communicative act, theories of communicative language use, or communicative competence, provide an important resource for developing a model of writing.

(Grabe & Kaplan, 2014)

The notion by Grabe and Kaplan (2014) also suggests that in functional approach, learners are actively participating in their learning of writing, as they are highly involved in the writing process. Learners are not only expected to store all sorts of grammar knowledge to produce flawless sentences in their writing, but they are encouraged to communicate in the target language in order to deliver the message effectively (Hendrickson, 1978). Thus, it is important to view writing as a communicative act, otherwise, they will only become pieces of work to please the teacher. As suggested by Horowitz (1989), "...when writing is not perceived as a realistic goal, most students; essays are usually addressed to the

same reader, namely, their language teacher". He further explained that these students believe that when their essay is addressed to the teachers, linguistic accuracy becomes the most important element, so their content and opinion then becomes irrelevant to them.

3.10.3. Form and function focused approaches and metalinguistic understanding

As a result of the debate around the effectiveness of form and function focused approaches in language learning, there are some researchers and teachers who believe that form and function focused approaches should be combined. Teaching grammar (in isolation) may be less effective when it comes to learners acquiring the knowledge subconsciously, which eventually deters their fluency in the language (Day & Shapson, 2001). In their study that looked at teaching grammar by combining communicative, functional and formal approaches, they found that learners managed to improve their written and oral grammar skills significantly. The materials for the intervention group were designed to teach the conditional with opportunities for students to use this form in communicative situations. This was achieved by conducting systematic, focused games or exercises as well as encouraging their metalinguistic understanding. They believe that the form-focused approach combined with the communicative and functional scaffolds for grammatical components affected the improvement of students' overall grammar performance (Day & Shapson, 2001).

However, recently, there has also been a similar notion that promotes the teaching of grammar to support the development of writing. Gutierrez (2008) conducted a study that investigated how metalinguistic discussion about textual choices helps develop writing skills. This signals the importance of having metalinguistic understanding about writing in order to achieve learners' rhetorical goals. Although there has been numerous research on communicative approach in language learning, research into how classroom talk helps develop learners' understanding of writing remain scarce. While Day and Shapson's (2001) study looked at combining form-focused with communicative approach through systematic, focused games and exercises, studies on metalinguistic understanding such as Myhill et al.'s (2016) promote the role of teachers' conversation about writing in developing students' metalinguistic understanding of writing. Drawing upon the theorisation of grammar as a resource for meaning-making, the pedagogy used in the intervention group focused on grammatical choice rather than accuracy. However, all of these studies were conducted on first language children and the challenge of learning to write for second language children may be greater as they need to learn the language as well as writing skills (Hyland, 2013). Considering the successful outcome of Day and Shapson's (2001) study, Myhill et al.'s notion of metalinguistic discussion about writing could be very useful for second language learners if their pedagogy of teaching grammar in the context of writing is adapted into Day and Shapson's (2001) form-focused and communicative approaches of teaching writing.

3.11. Conclusion

Despite being one of the most researched topics in linguistics, there are still inconsistencies in the results of syntactic complexity analyses of learners' writing, especially involving second language learners. The review in this chapter has revealed that one of the reasons for the inconsistencies is that the term 'syntactic complexity' has always been defined vaguely and poorly. Many researchers also failed to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of complexity, which then raises the question of what they are actually measuring.

It is also important to note that although there are many previous studies of syntactic complexity, there has been very little or no discussion on how certain structures affect complexity and the rhetorical aspects of learners' essays as they tend to be corpus-based studies that did not consider the effectiveness of learners' writing when it comes to using more complex syntactic structures. Instead, these corpus studies often report their results based solely on the presence of certain syntactic elements - referring 'more complex' to 'longer' T-units, sentences and clauses or 'higher' frequencies of certain syntactic features. What these studies failed to consider was that longer sentences, clauses or T-units do not always lead to good or effective writing, especially in second language writing. Higher frequency of certain elements may lead to misleading results – i.e. when there is a tendency for second language learners to overuse

linking adverbials, which is not necessarily a feature of more advanced or complex writing. Previous research also did not look at the use of minor sentences as a way to increase the effectiveness of writing despite the fact that in the 'real world' English, the minor sentence is a common feature in both literary and persuasive texts. While the results of previous corpus-based studies contributed significantly in the field of second language learning, these statistical results may not be used to present effectiveness in communication – an element beyond language accuracy that is often disregarded. Thus, it is important to conduct a more detailed analysis of syntactic complexity without only relying on statistical findings to challenge previous researchers' simplistic correlation between syntactical complexity and essay quality.

The importance of previous corpus-based studies is undeniable because they provide insights to language development in first and second language learners. However, there is very little evidence that could be used to help teachers improve classroom pedagogy. Furthermore, there is not yet a study that looks at the relationship between syntactic complexity and metalinguistic understanding of teachers and learners. The concept of metalinguistic understanding of writing in classroom teaching is uncommon in second language teaching and learning. Most studies look at the importance of explicit grammar teaching in writing lessons without considering how this knowledge can help shape learners' writing. Second language teachers often talk about grammar knowledge in their

classrooms without discussing how learners could use this knowledge to improve the effectiveness of their writing. Many previous studies of metalinguistic understanding/knowledge/awareness often consider learners' or teachers' metalinguistic knowledge – while this explicit knowledge may help improve accuracy in writing, it may not necessarily lead to better writing.

This research attempts to contribute to knowledge by looking at syntactic complexity both from the perspective of what is present in the text, as well as investigating learners' metalinguistic understanding of what is or could be in the text. In addition, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between these two perspectives and teachers' metalinguistic knowledge of syntactic complexity and how they make judgments about writing quality. The teaching of grammar and writing in Malaysia has always been isolated, resulting in students, especially with lower level proficiency, to decontextualise grammar in their writing. Although grammar knowledge is a key factor to measure language proficiency in second language learning, there is a pressing need to encourage students' metalinguistic understanding through classroom talk about writing or metalinguistic discussion. It is undeniable that some second language learners may be proficient in terms of grammar rules (even more proficient than native speakers are), but they may struggle to make appropriate linguistic choice to achieve their rhetorical goals. Thus, considering all of the issues above, this research aims to investigate second language Malaysian learners' syntactic

complexity of writing by conducting a detailed analysis to explain how syntactic features are used to increase the complexity and effectiveness of learners' writing. This research also explores how learners' metalinguistic understanding affects their writing and how teachers' metalinguistic understanding affects their judgement of essay quality. More specifically, this research aims to answer these research questions:

- 1) What is the nature of syntactic constructions in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency?
- 2) Is there a difference in the nature of syntactic constructions in narrative and argumentative essays?
- 3) What is the nature of students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical complexity in writing?
- 4) How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their judgement of students' writing quality?

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

4.1. Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, complexity can be an indicator and descriptor of second language performance and second language proficiency in writing (Bulte & Housen, 2012). Given the importance of syntactic complexity in second language learning and the scarcity of metalinguistic understanding studies, this mixed-method study positions itself to bridge this gap by investigating both syntactic constructions in second language learners' writing and the metalinguistic understanding of teachers and learners. The integration of detailed corpus work and interview analysis aims to provide more comprehensive findings to discuss the relationship between syntactic complexity of writing, and teachers' and learners' metalinguistic understanding.

This chapter addresses the process and methods for the analysis of students' essays and interviews/ writing conversations conducted with teachers and students. Apart from that, it also discusses the research design of the study, which includes the selection of participants, instruments and tools used during data collection and data analysis. Following this, validity, reliability, limitations and ethical issues relating to the chosen research method are also described and

discussed. Finally, as there is no study that integrates both detailed corpus work and interviews/ writing conversations in Malaysia, it is hoped that this study will generate new knowledge about both the syntactic complexity evident in students' writing, and the extent of their, and their teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity. At the same time, the study should provide findings which can inform the teaching of second language writing in Malaysia and address some of today's challenges.

4.2. Research design

Bryman (2001) suggests that "a general orientation to the conduct of social research" (p. 20) must be employed by researchers in order to achieve the research aims or address a set of research questions. As the aims of the present research are to explore the nature of the syntactic structures of Malaysian secondary school students' essays and to understand how metalinguistic knowledge affects teachers' judgment of essay quality and students' way of writing, this study adopts a mixed methods research design. A mixed methods study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in different stages of the research procedure in a study or a program of enquiry (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). More specifically, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) define mixed methods as follows:

Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. (p. 28)

Social researchers use mixed methods in several different ways (e.g. Bryman, 2006; Greene et al., 1989; Rocco et al., 2003), but Collins et al. (2006) identified four general foundations and 65 specific reasons in the broad variety of mixed methods research which was reviewed in published mixed methods studies. From the review, it was found that some researchers use mixed methods i) to improve the accuracy of data, ii) to show more comprehensive results by relating information from additional sources, iii) to avoid the prejudice directed at single-method approaches such as a quantitative or a qualitative approach – or as a way of counterweighing the strengths and limitations of particular methods, and iv) to develop the analysis and build upon early findings using different kinds of data or methods. As for this study, the use of mixed methods as the research design is so that a sounder understanding of the research problem can be provided from the perspectives of different approaches.

The philosophical assumption that is commonly related to the mixed methods approach is Pragmatism. Pragmatism comprises a set of assumptions on knowledge and enquiry that underpins the mixed methods approach, which differentiates the approach from purely qualitative approaches that are rooted in the philosophy of interpretivism or constructivism and purely quantitative approaches that are based on a philosophy of (post-)positivism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Maxcy, 2003; Rallis & Rossman, 2003). Pragmatism emphasises the importance of focusing on the research problem in social science research and uses varied approaches to develop knowledge about the problem (Morgan, 2007). This philosophical view is also not bound to any particular system of philosophy and reality, which describes the nature of the mixed methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Pragmatists who use a mixed methods research design “look to the what and how to research, based on the intended consequences—where they want to go with it” (Creswell, 2008, p.11). Because of this, it is crucial for pragmatists who use a mixed methods research design to justify why they choose to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches for their research.

A researcher has not only to determine the research design they plan to use for their research, but they also have to consider the strategy of enquiry within the research design. Strategies of enquiry are “types of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs or models that provide specific direction for procedures

in a research design” (Creswell, 2008, p. 11). Under mixed methods, there are mainly four main designs, which are the Triangulation Design, the Explanatory Design, the Embedded Design, and the Exploratory Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The present study mainly seeks to investigate the syntactic complexity of writing among Malaysian L2 learners of English. However, the study also aims to ascertain how students' metalinguistic understanding affects their way of writing essays and how teachers' metalinguistic understanding affect their judgement of students' essay quality. In order to achieve these aims, a Triangulation Mixed Methods design is employed, as the study involves a single phase of data collection.

Specifically, this study employs a mixed methods convergence triangulation design, which consists of one phase of quantitative and qualitative implementation methods during the same timeframe (Creswell & Plano, 2007). According to Morse (1991), cited in Creswell and Clark (2011), a triangulation design is chosen by a researcher "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (p.122), so that a more in-depth understanding of the research problem can be achieved. Because previous corpus works have focused more on generating numerical evidence, this study aims to use qualitative findings to expand on and validate quantitative results.

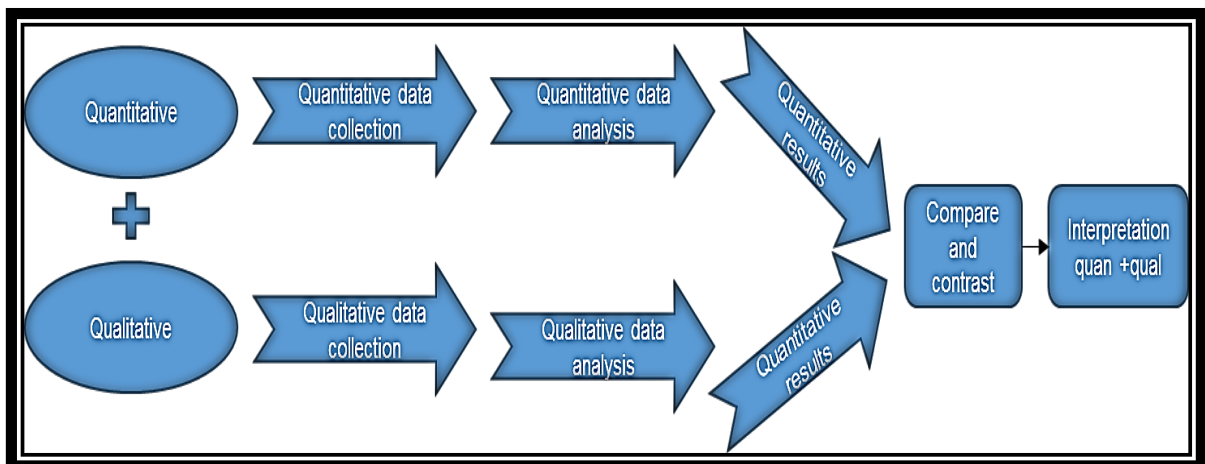


Figure 4.1: Triangulation design (Creswell & Plano, 2007)

This design involves a single-phase timing, which means it involves "concurrent, but separate collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data" (Creswell & Plano, 2007, p. 64). In other words, quantitative and qualitative data will be collected concurrently, but subsequently, the two data sets will be analysed separately before merging them during interpretation. This design is used as it provides the study with different but complementary data to investigate the problem. For this study, quantitative data provides answers to research questions one and two, while qualitative data provides answers to research questions three and four. Quantitative data consist of students' narrative and argumentative essays in order to look at the nature of syntactic structure in their writing. What is generated from these essays is measures of syntactic complexity from a corpus analysis, which is done manually. The qualitative data for this study are drawn from writing conversations conducted with teachers and students. These involve

not only questions related to research questions three and four, but also questions specifically intended to elicit teachers' and students' metalinguistic understanding. These qualitative findings, it is hoped, will shed light on and help expand the quantitative results of the study.

4.3. Procedure for triangulating a mixed methods design

The data collection procedures were carried out concurrently but separately and the two data sets were analysed separately and independently. The procedure for analysing corpus data involved using statistical analysis, percentages, comparisons and descriptive statistics. On the other hand, the analysis of interview and writing conversation data involved identifying patterns and thematic analysis. The findings for both sets were then thematically arranged and are reported in the findings chapter. The two data sets are merged in the next chapter to draw a final conclusion. The merged data are found in the discussion chapter, which explains how the different types of data form a more in-depth understanding in the current study.

4.4. The sample

In order to answer research questions one and two, this study examined students' essays, both argumentative and narrative. A total of 120 writing samples were collected for the present research. Only essays that were completed, clear and

comprehensible were chosen for the data analysis: this resulted in a sample of 92 essays. The participants involved in this study consist of Malaysian upper-secondary school students and English language teachers. Specifically, students aged 16 from three different schools around Selangor state and their English teachers were chosen for the purposes of the study. The reason why only these group of students were chosen is because the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the State Education Office (SEO) advised me not to involve students who were preparing for the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination (SPM), which is a public examination that determines students' entrance to higher education institutes. The MoE and SEO also advised not to interrupt students' lessons, hence the writing conversations could only take place after school hours. Three schools were randomly chosen from the list provided by the SEO to represent Selangor state. The time constraint (maximum of three months fixed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education) for data collection allowed only a limited number of schools and students to be sampled for the study.

School	Frequency (f)
School A	40
School B	40
School C	40
Total	120

Table 4.1: Total number of student participants

In the second stage of data collection, aimed to inform research questions three and four, writing conversations were conducted with 12 selected student participants and their English teachers. A writing conversation is similar to a semi-structured interview, but a writing conversation combines questions, which aim to elicit perceptions and beliefs on writing and grading essays, with elicitation tasks aimed to elicit a metalinguistic understanding among teacher and student participants. The 12 student representatives for writing conversations were chosen based on their proficiency levels: intermediate and advanced, according to their English language results in the Lower Secondary Assessment or PT3, a public examination taken by Form three students in Malaysia. Syntactic structures used in the chosen essays were also taken into consideration so that the essays could be used as prompts during the writing conversation. Essays chosen also exhibited certain syntactic features that were going to be discussed in the elicitation task. In addition to the student participants, there were also six

teacher participants for the study. All six teachers were English teachers teaching the student sample.

During writing conversations, essays written by chosen student participants were used additionally with the interview schedule to help elicit more in-depth data and stimulate or prompt students and teachers' metalinguistic knowledge. The essays used in teachers' writing conversations were those marked by them. Teachers were asked to initial each graded essay so that the researcher could identify which essays to include in the writing conversations.

School	Proficiency Level	
	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate
School A	2	2
School B	2	2
School C	2	2
Total	6	6

Table 4.2: Number of student participants for writing conversation

School	Frequency (f)
School A	2
School B	2
School C	2
Total	6

Table 4.3: Total number of teacher participants for writing conversation

4.5. Data collection: the writing sample

The first step in data collection involved the collection of essays from the student participants. This data collection was carried out over three weeks between late July and mid-August 2017. The first step included administration of the writing activity in classrooms. Essay questions or prompts were handed out to teachers of the selected classrooms and they were to administer the writing activity in class. The essay prompts mirror the structure and context of essay questions or prompts that are taught in classrooms and given in students' examinations. Students were given exactly one hour to complete the task.

During this data collection, the researcher went to each school according to the time slots given by the teachers. The researcher allocated a day to administer each writing session in each school. After each session, the researcher informed the teachers that they had four days to mark the essays. Each English teacher in

each school had an average of 10 to 15 essays to mark in four days. It is also important to note that each school had about three to four English teachers who were teaching the sample students.

4.5.1. *Essay pilot test*

Before the actual data collection was conducted, the writing tasks were first pilot tested with 40 students from one of the chosen schools. The students, who were not part of the research sample, were divided into two groups, one was given the argumentative task, the other the narrative task. A total of one hour was given to the students to complete the task, and they were instructed not to refer to any books or discuss with their friends during the writing session. The teacher was present in the room to help monitor the students. The essays were then collected after one hour. Based on the essays written by the students and the feedback given by them and their teachers, the essay prompts were maintained as they did not pose any problems during the writing session. Furthermore, the essay prompts were reported to be similar of those that they have been using in their writing lessons. Thus, both students and teachers were familiar with the essay prompts.

4.5.2. Essay writing

There were two essay prompts given to the students, and to make sure even numbers of argumentative and narrative essays were received from them, the researcher distributed 20 argumentative essay tasks to half of the class while the other half of the class received narrative essay tasks. The essay prompts given to the students are as follows:

Write a composition of about 350 words on the following topics:

- 1) Write a story ending with: “We had never laughed so much in our lives.”
- 2) Good results in school do not guarantee success in the future. Discuss.

Prompt 1 required the students to write a narrative essay, which ends with “We had never laughed so much in our lives”, whereas prompt 2 required students to write an argumentative essay. Students’ essays had to be about 350 words or more and they were given an hour to complete the task. Before the essay writing was conducted in class, the students and teachers were not informed of the writing topics. This was to avoid the students planning their writing in advance, which might affect their essay and eventually the findings. However, the topics or prompts given were modelled on those in the 1119 paper of the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination as well as other Form four writing textbooks

or exercise books. Thus, the topics were relevant and relatable to the students. During the one hour writing session, the researcher first distributed consent forms to students and teachers and read the conditions of the data collection. Students and teachers were given some time to read the consent forms again and sign them before returning them to the researcher. The researcher also made sure that students received minimal help from their teacher and friends during the writing session, so that the essays written by the students were based on their knowledge and ability. The essays were then collected and handed to the teachers for grading. Finally, the teachers passed the graded essays to the researcher for further analysis.

Essay Genre		
Proficiency Level	Argumentative	Narrative
Advanced	23	23
Intermediate	23	23

N= 92

Table 4.4: Essay samples in the study

4.5.3. *Marking rubric*

The essays were marked by the English teachers using the standardised English 1119 marking scheme for the Malaysian Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (henceforth SPM). All the English teachers were aware of this scheme as they often use it to mark English essay papers, especially those of upper-secondary level students. The marking scheme for continuous writing was used so that all the essays were marked based on standardised description criteria. The marking scheme consists of two sections, but the marking was based on the criteria in section B as argumentative and narrative essays are categorised under continuous writing in that section. The maximum mark for section B is 50, but there is a number of mark ranges according to the description criteria. The mark ranges are explained as follows:

MARKING SCHEME FOR CONTINUOUS WRITING

(SECTION B)

1. The candidate's response will be assessed based on impression.
2. The examiner shall read and re-read the response carefully and at the same time underline for gross or minor errors or put in insertion marks (^) where such errors occur.
3. The examiner should also mark for good vocabulary or expressions by putting a merit tick at the end of such merits.
4. The examiner shall fit the candidate's response against the most appropriate band having most of the criteria as found in the band. The examiner may have to refer to upper or lower bands to the band already chosen to BEST FIT the student's response to the most appropriate band. The marks from the band decided on for the script also depend on the number of criteria that are found in the script.
5. Justify the band and marks given, if necessary, by commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate's response, using the criteria found in the band.

MARK RANGE	DESCRIPTION OF CRITERIA
A 44 – 50	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language – entirely accurate, with occasional first draft slips• Sentence structures, varied and sophisticated – achieve particular effect• Vocabulary – wide and precise – shades of meaning• Punctuation and spelling – accurate and helpful• Paragraphs – well-planned, unified and linked• Topic – consistently relevant• Interest – aroused and sustained throughout writing

<p>B</p> <p>38 – 43</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – accurate, with occasional minor errors or first draft slips • Sentence – varied lengths and types, some complex sentences • Vocabulary – wide and precise – shades of meaning • Punctuation and spelling – nearly always accurate • Paragraphs – evidence of planning, appropriately linked • Writing – relevant, interest aroused and sustained throughout
<p>C</p> <p>32 – 37</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – largely accurate • Sentences – some variety in length and type, tendency to use one type • Simple structures – error-free, errors with more ambitious structures, • Vocabulary – wide enough to convey meaning but lack precision • Punctuation in simple sentences – accurate, with errors in more complex use • Spelling – simple words, correct but misspelt with more sophisticated words • Paragraphs – show unity, at times inappropriately linked • Writing – relevant lack originality and interest aroused and sustained throughout • Some interest – aroused but not sustained
<p>D</p> <p>26 – 31</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – sufficiently accurate • Patches of clear, accurate language – especially, when simple structures and vocabulary used • Some variety in sentence type and length • Vocabulary – adequate but not developed to show intended precision • Punctuation and spelling – generally correct • Writing – relevant but lacks interest
<p>E</p> <p>20 - 25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning – never in doubt • Single Word Errors (SWE) – frequent and serious to hamper reading • Sentence structures – accurate but not sustained for long • Vocabulary – limited, too simple or when more ambitious, it's imperfectly understood • Spelling – simple words spelt correctly • Paragraphs – lack unity or haphazardly arranged • Some relevance – topic partially treated • High incidence of linguistic errors
<p>U (i)</p> <p>14 – 19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning – fairly clear • SWE – very frequent and impedes reading/blurring • Vocabulary – many serious errors of various kinds, mainly single-word type, but could be corrected without rewriting • Sentences – very few are accurate, often simple and repetitive • Punctuation and spelling – sometimes used correctly • Paragraphs – lack unity or no paragraphs at all

U (ii) 8 – 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some sense • Multiple Word Errors (MWE) – very frequent, requires rereading before being understood, impedes reading / blurring • Only a few accurate sentences – mostly simple sentences • Length – short
U (iii) 0 – 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost entirely impossible to read / blurring • Whole sections make little or no sense at all • Occasional patches of clarity (marks awarded) • Vocabulary – simple words used • “0” to scripts with no sense from beginning till the end

Table 4.5: The standardised English 1119 marking scheme

4.6. Data collection: writing conversation interviews

Writing conversations were conducted personally with the selected teachers and students from each school. The writing conversation included questions to elicit students’ and teachers’ metalinguistic understanding of syntax and their perceptions on writing and grading essays. They were carried out after all the essays had been marked by the teachers and returned to the researcher, so that the students’ essays could be used in the writing conversations to aid in eliciting information from the participants. Furthermore, the direction of each writing conversation with the participant was determined by the essay used in the conversation. Six teachers, two from each school, and 12 students, four from each school, were chosen for writing conversations. All of them were briefed about the process and given consent forms before participating.

Steps	Data Collection
First step (Late July – early August 2017)	Administration of essay writing
Second step (Middle August – early September 2017)	Writing conversations with students
	Writing conversations with teachers

Table 4.6: Process of data collection

The researcher allocated approximately three to four days to conduct the writing conversations in each school. This is because the researcher had been advised by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the State Education Office (SEO) to conduct the research after school hours so that school lessons were not interrupted by the research. Because of the very limited time accessible each day for each school, the researcher had to allocate several days to conduct writing conversations in each school as the writing conversation for each participant lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. All the conversations were recorded using the researcher’s digital voice recorder. Two digital voice recorders were used, one serving as a back-up in case of electronic failure or fault. Note-taking served as added back-up to the audio-recording and gave context to the interviews.

The writing conversations with the students and teachers started with an introduction by the researcher, a briefing on the goals of the interview and the purpose of the questions asked in the interview. The consent forms which were given to and signed by participants during the one-hour essay writing session were shown to them once again to clarify the conditions of the interview and the research as a whole. The researcher then began establishing a friendly, informal atmosphere to make the participants comfortable and encourage them to speak. The interviews were conducted in English, as all of the interview participants were proficient English speakers. However, when necessary, Malay language was also used if there were any terms or questions that needed to be clarified. During the writing conversations, the researcher did not mention anything that could give away the identity of the participants. The participants were also informed regarding this matter and assured that none of their raw data would be shared or revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

4.6.1. *Semi-structured interviews and elicitation task*

Although the second stage of data collection in this study is called writing conversation, apart from the elicitation task, the main procedure of this method depicts a semi-structured interview. According to Cohen et al. (2011), the most important aspect of an interview is flexibility and this particular feature is what makes it different from other research methods. During an interview, questions

can be asked in more depth so that any misunderstandings can be clarified. Furthermore, if the participants or respondents do not understand any of the questions, the researcher may repeat or explain them (Burns, 2000).

One of the main reasons why this method was chosen is because face-to-face interaction helps to create a higher level of motivation among the participants as they explain their beliefs and perceptions in language that is natural to them (Burns, 2000). Thus, this method was seen as more apt, compared to questionnaires, because the likelihood of getting incomplete or no response from the participants is low. This can lead to richer and more in-depth data that are useful for the study.

There were two parts in the writing conversation: semi-structured interview and elicitation task. The semi-structured interview consisted of questions that were asked to elicit teachers' and students' perceptions and beliefs on grading, teaching and writing English essays. On the other hand, the elicitation tasks were conducted to elicit teachers' and students' metalinguistic knowledge and understanding of syntactic constructions. However, both the semi-structured interviews and the elicitation task were intended to meet the objectives of research questions three and four.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of pre-determined sets of open questions with the opportunity for the researcher to further probe particular topics

or responses. The researcher also allowed each participant to discuss or raise any issues that were related to the essay writing or questions from the semi-structured interview or elicitation task. During the writing conversation, the researcher tried to closely follow the schedule, avoiding as much as possible straying away from the main topic. The same questions were asked to each participant, but the researcher also asked additional questions related to the original ones to different participants whenever she thought appropriate. On the other hand, the same elicitation task was presented to each participant with no additional tasks. This was to ensure consistency in the data obtained from the elicitation task. A further explanation regarding the interview schedule and elicitation task is presented in the section below.

4.6.2. Interview schedule

According to Drever (1995), an interview schedule aims to remind and guide the interviewee of the formal purpose or nature of the discussion. Drever (1995) further explains that an interview schedule is developed to help the interviewer conduct the interview smoothly, without missing out any questions and misleading or confusing the interviewee. The interview schedules for students and teachers (Appendix M, N) were developed based on Drever's (1995) and Cohen et al.'s (2011) interview schedule guidelines, aiming to elicit responses and explanations to answer research questions three and four. It was important

to develop the questions in the schedule in an orderly manner so that responses could be elicited gradually, in a logical sequence, to ensure the natural flow of the interview (Denver, 1995).

Although the questions were already listed in the interview schedule, they were occasionally reworded or amended according to the interviewee's understanding and responses. However, this was done without altering the meaning or purpose of the questions. The interview schedules were divided into three parts – the background, students or teachers' beliefs about learning or teaching writing and the elicitation task. The interview schedule for the students differed slightly from the one for the teachers, as the questions were developed to prompt specific responses regarding the teachers and students' perceptions.

The background section covered students' and teachers' general information and educational or teaching background. In the students' interview schedule, the topics covered included their beliefs on learning writing and what is important in writing. In the teachers' interview schedule, on the other hand, the topics covered included their method of teaching writing and their perceptions of essay quality. Finally, the interview schedule included an elicitation task, which consisted of several types of sentences, clauses and phrases that sought to establish students' and teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical elements in

the sentences, their ability to explain the difference between phrase, clause and sentence and their understanding of a simple sentence.

4.6.3. Interview schedule pilot test

To ensure the questions were suitable for the interviews, the interview schedules were first piloted to ensure the questions were clear and the words used were suitable. The schedules were piloted with three participants from each sample – three students (from the writing session sample) and three teachers (those teaching the pilot group). This piloting was conducted to help detect any mistakes or limitations within the design of the schedule as well as to help the researcher improve the interview questions (Kvale, 2008). The piloting also helped the researcher to determine the time each interview would roughly take to ask all the questions and to check if any of the questions were sensitive, irrelevant or difficult to answer. After the piloting was conducted, the interview schedules went through some changes and modifications in terms of the sequence of the questions, and some questions were deleted as they were considered irrelevant.

Two interview schedules were designed specifically for the student and teacher participants and they differ in terms of the questions that focused on either teaching or learning writing. After the pilot test, this question was omitted from the students' interview schedule:

- 1) Have you given some thought to what grammar represents or means to you?

It was deleted, as it was too broad and not related to any of the research questions. Furthermore, students struggled to understand the question and they had problems in giving a definite answer or explanation. It was replaced with another question more focused on the research aims:

- 1) Based on the assessment criteria, could you explain what the term 'varied sentence structures' means?

This question was seen as more suitable in order to elicit responses from the students that could inform the research question.

The teachers' interview schedule was also amended. One question from the schedule was omitted for the same reason as above:

- 1) When assessing your students' essays, what is/are the biggest problem(s) or challenge(s) that you have to face?

It was replaced by the same one used to replace the question omitted from the students' interview schedule.

4.6.4. Elicitation task

The elicitation task (Appendix M, N) was specifically developed to establish students' and teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic features in sentences, their ability to explain the difference between a phrase, a clause and a sentence and their understanding of a simple sentence. In order to obtain such data, it was important to ensure that the aims of the present research were addressed in the elicitation task (Cohen et al., 2011). This is because a poorly designed task will result in data of limited value (Taber, 2007). Thus, to answer research questions three and four, the elicitation task was developed based on syntactic elements linked to writing complexity. The first part of the test assessed participants' knowledge of a simple sentence. They were asked to define a simple sentence and elicit any examples from the essays written by the student participants. Apart from that, they were also asked to define various sentence structures and elicit any examples from the essays. Next, a list of clauses and phrases was presented to the participants and they were asked to go through them and label each one with 'clause' and 'phrase' cards. The participants were then asked to explain their answers – i.e. what makes it a clause or a phrase. Finally, participants were also asked to describe the parts of speech in five different sentences with varying levels of difficulty. The list of sentences started with a fairly easy, straightforward sentence, and the level of difficulty or complexity increased with each subsequent one. During this task, students were

given several cards with 'subject', 'verb', 'object', 'compliment' or 'adverbial' on them and they were asked to label the parts of speech in each sentence using the cards. Participants were also asked if a particular task was challenging for them and, if so, the researcher prompted them to explain further. This was to elicit the reason behind their weakness in terms of their metalinguistic knowledge. Throughout the task, there were some additional questions asked to investigate if the participants were aware of metalinguistic understanding and if they had ever tried to develop their knowledge or might have the need to do so in the future.

Given the time constraint, it was impossible to conduct a task that would assess all components of metalinguistic knowledge and its subdivisions. Furthermore, the elicitation task aimed to explore the participants' general knowledge of terms and their knowledge of rules and how they applied their knowledge in writing and grading students' writing. Although the present research also aimed to investigate the importance of metalinguistic understanding in teaching and learning writing, there were no particular questions listed in the elicitation task to this end. Instead, participants' metalinguistic understanding of writing was investigated based on their responses, which revealed their level of awareness of linguistic choices in shaping their writing.

4.6.5. Elicitation task pilot test

The elicitation task was also piloted in order to identify any limitations or weaknesses in the system. It was piloted with three participants from each sample – three students (from the writing session sample) and three teachers not from the interview sample. Some tasks had to be omitted as they were too hard for the participants. Some tasks had to be reworded to avoid confusion among the participants. The task sequence was also re-ordered so that it began with an easy level and increased in difficulty. The piloting also helped the researcher to determine the amount of time needed to complete the task with each participant.

4.7. Data analysis: writing samples

Before the essays were analysed using the coding frame, relevant units were first identified in each text. Text analysis guidance (Appendix I) was used for this purpose in order to avoid inconsistencies. The essays were analysed by two people, the researcher and a colleague who is a lecturer in linguistics.

4.7.1. Coding frame

The coding frame was divided into several sections, namely, feature, subordination, coordination, phrasal post-modifier and clause pattern. Each of these sections consisted of specific syntactic measures that have been used in

previous second language syntactic complexity studies. These measures were chosen for the present study as each has been tested in previous studies and found to be suitable specifically for analysing second language writing (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998; Ortega, 2003; Lu, 2010; Bulté & Housen, 2012). Each of these measures was chosen cautiously to analyse overall complexity (mean sentence length and clause per sentence ratio), clausal complexity (mean clause length, frequency of relative clauses, frequency of ING-clauses, frequency of ED-clauses, frequency of TO-clauses and frequency of finite subordination clauses), amount of coordination (frequency of coordinate clauses and frequency of coordinate phrases) and phrasal complexity (frequency of adjectival prepositional phrases, frequency of appositive noun phrases and frequency of adverbial prepositional phrases). Frequency of clause patterns coded in the learners' essays were also analysed and computed to explore the diversity of syntactic constructions used by the learners in their essays. Each clause pattern was identified after the learners' essays were manually tagged. The clause patterns used in the learners' essays were listed in the coding frame, and all the essays were then coded against this list. Additional clause patterns that were found during the coding process were added to the existing list. The list of clause patterns below is not exhaustive, however, clause patterns with very low frequencies were omitted from the list, leaving the 12 most frequently used ones.

Overall Complexity	Clausal Complexity	Amount of coordination	Phrasal Complexity	Clause Patterns
Mean length of sentence	Mean length of clause	Coordinate Clause	Adjectival Prepositional Phrase	SV (subject + verb)
Clauses per sentence	Relative Clause	Coordinate Phrase	Appositive Noun Phrase	SVO (subject + verb + object)
	ING-clause		Adverbial Prepositional Phrase	SVC (subject + verb + complement)
	ED-clause			SVA (subject + verb + adverbial)
	TO-clause			SVOC (subject + verb + object + complement)
	Finite Subordinate Clause			SVOO (subject + verb + object + object)
				SVOA (subject + verb + object + adverbial)
				SVCA (subject + verb + complement + adverbial)
				AVS (adverbial + verb + subject)
				ASVA (adverbial + subject + verb + adverbial)
				ASV (adverbial + subject + verb)
				ASVO (adverbial + subject + verb + object)

Table 4.7: Syntactic complexity measures employed in the present study

Before the coding frame was used for the analysis, it was first tested on several piloted essays to see if each of the measures could be applied to analyse second language essays. All of the measures were retained because they were all applicable to the level of English in the samples.

4.7.2. Coding process

All the essays were manually coded by the researcher and a colleague who is a lecturer in linguistics. Because the researcher decided to hand-code all the essays, a second coder was needed to confirm the data were reliable. According to Krippendorff (2004), such data are reliable when coders are shown to agree on categories assigned to units to an extent determined by the purposes of the study. Thus, when these coders consistently produce similar results, it can be inferred that they have a similar understanding of the coding guidelines, and so a consistent performance or results can be expected with this understanding.

Thus, reliability is important for such data as it demonstrates the validity of the coding scheme used to analyse them. Given the number of essays that needed to be coded, it could be one of the reasons for human error. The coding process for this study was conducted based on the coding frame, to avoid inconsistencies. The coding frame used to analyse the essays was first discussed and explained by the researcher to the second coder. The researcher made sure that all discrepancies concerning the guidance and coding frame were clarified before

using it for data analysis. Then, to test the coding frame, the researcher and second coder coded ten identical essays and compared their results. All disagreements were discussed until agreement was reached. The coding process for each essay took around 30–40 minutes. Once agreement was reached, the researcher and second coder coded another ten identical essays before comparing the results and discussing any disagreements. After that, the researcher and second coder continued to code the remaining essays, and the results were again compared and discussed until agreement was achieved. Apart from that, reliability was also calculated. Forty essays were randomly selected according to genre and proficiency levels (10 essays for each genre; 10 essays for each proficiency level). Reliability was calculated respectively in relation to (i) number of sentences; (ii) number of clauses and (iii) number of coordinate phrases. Because of the time constraint, only these three measures were chosen to test the reliability of the coders. These three measures were chosen as they had higher frequencies than the other measures, in general, for clausal and phrasal complexity for an average of ten essays. The two coders first counted the number of words, number of clauses and number of coordinate phrases independently, then counted identical ones at each level and genre and re-evaluated the remaining ones through discussion. The tables below show the results.

Group	Rater 1	Rater 2	Identical	Agreed after discussion	*Agreement %
Advanced	156	167	150	161	92.8%
Intermediate	146	155	144	152	95.3%
Argumentative	152	163	150	157	95.2%
Narrative	272	286	265	281	94.9%
Total	726	771	709	751	378.2%

*Percentage of agreement is computed by dividing number of identical with half of the sum of coder 1 and coder 2 in each group. As an example, advanced = $150 / (156 + 167) \times 2 = 92.8\%$. This method is also used in Tables 4.9 and 4.10.

Table 4.8: Coder agreement in relation to number of sentences

Therefore, based on the results above, the reliability in relation to number of sentences is $709 / 751 = 94.4\%$.

Group	Rater 1	Rater 2	Identical	Agreed after discussion	Agreement %
Advanced	299	257	250	279	89.9%
Intermediate	343	312	297	329	90.6%
Argumentative	295	312	270	302	88.9%
Narrative	421	405	364	411	88.1%
Total	1358	1286	1181	1321	357.5%

Table 4.9: Coder agreement in relation to number of clauses

Therefore, based on the results above, the reliability in relation to number of clauses is $1181 / 1321 = 89.4\%$.

Group	Rater 1	Rater 2	Identical	Agreed after discussion	Agreement %
Advanced	69	60	51	62	79.0%
Intermediate	30	35	23	37	70.7%
Argumentative	26	37	21	35	66.6%
Narrative	68	81	59	77	79.1%
Total	193	213	154	211	295.4%

Table 4.10: Coder agreement in relation to number of coordinate phrases

Therefore, based on the results above, the reliability in relation to number of coordinate phrases is $154 / 211 = 72.9\%$.

Other measures were also taken to reduce possible unreliability for other codes that were not double coded. Several copies of each essay were made so that the coding process for each linguistic element would not be overlapped. Apart from that, different coloured highlighters were also used to represent different codes. After each essay has been coded, a thorough check was conducted at least twice to see if there was any element that was overlooked. This procedure was repeated for each essay to increase the reliability of the coding process.

4.7.3. *Managing linguistic analysis data*

Since each essay was manually hand-coded, software was needed to help manage and store the data. Each essay was coded using various coloured pens and highlighters. All the essays were typed and saved as Word documents so that they could be replicated for coding purposes. When the coding process was completed, the data were managed and stored in a purpose-built database, using Microsoft Access 2013. This was so that the data, which consisted of raw numbers, could be saved and transferred to other programs, such as Microsoft Excel and SPSS for statistical analysis.

IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was used to conduct the statistical analysis of the coded data. The raw data from Microsoft Access 2013 were first transferred to Microsoft Excel, then finally to IBM SPSS Statistics 25. All statistical analyses were then saved in a private folder which can only be viewed by the researcher.

4.8. Data analysis: writing conversations

Interviews were included as one data-gathering method to obtain additional data, allow further exploration of the research topics and expand on the quantitative findings. The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim for further analysis and interpretation. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the transcripts were first sent to the participants so that the contents could be verify and confirmed by them. However, only six participants signed and returned the transcripts, though the rest had given their consent for the recorded interviews to be used in the research.

The transcripts were then coded with the help of Nvivo12. This was used so that the data could be managed and stored privately and securely. Before coding, the transcripts were first read to get an overview of the body and context of the gathered data. There were two sections of interview data: elicitation task and writing conversation. The elicitation task, which informed teachers and students' metalinguistic understanding, was analysed deductively using predetermined codes informed by the questions in the task. Each code was listed and the elicitation task from each interview was analysed based on these codes: Identification of syntactical concepts, explanation of syntactical concepts and metalinguistic understanding of a simple sentence. There were also sub-codes under these three codes as presented in the following table:

Sub-codes	Definition
Identification of Syntactical Concepts Verb Subject Phrase Clause Object Adverbial Varied sentence structure Complement	Participants' ability to correctly identify these elements in a sentence or a paragraph.
Explanation of Syntactical Concepts Phrases Clauses Varied sentence structure	Participants' ability to correctly explain what phrase, clause and varied sentence structure are.
Metalinguistic Understanding of the Simple Sentence Simple sentence with no errors Tenses mistakes	Participants' ability to provide correct example of simple sentence with no errors and some tenses mistakes.

Table 4.11: Sub-codes of teachers and students' elicitation task

The second part of the interview data was writing conversations, which informed teachers' perceptions of essay grading and students' perceptions of important aspects in essays. The coding process for writing conversations involved two

stages; open coding and axial coding. The open-coding stage led to applying codes that were derived from the text (emergent codes). The codes applied during open coding were not priori codes, so this initial process was done carefully so that it was not affected by presumptions formed beforehand. The transcripts were read several times so that tentative codes or labels could be created for portions of data. Examples of participants' words were highlighted and recorded to establish the properties of each code. Using axial coding, the initial codes were again evaluated and analysed so that relationships among open codes could be identified. Codes that are more precise were then assigned to these open codes so that they were more coherent and relevant to the research questions.

Axial codes	Open codes
<i>Teachers' Perceptions in Essay Grading</i>	Error-free essays - Participant reported that it is important to have minimal or no errors in students' essays in order for them to award higher grades
	Tenses - Participant reported that good use of tenses in essays may contribute to higher grades
	Vocabulary - Participant reported that students are encouraged to use more uncommon words in their essays to get good grades
	Ideas - Participant agreed that having good ideas contribute to good grades
	Sentence variation - Participant reported that sentence variation is an important element in determining students' grades
	Subject-verb agreement - Participant reported that subject-verb agreement is important in determining students' grades

Table 4.12: Open and axial codes for teachers' interview

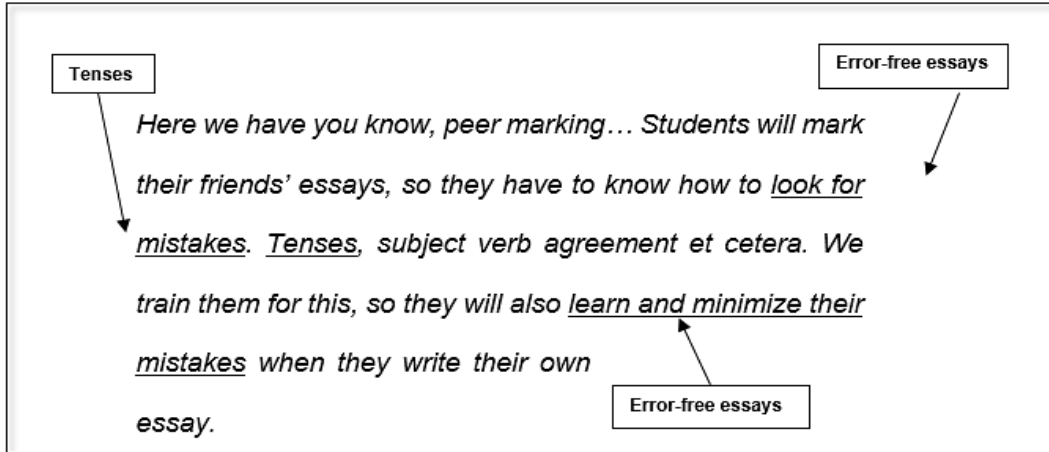


Figure 4.2: Example of teachers' writing conversation coding process

Axial codes	Open codes
Students' Perceptions of What is Important in Essay Writing	Teacher influence - Participant reported that it is important to follow closely what the teacher expects in their essay
	Grammar - Participant reported grammar, which includes SVA, tenses and sentence structure to be the most important element in essay writing.
	Ideas - Participant reported that good flow of ideas is important in essay writing. This also means that they need to write a complete essay
	Vocabulary - Participant reported that using 'bombastic' words in essay is important
	Spelling - Participant reported that spelling is important, that they spend time to make sure spelling mistake is at minimum if not none.

Table 4.13: Open and axial codes for students' interview

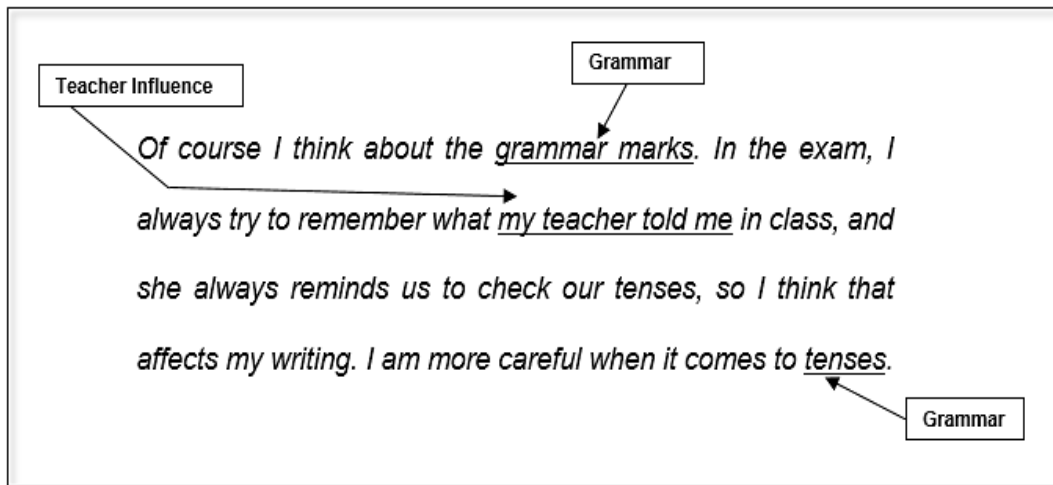


Figure 4.3: Example of students' writing conversation coding process

4.9. Ethical issues

In social science research involving human subjects, ethical issues are likely to arise, so ethical considerations must be identified and addressed by researchers (Cohen et al., 2011). Before the data collection could be carried out, an application to conduct research in Malaysian schools had to be made. This standard procedure involved several stages. First, an application form was submitted to the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) three months prior to data collection. The application form was then reviewed by the EPU and a copy was sent to the Ministry of Education (MoE) for their approval. This process took about two weeks before the data collection. A research pass that allows research to be conducted in certain organisations in Malaysia was then issued by the EPU.

Apart from the research pass, approval from the State Education Office (SEO) also had to be obtained. Thus, a formal letter and an application form were also sent to the State Education Office in Selangor. Along with this application, a description of the subjects needed for the research was sent so that they could suggest a list of schools that could be included in the research. Once the approval and a list of school were obtained from the SEO, copies of the approval letters from the MoE, EPU and SEO were sent to the list of schools suggested by the SEO to inform and seek consent from the principal of each school. There were 15 schools on the list, but only seven schools responded to the application. Of these seven schools, three schools were randomly chosen for data collection. Before the first step of data collection was taken, the three chosen schools were contacted and informed via the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the State Education Office (SEO). Only after all three schools agreed to participate in the research were follow-up calls were made to the Head of the English Department (HED) of each school to discuss suitable dates to conduct the research with the participants. Meetings with the English teachers were also arranged, which aimed to discuss the potential class or student sample based on the research requirements. The teachers then identified the classes to be involved and arranged suitable times for the researcher to come again in order to conduct the essay writing sessions. The data collection was conducted after a hard copy of the research pass was received.

Before the essay writing sessions and interviews were conducted, what was expected of the participants and the extent of their involvement in the research were discussed. Formal consent forms for teachers and students (Appendix D, E) were developed and sent together with an application form (Appendix K) to an Ethics Committee for approval. Discussion and review of the present research's intentions were conducted with the first supervisor prior to submission of the ethics form. Important aspects of the data collection process, such as ethical procedures in Malaysia, research methods, participants, the voluntary and informed nature of participation and data protection and storage, were clearly listed and discussed on the form. Approved consent forms were distributed to participants during the data collection process in order to ensure their rights were protected. The consent forms also acted as a guarantee that all participants' information would be treated as confidential and their identities would always remain anonymous.

4.9.1. Voluntary nature of participation

Voluntary participation of the students and teachers was ensured by seeking informed consent to participate. The consent forms informed participants of their right to withdraw, and this was reiterated orally at the start of each writing session and interview. In regard to the student participants, at age 15–16 years, the students are on the boundary of ethical requirements for parental consent.

However, parental consent was not sought because these students were able to make their own decisions, following the Gillick principle. The level of participation required was not too demanding nor did it put them at any risk. Nevertheless, the students were briefed in detail about the intentions of the research, ensuring they understood what they were consenting to.

4.9.2. Informed nature of participation

In the consent forms, information explaining the nature and purpose of the study, how it was to be carried out, the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected and the researcher's contact details, were also given (Appendix D, E). The participants were also told that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

4.9.3. Data protection and storage

Each student's essay was photocopied and numbered, and their name was replaced with this number. The original copies of the essays were stored safely by the researcher. Thus, during the analysis, only the researcher was aware of the author of each essay, i.e. not the second coder. In the interviews, participants were numbered to ensure anonymity. The real names of the participants and the numbers used for reference were recorded, kept in a password protected document and stored in my Exeter Udrive, which is also password protected.

These documents were only stored in the researcher's Udrive and not on any personal computer or flash drive.

The consent form also included a written privacy notice: 1. the interview will be recorded and transcribed. 2. A transcript of your interview can be provided, and corrections can be made to any factual errors. 3. The interview recordings will be deleted as soon as authoritative transcripts of the interviews are obtained by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar). 4. Transcripts and any documents that contain interviewees' information will be stored in Udrive, which is password protected and can be only accessed by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar). 5. All data will be destroyed once the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar) is awarded her PhD. 6. Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely for future use.

4.10. Limitations

The conduct and design of the present study revealed several limitations which should be considered in the attempt to interpret its findings. These limitations should also be addressed for improvement to and the means of future study.

First, the present study was restricted to students in boarding schools. Before the data collection was conducted, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the State Education Office (SEO) specified only conducting data collection after school

hours. Thus, they suggested that data collection be done in boarding schools, as students and teachers were able to stay in class after hours. In Malaysia, boarding schools are known to have high standards of education and, because of this, teachers and students may not have revealed the whole truth as they wanted to protect their status. Malaysians also expect teachers and students from boarding schools to be the cream of the crop, and so teachers and students may have been cautious or careful in revealing anything untoward during the interviews.

Secondly, not only was the present study restricted to students in boarding schools, it was also restricted to just three schools in one state. Because of the time constraint, data collection had to be conducted in only three schools, in one state, as conducting it in more schools would need more time and funding. Apart from that, approval from the MOE and SEO would also take longer as the researcher would have to apply several times to several different SEOs according to the state. Thus, the findings from the present study, in terms of generalisation, are limited to students from those specific schools. However, because the education system in Malaysia is highly exam-oriented and the English syllabus used is standardised, it can be assumed that the findings are partly applicable to students of the same level of proficiency in other schools across Malaysia. Similarly, the findings gained from the teachers could be applicable to other

teachers teaching English to the same level of proficiency across Malaysia because teacher training is also standardised.

Another limitation of this study was the method of choosing the interview participants. Student participants for the interviews were chosen by the researcher based on their proficiency levels and the sentence structures used in their writing. However, the researcher had no choice but to interact with the teachers in order to inform the students that they had been selected for interview. Because of this, student participants may have felt uncomfortable in revealing certain things, especially about their teachers or writing classes. Students might also have felt that they had to maintain a good rapport with their teachers because their grades depend on them.

Finally, the relatively small sample of essays collected from the students might have resulted in an unrepresentative sample. This was also linked to the issue of time constraint and the complicated process of choosing schools for data collection. As the essays were hand-coded, practicality had to be considered, which did not allow for bigger essay samples. Hiring research assistants was not an option as more funding and time to train the researchers would have been needed.

By considering these limitations associated with the methodology, the study could serve as the foundation for further research on syntactic complexity and

metalinguistic understanding among students and teachers in Malaysia or any second language learners. Surely, as in any educational research that employs a mixed methods approach, limitations and difficulties will be encountered. However, prior awareness and additional future study that could provide balance are recommended to redress these limitations.

4.11. Conclusion

This chapter has mainly discussed the methodology employed in the present research. The study employed a mixed-methods research design which sought to elicit participants' voices to further explain the statistical findings. This chapter has also described the participants and the research design, and discussed the data collection methods used in the research. Students' essays were collected and linguistic and statistical analysis were conducted in order to obtain quantitative data for the study. On the other hand, interviews and elicitation tasks were conducted with teacher and student participants in order to obtain qualitative data for the study. The data analysis procedures for both quantitative and qualitative data have been described in detail. Finally, this chapter has also described how the quality of the study was enhanced and how ethical considerations were taken into account.

CHAPTER 5

Linguistic Analysis of Students' Essays

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the linguistic and detailed statistical analysis of the students' essays. A total of 120 students with advanced and intermediate English proficiency levels from three different schools were chosen to participate in three 1-hour writing sessions. Forty students from each school participated, twenty with advanced English proficiency level and twenty with intermediate English proficiency level. The proficiency levels of the students were determined based on their English examination results from the Lower Secondary Assessment which is a public examination taken by all 15-year olds in Malaysia. All three schools involved were boarding schools, so the students were placed in class according to their attainment.

After the sessions, the essays were assessed and graded by their English teachers using a standardised marking rubric (as discussed in chapter 4) before they were given to the researcher. Only essays that were completed, clear and comprehensible were chosen for the data analysis: this resulted in a sample of 92 essays. The essays were then linguistically analysed using a coding frame that coded for several syntactic complexity key features. Microsoft Access 2013

was also used to manage data from the linguistic analysis, which was then extracted and exported into Microsoft Excel 2013. For statistical analysis, IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was used to carry out the analysis to investigate the nature of syntactic construction in essays written by two different groups of participants. The mean scores and standard deviations of the value of features for each group were calculated before independent T-test was used to check if there was any significant difference observed in the data. The difference observed in the data were regarded as significant when the significant value was lower than 0.05.

This chapter is divided into two sections, each section representing the data analysis linked to research question one and two. The first section presents the data analysis that reports on the nature of syntactic construction in essays of students with *different level of English proficiency* which answers the first research question '*What is the nature of syntactic constructions in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency?*'; whereas the second section presents the data analysis that reports on the nature of syntactic construction in *narrative and argumentative* essays which answers the second research question '*Is there a difference in the nature of syntactic constructions in narrative and argumentative essays?*'.

5.2. Differences in syntactic complexity according to language proficiency

In this research, proficiency in English, which is the second language of Malaysians, is defined as “a person’s overall competence and ability to perform in L2” (Bulté & Housen, 2015, p. 50). According to Norris and Ortega (2009), second language proficiency can also be defined and analysed based on three key components, which are complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF). Based on the CAF framework, second language proficiency can be measured quantitatively by computing the means of ratios, indices or number of frequencies. On the other hand, there is still no overall agreement on the definition of syntactic complexity especially in second language literature. However, this study adopts Bulté & Housen’s (2015) definition of syntactic complexity, which is

an absolute, objective and essentially quantitative property of language units, features and (sub) systems thereof in terms of (i) the number and the nature of discrete parts that the unit/feature/system consists of and (ii) the number and the nature of the interconnections between the parts (p. 50)

Hence, students’ writing is considered as syntactically complex when the language used in the essay reveals a higher frequency and greater range of

syntactical structures and when there is an inter-relationship between all these components.

The measures used in this study were also chosen based on Bulté & Housen's (2015) definition of syntactic complexity. Because complexity often happens at different levels of syntactic organisation, especially among L2 writers, it must be measured at each level – sentential, clausal and phrasal (Norris & Ortega, 2009). All of the measures used had been tested in previous L1 and L2 research (e.g. Ortega, 2003; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Spoelman & Verspoor, 2010; Verspoor, Schmidt & Xu, 2012; Kuiken, Vedder & Gilabert, 2010).

Unlike previous L2 research, which discussed only statistical data, this study aims to explain and relate the findings, which were derived from these measures, with the students and teachers' interview data. In addition, in this chapter, the results were also compared to the essays written by the student participants so that in-depth explanation could be provided.

5.2.1. Overall complexity

The overall complexity of a text is measured in two ways: firstly, by computing the average sentence length and secondly, by computing the ratio of sentence complexity - the number of clauses divided by the number of sentences. These measures are based on the assumption that longer sentences will be more

complex, and that complexity is indicated by a higher proportion of clauses per sentence.

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Sentence Length	Advanced	46	16.61	4.17	0.401
	Intermediate	46	15.80	5.03	
Sentence Complexity	Advanced	46	1.86	0.36	0.841
	Intermediate	46	1.84	0.49	

Table 5.1: General complexity of Advanced and Intermediate learners

Table 5.1 indicates that although the advanced learners had a higher mean sentence length and a very slightly higher ratio of clauses per sentence, there was no significant difference in general complexity, using this measure, between the two groups.

5.2.2. Clausal complexity

Clausal complexity is also measured in two ways: firstly, by computing the mean number of words per clause and secondly, by computing the mean number of subordinate clauses per 300 words analysed. The analysis considered the finite subordinate clause, the relative clause, and the three non-finite clauses (*ING*-clause, *ED*-clause, *TO*-clause). These measures are predicated on a view of clausal complexity being indicated by clause length, and by the number of

subordinate clauses used (the use of co-ordinated clauses is considered in the next section).

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Clause Length	Advanced	46	9.13	2.42	0.088
	Intermediate	46	8.41	1.44	
Relative Clause	Advanced	46	4.72	3.17	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	2.02	1.57	
ING-clause	Advanced	46	0.11	0.58	0.150
	Intermediate	46	0.02	0.15	
ED-clause	Advanced	46	0.11	0.48	0.133
	Intermediate	46	0.00	0.00	
TO-clause	Advanced	46	0.65	0.90	0.127
	Intermediate	46	0.39	0.71	
Finite Subordinate Clause (with connective conjunction)	Advanced	46	15.17	4.43	0.047*
	Intermediate	46	13.17	5.06	

Note. * indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.2: Clausal complexity of Advanced and Intermediate learners

As shown in table 5.2, advanced learners had slightly higher mean in clause length, *TO*-clause, *ING*-clause and *ED*-clause but the mean differences in relative clause and finite subordinate clause between the two groups were statistically significant. Even though only relative clause and finite subordinate

clause were statistically significant between the two groups, the data shows a consistent trend pattern in advanced writers: their clauses are longer, and they scored higher frequencies in all the different types of subordinate clauses measured, suggesting a possible development pattern which is only partially confirmed by the inferential statistics.

From these results, it could be inferred that the use of relative clause as post-modifiers and of finite subordinate clauses may be markers of syntactical development. The analysis of the essays revealed a consistent pattern of relative clause used among the advanced learners to represent expanded noun phrases. Advanced learners tend to use more relative clause in their sentences either to define the noun or simply add more information to the noun as exemplified below:

Example 1: advanced

I sat alone on the doorstep, indulging everyone's excitement. All of them walked into the red and yellow tent which was only a stone's throw away from my house. I can only stare in despair.

Example 2: advanced

I was shocked! The man whom I bumped into last night was there. Everything seemed like a dream to me. Nothing makes sense anymore. Is this the day that will determine my future?

As can be seen from both examples taken from advanced learners' essays, they used relative clauses in their writing to define and add more information to the nouns. More importantly, the use of relative clause to expand the noun phrase is also a good example of effective management of information for concise expression. Without using these relative clauses, sentences could have been written in a less sophisticated way using full clauses. As an example, the sentence '*The man whom I bumped into last night was there*' from example 2 may be written as '*I bumped into a man last night and he was there*'. This example of sentence was found more in intermediate learners' essays, as illustrated below, with the relative clause possibility indicated in brackets:

Example 3: intermediate

He did not notice how she was looking at him. The girl has been sitting across him for two semesters and she is starting to have feelings for him. [The girl, who has been sitting across him for two semesters, is starting to have feelings for him.]

Example 4: intermediate

While we were sitting, a man came to us and he was wearing the exact same sweatshirt as Adam's [A man came to us, wearing the exact same sweatshirt as Adam's]. I tried so hard not to laugh but Iman's facial expression made it harder!

The two examples above were found to be a common pattern in intermediate essays. Instead of coordinate clauses, relative clauses could have been used in the underlined text to expand the noun phrase with more compressed expressions. The use of full clauses may also contribute to the high frequency of coordinate clause, a typical feature of weaker writers.

There was also more variety in relative clauses used by advanced learners as they were able to use *that*, *which*, *who* and *whom*-clause. Intermediate learners tend to have limited use of relative clause, as there was more *that*-clause in their essays:

Example 5: intermediate

The bus that took us there broke down. We did not know what to do, so we called our parents. Unfortunately, Sarah's phone was out of battery and I ran out of phone credit to call anyone.

Example 6: intermediate

It was clear that she did not like the girl that came to the party last night. I saw how she looked at her. Jealousy. Pure jealousy. It was her that seemed to have problems with everyone.

In English, there are two types of relative clauses: subject-extraction relative clause and object-extraction relative clause. *'The girl who sits in the corner'* is an example of subject-extraction relative clause, in which the head noun *'The girl'* occupies the subject role. On the other hand, *'The boy who the girl kissed'* is an object-extraction relative clause, in which the noun *'The boy'* occupies the object role in the relative clause. In their essays, advanced learners seem to be able to use relative clauses that involved both subject and object extraction whereas intermediate learners tend to use only relative clauses with subject extraction. This can be seen in these examples:

Example 7: intermediate

Schools that are ranked higher seem to be parents' choice for sending their children. This has been a trend among parents in Malaysia and it is creating unnecessary stress to the children.

Example 8: advanced

The hospital room was cold, the atmosphere damp. The patient who the man attacked began to wake. His family gathered around his bed, hopeful. The mother who has been crying has now calmed down.

Relative clauses that involve subject extractions as in example 7 were found in advanced and intermediate essays. However, relative clauses that involve object extraction, such as in example 8, were found only in advanced learners' essays. It is also interesting to note how this particular learner (example 8) was able to use both subject and object-extracted relative clause in a paragraph. According to Wong and Chan (2005), in L2 learning, object-extracted relative clause is found to be harder to acquire than subject-extracted relative clause. Hence, object-extracted clause in writing may also represent complexity in L2 writing.

However, it is also important to note how the repetitive use of noun phrase structures as sentence openings for the first two sentences in example 8 is rather awkward. The learner has already used two short noun phrase structures in sentence one so, to start the second sentence with another noun phrase structure somehow makes the sentences rather choppy and the ideas disconnected. Another interesting finding is that the use of a minor sentence in example 6 seem to be more effective in comparison to example 8. Although example 6 was written by an intermediate learner, he or she somehow managed to employ minor sentences more effectively to give effect to his or her writing. This important point proves that syntactic complexity conceptualised and measured solely in terms of the presence of certain features may not be enough.

In terms of finite subordinate clause, advanced learners were found to use them more to connect ideas across a sentence:

Example 9: advanced

Although some students are not interested in scoring their examinations, they are forced to do so to fulfil their parents' expectations. Nowadays, most students are stressful in school because people say that good results will determine one's future but somehow, the reality is that good results do not guarantee success in the future.

In the example above, taken from an advanced learner's essay, three finite subordinate clauses were used to connect ideas across the two sentences. These clauses were also successfully used repeatedly, without any interruption or errors in between. The clauses were also used in different positions in the sentence - at the start, mid-sentence and at the end – which also suggests flexibility. This pattern was more evident in advanced learners' essays compared to their counterparts. The pattern of starting their sentences with finite subordinate clauses was also evident among these advanced learners.

Apart from that, it is also worth noting the low frequency of usage of the non-finite clauses (*ED*-clause, *ING*-clause and *TO*-clause) across the whole sample which may indicate these aspects of clausal complexity might benefit from further development.

5.2.3. Coordination

The amount of coordination used by advanced and intermediate learners is measured by computing the mean number of coordinate clauses and coordinate phrases per 300 words. These measures are based on research which has indicated that coordination is one of the typical features of less advanced technique in sentence complexity.

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Coordinate clause	Advanced	46	1.48	1.19	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	4.02	2.69	
Coordinate phrase	Advanced	46	6.37	2.76	0.103
	Intermediate	46	5.41	2.81	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.3: Coordination used by Advanced and Intermediate learners

The results showed that intermediate learners used more coordinate clauses in their essays compared to advanced learners, and that this difference was statistically significant. However, contrary to previous research, advanced learners used more coordinate phrase, but this difference was not statistically significant.

The heavy use of coordinate clause among intermediate learners is shown in the example below:

Example 10: intermediate

I always accompanied him and I always helped him clean his cave. He was a very great person. He knew about the chaos above the ground, so he wanted to join the Scout Regiment. The Scout Regiment helped destroy the titans and they vowed to bring peace to the world again.

The trend of using coordinate clauses to link ideas across sentences as demonstrated by these intermediate learners may be an attempt to produce longer sentences or create more complex structures in their writing. It may also reflect a lack of linguistic confidence in using alternate structures such as subordinate clauses. The final two sentences of example 10 could have been written as one sentence using a relative clause and non-finite ING clause to avoid repetition of 'The Scout Regiment' and reducing the clausal co-ordination:

I always accompanied him and I always helped him clean his cave. He was a very great person. He knew about the chaos above the ground, so he wanted to join the Scout Regiment, who had helped destroy the titans, vowing to bring peace to the world again.

The pattern of heavily-used coordinate clauses and redundant subjects seems to be a distinct feature of weaker writers. In example 10 above, the idea was not effectively communicated because of this problem. The recounting of events mirrors the features of speech and less focus was put in the effect of the writing on readers.

In contrast, advanced learners tend to use more coordinate phrases to elaborate their sentences and create variation in their sentence structures. This can be seen in the example below:

Example 11: advanced

Debts, loans and financial issues. Wedding fees, college fees, thousands of money to be spent but an income so little and a thirsty bank account. What have we become? We were brainwashed to believe that a good examination result is everything. We then work so hard, day and night, forgetting everything and anything, just to get that desirable results.

The above example depicts an advanced learner using coordinate phrases to create short or minor sentences, which makes the text more 'crafted'. The use of the short or verbless sentences appears to be interesting as it draws attention to the nouns which helps the writer to convey his or her message. Although this sort of patterning is not present in all advanced learners' writing, there is a consistent pattern of using coordinate phrase to list examples and elaborate phrases:

Example 12: advanced

Ariff admitted that her presence brought light into his life. Since he met her, his mornings and nights were no longer monotonous. Even his mother and sister noticed the big change! Of course Ariff would never forget about Mia, but he was thankful for how Sarah has made him feel happy and loved. He knew he was lucky to be destined with this amazing and incredible girl.

Example 13: advanced

Today, many students are not aware of the importance of social skills and emotional intelligence. All they could think about is getting a long list of A's and the highest score in all subjects. They spend day and night reading books that only contain theories, which they may or may not need in the future.

Although the sentence structures used in the examples above seem to lack variation, phrase elaboration was evident. The repetition of structure in example 13 is also seen quite effective in conveying the monotony of 'the students' lives. Apart from elaboration, based on the examples above, coordinate phrases also tend to signal wider vocabulary among advanced learners as they were used for listing people, objects or reasons in argumentative essays as well as narratives.

5.2.4. Phrasal complexity

The phrasal complexity is measured by computing the mean number of adverbial prepositional phrases, adjectival prepositional phrase and appositive noun phrase per 300 words. The present research considers these measures as phrasal complexity because not only are these phrases elaborating – as they are optional – but they are also condensed or compressed. In other words, these phrasal modifiers are the alternatives to elaborated sentences that use clausal modifiers.

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Adjectival prepositional phrase	Advanced	46	6.67	2.98	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	4.11	2.40	
Appositive noun phrase	Advanced	46	0.17	0.44	0.596
	Intermediate	46	0.13	0.34	
Adverbial prepositional phrase	Advanced	46	14.39	4.99	0.031*
	Intermediate	46	12.33	4.02	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.4: Phrasal complexity of Advanced and Intermediate learners

Based on the results, there is a consistent trend pattern of higher phrasal complexity in advanced learners compared to intermediate learners. In terms of using adverbial and adjectival prepositional phrase as phrasal post-modifier, advanced learner had higher means and the independent T-test showed significant difference between the two groups.

Example 14: advanced

I made my way to the rooftop of the building and the sight of the helicopter somehow calmed my anxious mind. Immediately, we took off to the place of the incident. It was not long before I saw a cloud of black smoke hovering over the enormous building. My heart began to pound but I reminded myself that I needed to get myself together. The captain's voice buzzed from the walkie-talkie, giving me instructions to save any victims trapped in the building. "This is it!" I thought to myself.

Example 15: intermediate

It is the first day of school and nothing changed. She was still the girl she had been before. The idea of having cool new friends suddenly disappeared. She walked into the hall with a heavy heart and saw Erica, who used to be her best friend, sitting on the bench and having a conversation. She walked pass them and overheard their conversation. She almost stumbled but she maintained her cool and just walked.

The examples above show the difference in using adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrase between advanced and intermediate learners. Advanced learners tend to use multiple adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrases to present their ideas more vividly. As shown in example 14, the advanced writer managed to confidently use both type of phrases to add vivid details to the narrative and expand sentences. The use of adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrase seems to help the writer to present his or her narrative more effectively to the readers. Readers can almost picture the real situation of the fire incident that the writer wanted to portray. On the other hand, the use of adverbial and adjectival prepositional phrases in example 15 appears to be rather limited. Although both phrases were present in the narrative, the structure of the phrases seems rather basic and simple. There is a good use of adverbial prepositional phrase in example 15 which is '*She walked into the hall with a heavy heart*', but the rest of the extract has much less detail in comparison to example 14. As an example, the sentence '*She walked pass them and overheard their conversation*' could have been elaborated by using adjectival prepositional phrase to add more information about the conversation – what was the conversation about? Another adverbial prepositional phrase can also be used to elaborate on the verb *stumble*.

It is the first day of school and nothing changed. She was still the girl she had been before. The idea of having cool new friends suddenly disappeared. She walked into the hall with a heavy heart and saw Erica, who used to be her best

friend, sitting on the bench and having a conversation. She walked pass them and overheard their conversation **about the spring break party last week**. She almost stumbled **over her own foot** but she maintained her cool and just walked.

Additionally, although there was no significant difference in the use of appositive noun phrase between the two groups, advanced learners had a higher number of occurrences.

Example 16: intermediate

Diana, her sister, wanted to have a big wedding, so she had to sacrifice her dream of pursuing her master's degree. There is no way her father could afford both!

Example 17: intermediate

The owner of the mansion, Mr. Magoo, greeted us with the biggest smile. We immediately felt so welcome.

Example 18: advanced

All of them looked so happy. During the celebratory dinner, Adam, the clumsiest member of the Clifford family, accidentally spilled his glass of cranberry juice on their mother's new table cloth.

Appositive noun phrase was found used differently by both groups. In most advanced and intermediate essays, appositive nouns were used either as a noun as in example 17 '*The owner of the mansion, Mr. Magoo*' or a noun phrase as in example 16 '*Diana, her sister,*'. Nouns and simple noun phrase as appositives may depict limited vocabulary although the use may improve the general complexity of the sentence. A more complex structure of appositives was found in advanced essays even though this trend was not common among the advanced writers. In example 18, the appositive '*the clumsiest member of the Clifford family*' has a more complex structure in which a noun phrase and an adjectival prepositional phrase were used.

5.2.5. Syntactic constructions of advanced and intermediate learners

The present research also explored if there were any patterns in the syntactic constructions used by learners according to their level of proficiency. Each syntactic structure was identified after learners' essays were manually tagged. The syntactic structures used in learners' essays were listed in the coding frame and all essays were then coded against this list. However, if there were any additional structures found during the coding process, they were added to the existing list. Finally, the mean number of each syntactic construction was computed per 300 words.

	Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
SV (subject + verb)	Advanced	46	0.52	1.03	0.077
	Intermediate	46	0.22	0.51	
SVO (subject + verb + object)	Advanced	46	4.61	1.60	0.001*
	Intermediate	46	6.13	2.46	
SVC (subject + verb + complement)	Advanced	46	5.91	2.06	0.764
	Intermediate	46	5.76	2.74	
SVA (subject + verb + adverbial)	Advanced	46	6.02	1.42	0.069
	Intermediate	46	6.61	1.62	
SVOC (subject + verb + object + complement)	Advanced	46	3.91	1.64	0.192
	Intermediate	46	4.41	1.98	
SVOO (subject + verb + object + object)	Advanced	46	3.07	1.50	0.000*
	Intermediate	46	4.87	2.36	
SVOA	Advanced	46	5.30	2.04	0.001*
	Intermediate	46	3.93	1.87	

(subject + verb + object + adverbial)					
SVCA	Advanced	46	2.96	1.25	0.516
(subject + verb + complement + adverbial)	Intermediate	46	3.13	1.31	
AVS	Advanced	46	0.52	0.84	0.015*
(adverbial + verb + subject)	Intermediate	46	0.17	0.44	
ASVA	Advanced	46	1.98	1.47	0.084
(adverbial + subject + verb + adverbial)	Intermediate	46	1.32	1.06	
ASV	Advanced	46	1.47	1.70	0.048*
(adverbial + subject + verb)	Intermediate	46	0.80	0.65	
ASVO	Advanced	46	2.31	1.04	0.104
(adverbial + subject + verb + object)	Intermediate	46	1.81	1.37	

*Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance*

Table 5.5: Syntactic constructions of Advanced and Intermediate learners

Overall, the analysis found 12 most frequently used syntactic patterns in their essays. Of course, there were other patterns apart from those listed in the table above, but the frequencies of those patterns were too low, that they had to be omitted from the table. As shown in table 5.5 above, learners tend to use either

a subject or an adverbial to begin their clauses or sentences. There were more constructions with subject + verb order in their writing, but this is expected, as subject + verb syntactic pattern in English is common. The results show that there were statistically significant differences in using several different structures between the two groups. This includes using SVO, SVOO and SVOA structures. However, higher frequency of using adverbials as sentence opening is seen evident in advanced learners' essays. The results also show statistically significant differences in using AVS and ASV patterns between the two groups. This suggests that the advanced learners were more confident in using more non-standard subject + verb syntactic patterns to begin their sentences.

Advanced

- i. With determination, students continue pursuing their dreams.
(ASVO)*
- ii. Under the moon stood the most perfect girl. (AVS)*
- iii. Behind him, the hunter followed cautiously. (ASVA)*
- iv. Frightened by the threat posed to her, she decided to disappear.
(ASVA)*

Intermediate

- v. *Firstly, parents are to blame for this problem. (ASVA)*
- vi. *However, a lot of students do not agree with this statement. (ASVA)*
- vii. *Suddenly, the door opened! (ASV)*
- viii. *Immediately, she chased her best friend. (ASVO)*

In the above examples, adverbials as sentence opening were found used in both advanced and intermediate learners. However, the patterns of using adverbials as sentence opening differ between the two groups. Advanced learners demonstrated more complex structure of adverbials, whereas intermediate learners tend to use linking adverbials or adverbs to begin their sentences. The ability of advanced learners to use adverbial phrases or clauses in the beginning of their sentences was rarely found in the writing of intermediate learners. It is also worth noting how the advanced learners were able to place the adverbials in the beginning of the sentence such as *'Behind him, the hunter followed cautiously'* and *'With determination, students continue pursuing their dreams'* because verbs usually precede adverbials. These sentences could be written as *'The hunter followed cautiously behind him'* or *'Students continue pursuing their dreams with determination'* with a subject noun as the sentence opening. However, by placing the adverbials in initial position, the writers were able to alter both the rhythm and the emphasis of the sentence. Although infrequent, subject-

verb inversions were also present in advanced essays. For example, in the sentence *'Under the moon stood the most perfect girl'*, the subject-verb inversion was used effectively by the writer and it creates a sense of delay or climax. Intermediate learners were more confident to use adverbs to begin their sentence, followed by the typical subject verb structure. This may be the result of overemphasizing the use of adverbial connectives during writing lessons. Based on the linguistic analysis, the advanced learners were found to have more control in manipulating their sentence structures in comparison to weaker writers.

	Proficiency Level	N	Frequency	Mean
Subject-verb sentence patterns	Advanced	46	1486	32.30
	Intermediate	46	1613	35.06
Adverbials as sentence openings	Advanced	46	289	6.28
	Intermediate	46	189	4.10

Table 5.6: Sentence patterns variation of Advanced and Intermediate learners

To investigate the sentence patterns used by both groups, the total mean of subject-verb sentence patterns and adverbials as sentence openings were calculated. This was done by adding each frequency of subject-verb sentence patterns used by advanced learners and dividing it by 46 (total number of advanced learners). This method was repeated to compute the mean of subject-

verb sentence patterns used by intermediate learners as well as the mean of adverbials as sentence openings for advanced and intermediate learners.

The results show that there is a big difference in using adverbials as sentence openings between the two groups. This may suggest that advanced learners were more confident in using more complex sentence structures in their writing. It may also indicate that advanced learners had more syntactical variety in their essays.

5.2.6. Discussion of the patterns of syntactic complexity in advanced and intermediate learners

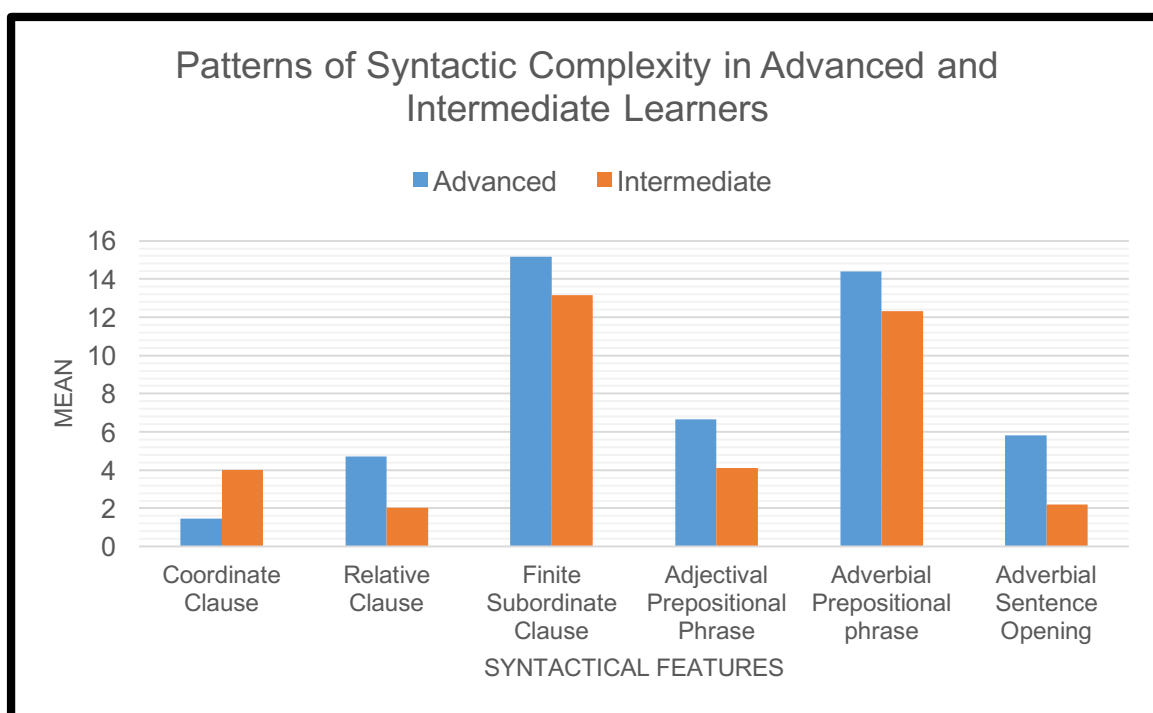


Figure 5.1: Patterns of syntactic complexity in Advanced and Intermediate learners

The patterns of difference in syntactic complexity between advanced and intermediate learners are based on several features: coordinate clause, relative clause, finite subordinate clause, adjectival prepositional phrase, adverbial prepositional phrase and adverbial sentence opening. In terms of clausal complexity, advanced learners clearly used more relative clause and finite subordinate clause in their essays. The frequency of finite subordinate clause with connective conjunction was significantly higher among advanced learners, and this differs from previous second language writing studies (Biber et al., 2011). In the linguistic analysis, advanced learners tend to use the clauses in different positions in the sentence - at the start, mid-sentence and at the end suggesting flexibility. This pattern was uncommon in intermediate essays which may suggest the lower number of occurrences of this feature. In terms of phrasal complexity, advanced learners were more confident in using adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrase in their writing. These phrases were used to add additional information and expand their sentences. They were also able to use these two different phrases one after another in a single sentence. In contrast, intermediate learners had more limited use of adverbial and adjectival prepositional phrase in their writing. The structures used were shorter, simpler and less detailed which results in a less sophisticated essay. Coordination has always been noted as a characteristic of weaker writers in previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Lu, 2011; Neary-Sundquist, 2017). This study agrees that advanced learners used less coordinate clause in their essay compared to intermediate learners. These

weaker writers tend to use more coordinate clause in the attempt to produce longer sentences or create more complex structures in their writing. It is also important to emphasise how the higher number of coordinate clause results in lower relative clause used in intermediate essays. This may suggest that intermediate learners struggle in managing information for concise expressions and may also have less sense of writing for effect. Although the result for this particular feature supports the notion of coordination indicates less proficient writers which was presented in previous studies, the results for coordinate phrase depicts otherwise. Finally, when it comes to sentence variation, advanced learners were found to be more confident in using adverbial as sentence opening. This trend suggests their ability to manipulate their way of writing to effectively communicate their ideas. Intermediate learners were also found to use adverbials to begin their sentence but, they were more confident in using only linking adverbs instead of adverbial phrases or clauses. The difference in using adverbials in sentence opening between these two groups shows how advanced learners showcase greater confidence in manipulating their sentences for rhetorical effects.

5.3. Difference in syntactic complexity based on essay genres

The present research also looked at the difference in syntactic complexity based on essay genres. According to Faigley (1980), the effectiveness of a language

depends on “its appropriateness to the communicative context” (p.299). Based on this view, appropriateness then depends on the writer’s engagement with genre which are patterns of language use that are much routinised, socially recognised and culturally formulated and respond to social norms and expectations (Hyland, 2003; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). These patterns provide the textual structures which are appropriate for subject, audience, purpose and context (Faigley, 1980; Hyland, 1990; Bhatia, 1993).

In this study, two essay genres were chosen mainly because these two genres are common among learners in Malaysian secondary schools. Narrative essays involve learners describing events with focus on people and their actions in a specific time frame whereas argumentative essays involve learners discussing or making argument of ideas or beliefs in a logical fashion (Berman & Slobin, 1994). Hence, the different ways of writing these two essay genres result in some different language features (Beers & Nagy, 2011) and different syntactic structures. So far, the study of the effect of genre on syntactic complexity has always been more focused on L1 writing and much less in L2 writing. Although there are clear expectations of genre differences based on previous studies, this research aimed to explore the possible reasons for genre differences by connecting statistical findings with interview findings. Furthermore, there are still no studies that relate interview findings with statistical findings of syntactical structures in different essay genres.

Using the same measures in computing syntactic complexity based on different proficiency levels, syntactic complexity based on essay genres was computed and analysed. However, the findings in this section were derived solely from the comparison between the essay genres and did not distinguish writers' proficiency.

5.3.1. Overall complexity

Overall complexity is measured by computing the ratio of sentence complexity – number of clauses divided by the number of sentences – and secondly, the average sentence length.

	Genre	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Sentence Length	Argumentative	46	16.34	4.69	0.024*
	Narrative	46	14.34	3.59	
Sentence Complexity	Argumentative	46	2.43	0.85	0.001*
	Narrative	46	1.91	0.52	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.7: General complexity of argumentative and narrative essays

Based on the results shown in table 5.7, it is evident that argumentative essays had higher mean sentence length and ratio of clauses per sentence. The independent T-test recorded significant difference in general complexity between

the two essay genres. In Lu's (2011) study, it was found that there was an increased complexity in argumentative essays over narratives and the results of this study coincide with his research. The detailed analysis revealed that there were more minor sentences used in narrative essay and this may be the cause of such result. Furthermore, the communicative function of argumentative essay which requires writers to present their arguments and display cause-effect relationship may contribute to longer sentence production.

5.3.2. Clausal complexity

Clausal complexity for both genres was measured by repeating the same steps used in computing clausal complexity for advanced and intermediate learners – by computing the mean number of words per clause and the mean number of subordinate clauses per 300 words.

	Genre	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Clause Length	Argumentative	46	9.26	2.38	0.017*
	Narrative	46	8.27	1.42	
Relative Clause	Argumentative	46	3.50	2.97	0.661
	Narrative	46	3.24	2.72	
ING-clause	Argumentative	46	0.11	0.38	0.150
	Narrative	46	0.02	0.15	

ED-clause	Argumentative	46	0.04	0.21	0.763
	Narrative	46	0.07	0.44	
TO-clause	Argumentative	46	0.50	0.84	0.800
	Narrative	46	0.54	0.81	
Finite Subordinate Clause (with connective prep)	Argumentative	46	14.30	4.13	0.797
	Narrative	46	14.04	5.49	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.8: Clausal complexity of argumentative and narrative essays

As can be seen in table 5.8, argumentative essays had slightly higher mean in relative clause, *ING*-clause and finite subordinate clause. However, the mean difference in mean clause length between the two genres was more evident. Again, this may be the effect of the genre communicative function. Higher frequency of phrases used in the writing may result in longer or more complex clauses, whereas more minor or verb-less sentences were used in narratives as shown in example 20 below. The independent T-test recorded statistically significant difference in the mean clause length between the two genres.

Example 19: argumentative essay

Today, the society in our country especially may not have realised how we have become the slaves to what we measure. We tend to measure everything we have in life. We measure our weight, height, salary and the latest trend among parents and students – grades. Although this recent phenomenon may not seem so serious, more and more students are suffering from multiple mental and health problems because of this obsession.

Example 20: narrative essay

It was clear that she did not like the girl that came to the party last night. I saw how she looked at her. Jealousy. Pure jealousy. It was her that seemed to have problems with everyone.

On the other hand, narrative essays had very slightly higher mean in *ED*-clause and *TO*-clause but there were no significant differences between the two genres. Similar to the clausal complexity result between different proficiency levels, the low frequency of usage of *ING*-clause, *ED*-clause and *TO*-clause suggests the feature of clausal complexity that needs further development.

5.3.3. Amount of coordination

To measure the amount of coordination used in argumentative and narrative essays, the mean number of coordinate clauses and coordinate phrases per 300 words was computed.

	Genre	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Coordinate clause	Argumentative	46	2.57	2.53	0.469
	Narrative	46	2.93	2.34	
Coordinate phrase	Argumentative	46	6.48	2.89	0.045*
	Narrative	46	5.30	2.63	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.9: Amount of coordination of argumentative and narrative essays

The results in table 5.9 supported Lu's (2011) study which reported learners used more coordinate phrase in argumentative essay compared to narratives. The mean difference between the two genres was statistically significant.

Example 21: argumentative essay

Today, many students are not aware of the importance of social skills and emotional intelligence. All they could think about is getting a long list of A's and the highest score in all subjects. They spend day and night reading books that only contain theories, which they may or may not need in the future.

Example 22: argumentative essay

Working hard to achieve good grades can be good and bad at the same time. It is good when you know there is a limit between being hardworking and obsessive. It starts to turn bad when you begin to lose yourself and ignore the people around you. The good grades and multiple certificates of achievement will no longer be useful if you cannot make it out alive.

In argumentative essays, coordinate phrases were used more because naturally, learners tend to provide examples or more information that could support their argument. The context of an argumentative essay requires writers adding more to a point already made, writing in list or providing examples. Thus, using more coordinate phrase may be a natural pattern in argumentative writing. Furthermore, the register in argumentative writing is formal which may require writers to use more complex sentence structures. Using coordinate clause decreases the complexity of the sentence, thus writers may increase phrasal complexity to achieve the communicative function of argumentative essay. Phrasal complexity increases the sophistication of the sentence as it elaborates as well as condenses the sentences. Coordinate clauses were still used in this essay genre, but there were more coordinate phrases because they may be more suitable for the communicative context of the argumentative essay.

On the other hand, although there was no statistically significant difference, it was found that coordinate clause was used more in narrative essay. As can be seen in example 24, learners tend to use coordinate clause in the attempt to connect ideas or events sequentially. Furthermore, as shown in example 23, writing a narrative is similar to orally telling a story; hence, clauses linked with conjunctions, which is a typical feature of spoken language, are more likely to be used.

Example 23: narrative essay

It was already in the middle of autumn and I was prepared to see her again. How could I ever forget those eyes? I made my way to the gate but something I saw made me stop. 'That can't be!' I shouted in my head. I've waited for so long and I have imagined having her in my arms over and over again. No. No.No.

Example 24: narrative essay

Jason was at the back seat when the accident happened, but the memory was still fresh in his mind. His parents wanted to take him and his younger brother to the beach. It was a bright summer day and the sky was so clear that no clouds were present! His brother was smiling and giggling so, he took out his phone to take his picture. That was when everything went black.

5.3.4. Phrasal complexity

The phrasal complexity is measured by computing the mean number of adverbial prepositional phrases, adjectival prepositional phrase and appositive noun phrase per 300 words.

	Genre	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
Adjectival prepositional phrase	Argumentative	46	6.07	3.06	0.022*
	Narrative	46	4.72	2.78	
Appositive noun phrase	Argumentative	46	0.15	0.36	0.796
	Narrative	46	0.17	0.43	
Adverbial prepositional phrase	Argumentative	46	13.83	4.38	0.335
	Narrative	46	12.89	4.85	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.10: Phrasal complexity of argumentative and narrative essays

Adjectival prepositional phrase and adverbial prepositional phrase were used more in argumentative essays, but appositive noun phrase was used more in

narrative essay. However, the mean difference in adjectival prepositional phrase was the most evident.

Example 25: argumentative essay

However, parents and teachers need to acknowledge the issue of misconception and unnecessary stress among students. Failure in resolving this matter will eventually lead to bigger problems among youth in general. This obsession with grades is also creating unhealthy competition among students and teachers in schools.

Example 26: argumentative essay

The obsession with grades and class rankings among students in this country is extremely worrying. It creates unhealthy competition in many schools which eventually results in bigger problems such as depression. Teachers and parents play such important role in shaping the future of the education system in our country. Our education system has become too exam-oriented.

The example above shows how the adjectival prepositional phrases are used repeatedly in an argumentative essay. Learners may want to provide additional information and examples when writing their arguments. However, the formal register of the genre requires learners to write their arguments in a more compressed and sophisticated structure. As an example, the sentence ‘The

obsession with grades and class rankings among students in this country is extremely worrying' may have been written in a less sophisticated way [Students in this country are obsessed with grades and class rankings and this is extremely worrying]. Compared to the example above, the less sophisticated sentence has less prepositional phrase. Being a prototypical genre of academic writing, argumentative essays may consist distinctive features of academic text – one of it being phrasal complexity.

Example 27: narrative

It is the first day of school and nothing changed. She was still the girl she had been before. The idea of having cool new friends suddenly disappeared. She walked into the hall with a heavy heart and saw Erica, who used to be her best friend, sitting on the bench and having a conversation. She walked pass them and overheard their conversation. She almost stumbled but she maintained her cool and just walked.

Example 28: narrative

Alice turned the pages and continued with her reading. She secretly wished the boy would walk in her direction, so she could make her move. 'Oh, quit dreaming Alice!' she thought to herself. She glanced nervously and smiled. She then reached for her phone and started to scroll down her Instagram feed.

Adjectival prepositional phrases were still used in narrative essays. Although some students managed to use adjectival prepositional phrase effectively in their narrative, the structure used were mostly more limited and simple compared to those used in argumentative essays. In example 27, adjectival prepositional phrase could have been used more to provide additional information to the narrative – *‘having a conversation **about the spring break party last week**’*. Similarly, in example 28, the first and second sentence could be written with more details using adjectival phrases – *‘Alice turned the pages of her biology textbook and continued with her reading’*; *‘She secretly wished the boy from her arts class would walk in her direction...’*. Although there was good use of adverbial prepositional phrase, expanding the noun phrase with adjectival prepositional phrase would make the narrative more interesting and complex. Both examples were also written with more focus positioned on plot or action instead of details, especially in example 28, in which a lot of coordination was used by the writer. The high frequency of coordination in example 28 results in plot driven narrative because the coordination was used to chain actions together. Noun phrase expansion would allow clausal compression that could reduce the sense of sequencing while adding more details to the text.

5.3.5. Syntactic constructions in argumentative and narrative essays

Because argumentative and narrative essays have distinct ways of presenting ideas, this research also explored if there were any difference in syntactic

structures used in each genre. Each structure were identified after learners' essays were manually tagged. The syntactic structures used in learners' essays were listed in the coding frame and all essays were then coded against this list. However, if there were any additional structures found during the coding process, they were added to the existing list. Finally, the mean number of each syntactic construction was computed per 300 words.

	Genre	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T-test P value
SV (subject + verb)	Argumentative	46	0.15	0.47	0.011*
	Narrative	46	0.59	1.03	
SVO (subject + verb + object)	Argumentative	46	5.50	1.91	0.573
	Narrative	46	5.24	2.48	
SVC (subject + verb + complement)	Argumentative	46	5.35	2.35	0.051
	Narrative	46	6.33	2.40	
SVA (subject + verb + adverbial)	Argumentative	46	6.48	1.59	0.315
	Narrative	46	6.15	1.51	
SVOC	Argumentative	46	4.74	1.69	0.002*

(subject + verb + object + complement)	Narrative	46	3.59	1.79	
SVOO (subject + verb + object + object)	Argumentative	46	4.15	2.80	0.417
	Narrative	46	3.78	1.25	
SVOA (subject + verb + object + adverbial)	Argumentative	46	4.41	2.07	0.340
	Narrative	46	4.83	2.06	
SVCA (subject + verb + complement + adverbial)	Argumentative	46	3.17	1.39	0.329
	Narrative	46	2.91	1.15	
AVS (adverbial + verb + subject)	Argumentative	46	0.00	0.00	0.000*
	Narrative	46	0.70	0.84	
ASVA (adverbial + subject + verb + adverbial)	Argumentative	46	0.94	0.97	0.000*
	Narrative	46	2.88	1.03	
ASV (adverbial + subject + verb)	Argumentative	46	0.00	0.00	0.000*
	Narrative	46	1.86	1.31	
ASVO (adverbial + subject + verb + object)	Argumentative	46	2.21	1.29	0.636
	Narrative	46	2.07	0.98	

Note. *indicates that the difference between these two groups have a statistical significance

Table 5.11: Syntactic constructions in argumentative and narrative essays

As shown in table 5.11 above, the mean differences between the two genres were more evident in sentences with adverbials as openings. There were statistically significant differences in the use of AVS, ASVA and ASV sentence patterns. More adverbial openings were found in narrative essays:

Narrative essay

- i. In that chaotic moment my heart stopped. (ASV)*
- ii. Along with the soft music danced the newlywed. (AVS)*
- iii. Slowly, he opened the door with tears rolling down his cheek. (ASVOA)*
- iv. During that time, Emma did not have any choice. (ASVO)*

Argumentative essay

- v. Although the number of students getting straight A's has increased, unemployment is still rising among graduates. (ASVA)*
- vi. When students are burdened with too many expectations, they start to lose focus. (ASVO)*
- vii. Therefore, results does not determine our future. (ASVO)*

Clearly, the use of adverbials as sentence openings differs between the two genres. This finding highlights the importance of communicative or functional requirements of each genre. In narrative essay, the use of adverbials help writers to place focus on certain aspects of the story and provide vivid descriptions to their readers. Beginning a sentence with adverbials also provide sentence

variation which gives certain effect to the narrative. In contrast, argumentative essay involves writers presenting their points and arguments, so they may have less confidence in managing or manipulating their sentence using varied structures to communicate their points and arguments. Most times, adverbials were used to write the cause and effect relations as well as contrastive statements.

	Genre	N	Frequency	Mean
Subject-verb sentence patterns	Argumentative	46	1562	33.95
	Narrative	46	1537	33.41
Adverbials as sentence openings	Argumentative	46	145	3.15
	Narrative	46	346	7.51

Table 5.12: Sentence patterns variation of argumentative and narrative essays

To investigate the sentence patterns used in both genres, the total mean of subject-verb sentence patterns and adverbials as sentence openings were calculated. This was done by adding each frequency of subject-verb sentence patterns used in argumentative essays and dividing it by 46 (total number of essays). This method was repeated to compute the mean of subject-verb sentence patterns used in narrative essays as well as the mean of adverbials as sentence openings used in argumentative and narrative essays.

The results show that there is a big difference in using adverbials as sentence openings between the two genres. There were more adverbials used to begin sentences in narrative essays and this may be as the result of the purpose and the communicative functions that require writers to use more varied sentence structures in their narratives. Short or minor sentences that were used in narratives also allowed learners to use adverbials to begin their sentences. Learners were found more confident starting their sentences with the typical subject verb structure in argumentative essays, although linking adverbials were found at the beginning of some sentences.

5.3.6. Discussion of the patterns of syntactic complexity in argumentative and narrative essays

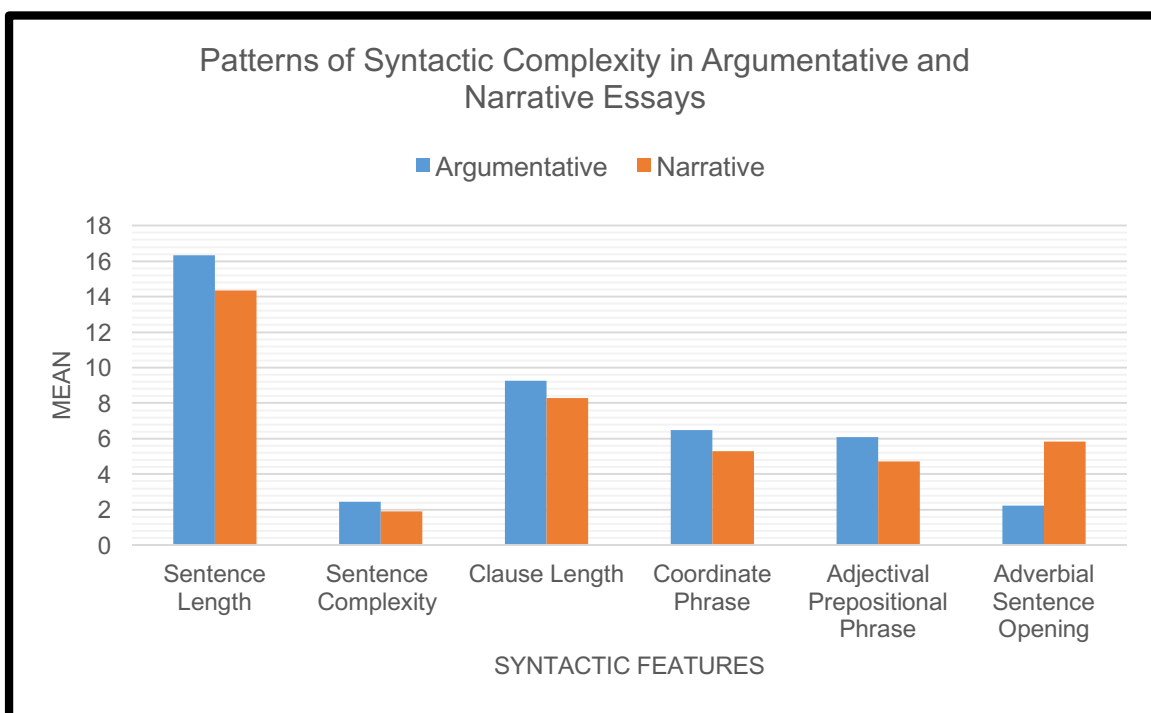


Figure 5.2: Patterns of syntactic complexity in argumentative and narrative essays

The results of syntactic complexity based on different genres revealed a slightly different pattern. The patterns of difference in syntactic complexity between these two genres are based on these elements: mean sentence length, sentence complexity, mean clause length, coordinate phrase, adjectival prepositional phrase and adverbial sentence opening. Argumentative essays were found to be generally more complex than narrative essays and this result matches those observed in earlier studies (Lu, 2011; Yoon & Polio, 2017). Mean sentence length

of argumentative essays was found to be significantly higher and this may be the result of higher number of expanded phrases. The higher frequency of post-modifiers such as relative clause, adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrase and coordinate phrase in argumentative essays may result in longer sentence production. Similarly, these post-modifiers may also contribute in higher mean length of clause in this genre. Higher frequency of post-modifiers in argumentative essays may occur as a result of argumentative essay being a prototypical genre of academic writing. Academic essays consist of features of academic text and one of it is phrasal complexity. Following this, it was found that coordinate phrase was used significantly higher in argumentative essays and it was used to provide examples or additional information. Although this finding differs from the view that coordination decreases the complexity of a text, it is important to note that this was measured at the phrasal level. Finally, there were more adverbial sentence openings found in narrative essays. As explained above, this may be as the result of the features of narrative essays, which require writers to use more sentence variation to give certain effect to their narratives. However, further explanation of these findings will be discussed in the discussion chapter.

5.4. Conclusion of linguistic analysis of students' essays

The findings from the linguistic analysis of students' essays according to different proficiency level and genres reveal different syntactical patterns. It is evident that more proficient writers have better control of their sentence structures. This can be seen in the higher frequency of relative clause, finite subordinate clause, adjectival and adverbial prepositional clause and adverbial sentence opening found in advanced essays. Through the analysis, advanced writers were more confident in using these syntactic features to create several rhetorical effects in their writing which include amusing, shocking, persuading or prodding the readers. This trend may be considered as a marker for more able writers because it involves the writer in making conscious decisions about using certain features in order to write more effectively. Intermediate writers were found to use more compound sentences chained by coordinate conjunctions – dominated by 'and', 'but' and 'so' – revealed how they were very focused on delivering the content with less consideration given to the rhetorical effect that could be achieved by employing these more complex syntactical features. Most importantly, the higher use of adverbial as sentence opening also showed that advanced writers were able to manipulate their sentence structures to create different effects in their writing by using short or minor sentences. They were also more confident to use adverbials to begin their sentences to place focus on different ideas in order to communicate their message more effectively. Although adverbials were also

used by intermediate writers to start their sentences, the adverbials were mostly linking adverbs which were overly used in some essays. Although the statistics show the frequency of the linking adverbs used among intermediate writers, the qualitative analysis of the text revealed how intermediate writers were overusing them in their writing, which may result in less effective essay. This significant point highlights the importance of manual linguistic analysis, and that relying solely on numbers of occurrences to determine complexity may result in misleading findings as complexity alone does not necessarily correlate to quality or effectiveness.

The findings also revealed that argumentative essays clearly had higher mean sentence length, sentence complexity, mean clause length, coordinate phrase and adjectival prepositional phrase. Overall, the frequencies of these features may be determined by the purpose and communicative functions of each genre. An argumentative essay is a typical example of an academic writing, so the features used in this genre may typically mirror those found in academic writing. Furthermore, writers tend to use more post-modifiers in managing their argument and showing cause-effect relationship in their writing, which may contribute to such results. Interestingly, although the argumentative genre is found to be generally more complex than narrative, it had less adverbials as sentence opening. The use of short or minor sentences in narratives may have allowed writers to use more adverbials to begin their sentences. Writers may also feel

more confident to start their sentences with the typical subject verb structure as the structure may make it easier for them to manage and present their argument. This particular finding may suggest this aspect of syntactic variation might benefit from further development especially when used in different genres.

CHAPTER 6

Students' Interview Findings

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings resulting from the data analysis of the student participants' interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 sixteen-year-old students from three different schools. Each of them was chosen based on their graded essays. A total of 92 graded essays were collected from the students, and the essays were then grouped according to two different grade levels according to the standardised 1119 English essay marking rubric. The grade levels were grade C (32-37 over 50) and D (26-31 over 50). Two students from each grade level per school were then randomly chosen for the interview. The interviews were conducted individually, with their essays as supplementary to probe students' response. The interview schedules (Appendices M) were designed to explore students' metalinguistic understanding and their perceptions on what is important in essay writing.

Hence, this chapter is divided into two sections, each section representing the theme linked to research question number four. The first section presents the theme 'metalinguistic understanding' while the second section presents the theme 'student perceptions of essay writing'. The findings of this chapter inform

the fourth research question of the study which is 'How does students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing?'

6.2. Metalinguistic understanding

In this research, metalinguistic understanding refers to participants' ability to reflect explicitly on language and its use and consciously monitor and manipulate language to create desired meanings in their writing. The interview schedule comprises the writing conversation and elicitation task. The writing conversation invited student participants to talk about their essays and their views on writing; whereas, the elicitation task specifically aimed to draw out much of metalinguistic understanding from these participants.

The elicitation task consisted several types of sentences, clauses and phrases, which sought to establish their metalinguistic understanding of syntactical elements in the sentences, ability to explain the difference between phrase, clause and sentence and their understanding of a simple sentence. Although there are two parts of the interview schedule, both parts inform one another. Also, any evidence of metalinguistic understanding was coded whenever it occurred, even if it was not from the elicitation tasks. The findings under metalinguistic understanding revealed participants' awareness on syntactic elements such as subject, verb, object, complement, adverbial, phrase and clause. Apart from that, the findings also presented participants' reflections on using varied sentence

structure in their essays. Thus, the findings under the first theme are divided into two main sections: Syntactic knowledge and Students' reflections on sentence variety.

Each of these sections is further divided into sub-sections which will be reported thoroughly and separately.

6.2.1. Syntactic knowledge

Student participants' answers on the elicitation tasks were very straight-forward and so, they were easily identified and coded under this theme. The sub-sections of the theme 'syntactic knowledge' and their definitions are as listed below.

Sub-sections	No. of reference	Definition
Identification of Syntactical Concepts		
Verb	35	Participants' ability to correctly identify these elements in a sentence or a paragraph.
Subject	34	
Phrase	21	
Clause	10	
Object	6	
Adverbial	3	
Varied sentence structure	2	
Complement	0	

Explanation of Syntactical Concepts		
Phrases	13	Participants' ability to correctly explain what phrase, clause and varied sentence structure are.
Clauses	6	
Varied sentence structure	3	
Metalinguistic Understanding of the Simple Sentence		
Simple sentence with no errors	3	Participants' ability to provide correct example of simple sentence with no errors and some tenses mistakes.
Tenses mistakes	12	

Table 6.1: Sub-sections of Syntactic Knowledge and their definitions

Identification of Syntactical Concepts:

In the elicitation task, a list of clauses and phrases was first presented to the students and they were asked to go through them and label each one with 'clause' and 'phrase' cards. The participants were then asked to explain their answers – i.e. what makes it a clause or a phrase. Then, participants were also asked to identify the sentence elements (i.e. subject, verb, object, adverbial, complement) in five different sentences with varying levels of difficulty. During this task, students were given several cards with 'subject', 'verb', 'object', 'compliment' or 'adverbial' on them and they were asked to label the structure in each sentence using the cards.

For the elicitation task, the **verb** element was correctly identified most times. Out of 72 correct possibilities, the verb element was correctly identified 35 times by the students. This means, however, that none of the students managed to correctly identify all six verbs in the elicitation task.

No.	Sentence	Verb element	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	are driven	7 first occurrence 2 first and second occurrences	24
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	is watching	9	12
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	is	4	12
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	lurked	8	12
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	stopped	5	12
	<i>Total</i>		35	72

Table 6.2: Identification of verb element

The verbs in sentence 7(d) were least correctly identified. The common problem shared by the students when attempting to identify the verbs in this sentence seems to be their confusion about the sentence structure. In the sentence, the transition ‘however’ that was preceded by a semi-colon and followed by a comma may seem uncommon among the students. Because of this, most students only identified the first verb occurrence while ignoring the second occurrence in the

second sentence. One student reported that sentence 7(d) was *'difficult'* for her and that she was *'confused'* about the structure. This may also explain the absence of this kind of structure in all of the 12 students' essays. Another confusion relates to the modified noun phrase, which is also the subject in sentence 7(c). The multiple pre-modifiers *'the'*, *'tall'*, *'handsome'* and *'young'* may be the cause for eight students to wrongly identify the subject of the sentence. For some students, the problem seems to lie in the meaning of the main verb in the sentence: four students reported that they simply did not *'understand'* what *'lurked'* in sentence 7(b) means and that they *'have never heard of the word before'*. On the other hand, some students had problems in identifying the main verb in sentence 7(e) because they were *'not sure which word is the verb'* between the word *'walking'* and *'stopped'*. Again, the confusion about sentence structure was brought up by these students as they reported sentence 7(e) to be *'a bit hard'* and that they were *'not familiar with it'*.

The **subject** element was correctly identified for a total of 34 times out of 72 correct possibilities. There were six subject elements in the elicitation task, but none of the students managed to identify all of them.

No.	Sentence	Subject element	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	a strange shadow	2	12
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	The cat	11	12
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	the boy	7	12
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	<i>The tall, handsome, young man</i>	4	12
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	Surface currents; deep currents	6 first subject 4 first and second subjects	24
	<i>Total</i>		34	72

Table 6.3: Identification of subject element

The adverbial *'in the woods'* that was used to start sentence 7(b) seems to pose the biggest problem to most students. Ten students answered *'I don't know'* or *'I'm not really sure'* when they were asked to identify the subject of the sentence. Two students labelled *'in the woods'* as a complement because *'a sentence cannot have two objects'* and that *'it does not sound like an object'*. Following this, these two students labelled *'a strange shadow'* as object as it *'comes after the verb'*, while other students could not provide any specific answer. This may be because the students were more familiar with the usual *subject + verb + object* structure which explains students' misconception of a subject having to precede a verb.

Students were only able to identify one subject in sentence 7(d) because they were *'unsure of the type of sentence'* this was and therefore did not know *'how to identify the elements in the sentence'*. They seem to ignore the second sentence and this may be because they were unsure of the semi-colon and transition *'however'* used in between the two sentences. This confusion was confirmed when two students identified sentence 7(d) as a complex sentence because *'however is used in the sentence'*. Other students also had problems identifying the subject in sentence 7(c) as it has several pre-modifiers.

Out of 48 correct possibilities, there were only 21 correct **phrase** identification, and none of the student managed to correctly identify all four. Before the students undertook the identification task, they were asked to provide a definition of phrase based on their understanding. Five students defined a phrase as an *'incomplete sentence'* or a *'sentence that does not contain a verb'*; and the remaining students requested to skip the question as they could not provide any answer. The definition given by these students may have caused some of their confusions about the phrase and it could be shown below.

No.	Phrase	No. of correct identification
6 (d)	<i>during the long, boring game</i>	4
6 (b)	<i>after our visit to the zoo</i>	6
6 (f)	<i>underneath the seat in front of you</i>	6
6 (a)	<i>on the street corner beside the mailbox</i>	5
	<i>Total</i>	21/48

Table 6.4: Identification of phrase

Phrase 6(d) was least correctly identified. Students' reasoning about this phrase included deciding it was not a phrase because *'it sounds like a complete sentence'* and it *'can stand on its own'*. One student argued that the word *'during'* makes it a sentence and not a phrase. Another student also reported that she did not think this was a phrase because *'a comma was used'* so *'this makes it a sentence'*. Similar confusions were evident in the responses to the other phrases used. One set of confusions relate to the verb, and the notion that a phrase does not contain a verb. Some students thought *'visit'* in phrase 6(b) was a verb and one student maintained that *'in front of you'* in phrase 6(f) seems to *'sound like a verb'* and thus this *'cannot be a phrase'*. For others, the confusion lies in misconceptions about the sentence. One student believed that when the word *'after'* is used, it *'automatically becomes a sentence and not a phrase'*. For another student, length was an indicator - the "sentence" was long and therefore

phrase 6(a) *'could not possibly be a phrase'* because phrases are *'usually very short'*. Evidently, there was no grammatical reasoning in their decisions as they said they were *'just following my instinct'* and *'just guessing'*.

The two **clauses** in the elicitation task result in 10 correct identifications and two students managed to identify both clauses. There were also four students who did not manage to identify any of the clauses.

No.	Clause	No. of correct identification
6 (c)	<i>before the television show starts</i>	4
6 (e)	<i>now that you have arrived</i>	6
	<i>Total</i>	10/24

Table 6.5: Identification of clause

Before the task started, the students were asked to provide a definition of the clause based on their understanding. Four students defined a clause as *'incomplete sentence'* and *'a sentence that can stand on its own'*. The rest of the students chose to continue with the identification task without giving the definition. The summary of the analysis revealed that most students were not able to identify the clauses because they believe that it *'does not look like a clause but sounds and looks like a phrase'*. There is also a possibility that some students were merely guessing when they reported that they were confused *'after looking at*

other tasks' and that they were *'not sure which is which'*. Other students thought that this "sentence" *'sounds hanging'* and it needs *'more words'* to make it a complete sentence.

There was only one **object** element in the elicitation task, and only half of the 12 students managed to identify it.

Sentence 7(a)

The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.

The common *subject + verb + object* structure used in this sentence may be the reason for the six students to easily identify the object element *'me'*. In contrast, six other students still had problems identifying the object and this may be because of the adverbial element in the sentence. The adverbial element which consists adjectives *'sad'* and *'droopy'* to modify the noun *'eyes'* may have confused the students. This was evident when two students tagged *'eyes'* and *'sad droopy eyes'* as the object of the sentence. Other students did not even mention the object element when they were tagging sentence 7(a).

There were only three correct **adverbial** identifications out of 72 correct possibilities. The elicitation task included six adverbial elements but only two were identified by the students.

No.	Sentence	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	2	12
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	0 on first adverbial; 1 on second adverbial	24
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	0	12
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	0	24
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	0	12
	<i>Total</i>	3	84

Table 6.6: Identification of adverbial

Students were not familiar with the term ‘adverbial’ and this may contribute to such a low number of correct identifications. More unusual sentence structure used in sentence 7(e), 7(b), 7(c) and 7(d) may also be the reason for students failing to identify the adverbial element. This was shown when students reported that they were ‘not sure’ when asked to tag the text ‘walking home from school’ in sentence 7(e). The second adverbial in the sentence – ‘to buy some food’ – also posed problems to students as some of them had mistakenly tag the word ‘buy’ and phrase ‘to buy’ as the verb and the word ‘food’ as the object of the sentence. Because of the same reason, none of the students managed to identify the adverbials in sentence 7(b), 7(c) and 7(d). Sentence 7(a) has a more common sentence structure, so this may have helped two students to correctly identify the adverbial at the end of the sentence. Most students were not confident to use the

adverbial labelling card to tag the sentences simply because they did not know what an adverbial is and that they were '*confused about the sentence structure*' used in most of the tasks.

Only two students managed to elicit several examples of **sentence variation** used in their essays. Before the students were asked to identify the examples, they were asked to define sentence variation based on their understanding. This is key to the investigation because sentence variation is one of the important elements in the standardised marking rubric that is used to mark students' essays. In writing, sentence variation refers to the practice of varying the structure and length of sentences to shift focus and avoid monotony (Vivian & Jackson, 1991; Solikhah, 2017). Strategies to sentence variation may include varying sentence opening and length, as well as sentence types – simple, compound, complex and compound-complex (Vivian & Jackson, 1991; Solikhah, 2017). In the interviews, two students explained that sentence variation could be achieved by using different types of sentences in writing. The students provided examples of sentence variation as shown below:

- i) Ana was feeling lonely at that time. She had to shy away from others because of the scar on her face. She didn't want any of her classmates to see her like this.
- ii) Good grades will not seal one's future. There are so many other factors that could affect one's success and one of it is

determination. Someone with great determination will easily surpass someone with just good grades.

Based on the examples given above, both students seem to think that sentence variation is achieved by using different types of sentence. These students tend to only focus on using different types of sentence – simple, compound, complex and compound-complex – to achieve sentence variation with no mention of other features of sentence variation such as varied sentence length or syntactical variation. Others only defined sentence variation as *‘using many types of sentences such as simple, compound and complex’* but were not able to provide any examples from their essays. There were also six students who chose to completely skip the task, as they did not know what it means and *‘have never heard of it’*. This result may also be related to how the students define sentence variation, which will be presented later on in the ***Explanation of Syntactical Concepts*** section.

None of the students managed to identify the **complement** element in the elicitation task. There was only one complement element in sentence 7(c):

The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.

The above sentence has been proven to be problematic to students; students found it difficult to identify the verb, subject, adverbial and complement. The main

problem that may cause this is the use of a complex noun phrase as the subject of the sentence, which may have hindered students' ability or confidence to identify the sentence elements. This was evident when most students seemed uncertain when they tried to tag this sentence. One student took almost four minutes to identify the elements, constantly changing her answers because she could not '*see the structure clearly as there are so many nouns*'.

All in all, there were more correct identifications for sentences that featured a *Subject + Verb + Object* structure. Even so, when the common *Subject + Verb + Object* structure consists a complex noun phrase, students still find it hard to identify sentence elements. When it comes to identifying phrases and clauses, students relied on their instincts and often mistook clauses with phrases and vice versa. They defined both clause and phrase as '*incomplete sentence*' which contributed to this mistake, and this suggests that students seem to lack metalinguistic understanding in syntactical elements.

Explanation of Syntactical Concepts:

In certain parts of the elicitation task, students were asked to explain elements such as phrases, clauses and varied sentence structure. Out of 12 students, 11 of them felt able to explain the **phrase** element and it was mentioned 13 times by these students. However, none of these references was a correct explanation of what a phrase is. Students were expected to mention that a phrase is '*a group of*

words that stand together as a single unit and that it does not contain a subject and a verb, thus cannot convey a complete thought. However, if students used *'a word or a group of words'* to define phrase, it was still accepted. The closest answer to the correct explanation provided by a student was *'words joined together in a sentence'*. It is important to note that, five out of 11 students mentioned that a phrase is an *'incomplete sentence'*. Perhaps, this can explain why most students had problems in the phrase identification task. When these students were asked to justify their responses during the phrase and clause identification task, most of them answered that it was a phrase because *'it sounds incomplete'* and *'it looks incomplete and short'*.

As an example, a student's reasoning for identifying the text *'underneath the seat in front of you'* as a phrase is because it is an *'incomplete sentence'* and that *'it doesn't sound complete'*. Although her identification is correct, her misconception of phrase may pose other problems especially when a clause seems like an *'incomplete sentence'*. Another student wrongly identified *'now that you have arrived'* as a phrase when it was clearly a clause just because *'it looks incomplete and needs another sentence to it'*. This is an example of a very common misconception among students that contributed to the confusion.

Three other students gave different explanations of what a phrase is. One student defined a phrase as *'two words joined together to give a different meaning'*. There

was also a student that mentioned a phrase as an idiom and another student mentioned it as simple words in a sentence. All of these misconceptions, especially about a phrase being an incomplete sentence, may affect students' writing in a way, because they could not differentiate different parts of a sentence.

The **clause** element was mentioned six times by four students who were willing to provide explanation of what a clause is. Eight more students chose to completely skip the task because they did not know how to put it into words. Students were expected to use '*a group of words containing a subject and a predicate/verb*' to define a clause, but none of the six students defined a clause correctly. The closest answer to the correct explanation was '*a sentence that can stand on its own*', in which was partly correct. The explanation given by the student actually referred to the independent clause, but the student may not be aware that dependent clause or a clause that cannot stand on its own is also considered as a clause. Other students mentioned about a clause being an '*incomplete sentence*', the same explanation used to previously describe a phrase. These misconceptions may possibly contribute to students' inability to differentiate clauses and phrases.

Lastly, students were asked to define **varied sentence structure**, which was included as one of the grammar features in the standardised marking rubric. Only three students felt able to discuss what varied sentence structures are. Among

the three students, two students explained that varied sentence structure is having *'different types of sentences such as simple, compound and complex sentences in the essay'*. As mentioned above, students' understanding of sentence variation seems to be focused on using different types of sentence, with no mention of other features of sentence variation. However, sentence variation may be achieved through syntactical variation, varied sentence length and sentence types (Vivian & Jackson, 1991; Solikhah, 2017). Based on their definition, the students may not be aware of the two equally important features of varied sentence structure. Another student completely had a misconception of what varied sentence structure is. The student explained to have varied sentence structure is to *'use quotes from famous people'*. The small number of students who chose to talk about varied sentence structure is worrying because sentence variation is obviously featured in the standardised marking rubric. This suggests that it is an important element and students are supposed to be aware of it.

When it comes to explaining syntactical concepts, students were either unaware or have very limited metalinguistic understanding of phrase, clause and sentence variety. Students only viewed phrases and clauses as *'incomplete sentences'* or *'short sentences'* that *'need another sentence to compete it'*. Sentence variation was also uncommon among students as only a small number of them felt able to discuss it.

Metalinguistic Understanding of the Simple Sentence:

This segment is the last sub-section under ‘*syntactic knowledge*’. In the elicitation task, students were asked to provide several examples of a **simple sentence used with no errors** and **several tenses mistakes** in their essays. Out of 12 students, only three were able to provide correct examples. Five students provided wrong examples of simple sentence and four more students chose to skip the task as they were unable to identify any simple sentence in their essays.

No. of students	Example of simple sentence given by students
3	My name is Fiq. I was shocked. Her name was Helene.
5	... so, our success is not really guaranteed... Amar became older and he became a handsome boy. Although we have to be careful sometimes. He got angry as he walked. I met him when I was ten.
4	None

Table 6.7: Examples of simple sentence with no errors

The structure of the correct examples of simple sentence given by three students were very basic and straightforward. It is also interesting to note that all of the sentences feature either a pronoun or a simple noun phrase as the subject. This may expose the monotonous structure of students’ writing and their misconception of the simple sentence structure. There are two wrong examples

of simple sentence that are short in length, and this may highlight students' misconception - simple sentences are short sentences.

When students were asked to provide examples of tense errors, all 12 students were able to provide an example. However, all of these students provided either errors in simple present or past tense, and nothing on other aspects although there were many.

- i) *I **want** to get the tickets to the concert so much...*
- ii) *Nowadays, students always **aimed** to be the most successful ...*
- iii) *Sure enough, she was waiting for me outside while I **slept** ..*

From the examples above, it was evident that all of them provided errors of past or present tense. This may be because students were drilled with these two tenses as they reported that these two tenses are always used in narrative and argumentative essays.

6.2.2. Students' reflections on sentence variety

The interview sessions with students were continued to elicit metalinguistic reflections on their own use of sentence variety in their essays. The data from this interview and the elicitation task is hoped to provide further explanation to the statistical findings of the study. Inductive analysis of students' metalinguistic reflections resulted in five themes as outlined in Table 6.8.

Sub-sections	No. of reference	No. of students	Definition
Scared of mistakes	9	5	Participant reported that they were scared of making mistakes if they use more varied sentence structures
Not confident	5	5	Participant reported not having enough confidence to use varied sentence structure in their essay
Willing to take the risk	2	2	Participant reported they are willing to take the risk to use more varied sentence structure if they are given another chance to re-write their essay
Explicit knowledge on using varied sentence structure	2	2	Participant agreed that having explicit knowledge on syntactic structure will help them become a better writer
Time constraint during exams	1	1	Participant reported the time constraint during exams hinder their effort to use more varied sentence structure

Table 6.8: Sub-sections of students' reflections on sentence variety

Scared of mistakes:

Five students reported that they were '*scared of making mistakes*' if they use more varied sentence structures. This reason was mentioned most times which revealed students' concerns of having errors in their essays, which may contribute to having low marks. Most students reported that they prefer to follow their teacher's 'template' of writing.

...not really sure how to have varied sentence structure... that means having compound and complex, uh compound-complex sentence? I don't

know. I think because I am scared if I get a low mark and I don't reach the expectation of my family. They will be disappointed in me. I don't want that. Plus, I need high marks to apply for a university.

If I have so many mistakes, how am I going to get good grades? My marks will be low, and I will not be able to get all A. So maybe that's why I think it's better to just write a safe essay.

Some students also reported that they were scared of mistakes because they did not want to look bad in class. They worry that they will be labelled as weak students by their teachers and classmates. The exam-oriented system in Malaysia may contribute to this, in which students feel obligated to do well just so that they can make their teachers and parents happy. Also, they want to feel accepted by friends, so they feel that getting high marks in class helps.

I'm not sure how to use varied sentence structure, maybe I'll have so many mistakes, my teacher will not like it. Maybe she will think I don't understand what she's teaching.

Varied sentence structure? I don't know. If I have so many mistakes, then my friends will laugh at me, they will think I don't know how to write or something. And my teacher will be upset.

Not confident:

Five students mentioned that they were not confident to use varied sentence structure in their essay and this was mentioned five times in the interview. A student said that she once *'thought about it'* but then changed her mind because she *'did not have the confidence to do so in the exam'*. According to this student, she always feels nervous when writing and this contributes to her lack of confidence. Eventually, she chose to just play it safe, and use sentences that she always *'uses in class'*.

Some students suggested explicit teaching of sentence variation might increase their confidence in using more varied sentence structure in their writing. One student admitted that he *'will only be confident to try in class, but not in exams'*. This is because the lack of knowledge and practice deter him in considering using more varied sentence structure when writing. One student also stated that she thought using varied sentence structure is *'hard'* and *'risky'* so she is not confident to try.

If I know more, I mean if it is something that I always do, maybe yes, I will try. But, I think it will be hard, because you need to have various types of sentences, so maybe it's risky. I'm not really confident because then you can make a lot of mistakes. What happens then?

There were also students who were unsure if they were able to communicate their message effectively if they were to use more varied sentence structure. This is because they worry that if they had so many errors, this could hinder readers' understanding.

Well, I can try, it's not that I won't. But, I think I'm not confident that people can understand what I'm trying to say in my essay if I use varied sentence structure. I think I will make too many mistakes and that will affect my essay.

Another student reported that her confusion contributes to her lack of confidence in using varied sentence in her essay. She said she might consider using varied sentence structure if she is well aware 'what it is exactly' and 'how to use it'. This suggest that sentence variation was not being exposed enough to students and some of them are not even aware of it. This can be supported when most students reported that sentence variation was never mentioned in class.

Willing to take the risk:

Two students did not mind taking the risk to use varied sentence structure in their writing, even in exams. These students reported that they were unaware their essays could be improved by using more varied sentence structure and that they would be willing to try if they knew.

*Oh I see. So if I have sentence variation in my essay, I'll get better marks?
That's interesting. Maybe I will take the risk and try, why not? If it means I
can get better marks.*

*I didn't know it could improve your essay. If I knew, I would have used it.
If only I know more about it. But, maybe I should really learn more about
it? Then I will maybe try to use it in my writing. Maybe in exam too. Then I
can get better grades?*

Here, although both students reported that they are willing to take the risk to use varied sentence structure, it was only because they wanted to have better grades. It is interesting to note how important having good grades are to these students. They did not mention about being a better writer or to increase the effectiveness of the essay, instead, they focus more on having good grades.

Explicit knowledge on using varied sentence structure:

Two students reflected that in order for them to use varied sentence structure in their essay, sentence variation needs to be taught explicitly. When asked if they knew that sentence variation also includes variation in sentence length and sentence openings, both of them said that they have never heard of those terms and did not really know what they were.

Varied sentence structure? Like using simple, compound and complex sentences in your essay. Our teacher said that we need to use those sentences in our writing. But when writing I can't really say because I can't really differentiate them.

I think if it is taught, maybe we could use it. Right now, because I have never heard of it, I think we all in the class have never, so we don't really know what to do. We just follow whatever our teacher said. Usually, there will be like a sample essay or something.

The interviews revealed students' limited understanding of sentence variation, and they explicitly stated that it needs to be taught in order for them to understand better. One of them even admitted that learning about it might help her *'to become a better writer'*. This, according to her, *'could help me choose better ways to write'*.

Time constraint during exams:

Lastly, a student reported that insufficient time during examinations is one of the reasons she did not really think about varied sentence structure when writing. The student said that she was aware that she needed to *'use simple, compound and complex sentences'* in her writing but seemed unsure when variation in sentence length and sentence openings were mentioned to her. Therefore, she

only reported that she did not have the time to check if she is using simple, compound and complex sentence alternatively when writing, especially during exams. Writing an error-free essay was her goal because she believes it could help her get a better grade.

Usually we only have very limited time in exams. We have to plan, think about our ideas and everything. I don't think we have enough time to look at the essay and make sure our sentences are not too repetitive. Usually, when we have that extra time, we will check for our spelling and make sure we are using the correct tenses. I think that is important because our teacher always tells us to not make too many mistakes in the essay.

In conclusion, it appeared that students lacked metalinguistic understanding in terms of identifying and explaining syntactical elements. It may be very helpful if, for example, students are made aware of what a phrase and a clause are, so that they could be more confident to manipulate their sentence structures. Explicitly teaching sentence variation may also help students to have more control in their writing. Finally, the interviews revealed that syntactical element in essay writing has never been the focus in writing lessons and that students were more concerned about the mechanical aspects of their writing rather than the linguistic choices that could shape texts to meet the readers' needs.

6.3. Students' Perceptions of What is Important in Essay Writing

During the interviews, students also discussed what they felt was important in essay writing. Students talked about the elements and aspects that they thought were important in order to write a good essay. Five themes were evident in their responses, as outlined in Table 6.9.

Sections	No. of reference	No. of students	Definition
Teacher influence	28	11	Participant reported that it is important to follow closely what the teacher expects in their essay
Grammar <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SVA • Tenses • Sentence structure 	18	11	Participant reported grammar, which include SVA, tenses and sentence structure to be the most important element in essay writing.
Ideas	15	11	Participant reported that good flow of ideas is important in essay writing. This also means that they need to write a complete essay
Vocabulary	13	9	Participant reported that using 'bombastic' words in essay is important
Spelling	3	3	Participant reported that spelling is important, that they spend time to make sure spelling mistake is at minimum if not none.

Table 6.9: Sub-sections of students' perceptions of what is important in essay writing

Teacher influence:

Teachers clearly play a major role in determining how these students write because teacher's influence was discussed most of the time by 11 students during the interview. Students believe grammar, spelling and ideas are important in writing because these elements were mentioned repeatedly by their teachers during writing instructions.

Students revealed that the two elements mentioned most by their teachers in classrooms were tenses and spelling. The students reported that their teachers expect them to use correct tenses and that more able students were expected to have less to no mistakes in tenses.

It depends. But for us, because we are in set A, our teacher always said that we need to make sure the tense that we use is correct. For example, it's very important to use past tense when you write a narrative essay. So I think, what is important is tenses because that is always mentioned in our class. If it's not mentioned, then it's not really important.

Further analysis also revealed that some students even have a special notebook to list down the important elements in writing which were often reminded by their teachers in class.

We have a note book, we usually write whatever our teacher told us that is important for essay writing. When the exam is near, we usually refer to the note book to do a practice essay at home. I think that is one way to get good marks.

It seems that one of the ways to get good marks is to practise essay writing at home and follow teacher's suggestions on important essay elements. The fact that students keep notebooks to refer to their teacher's 'advice' shows that teacher's influence is vital in these students' writing.

When examination was mentioned, some students also responded that they always think about what their teacher '*would like to see*' in their essays when writing for an exam.

Of course I think about the grammar marks. In the exam, I always try to remember what my teacher told me in class, and she always reminds us to check our tenses, so I think that affects my writing. I am more careful when it comes to tenses.

Here, the student reported that this has somehow affected his writing, and this may be as he is too focused on using the correct tense. This can also be supported by the responses given by some students who said that they were more careful when writing because mistakes lead to their grades being pulled

down by their teachers. Because of this, students may resort to memorizing 'template essays' or writing 'safe' essays.

Some students also expressed their belief that in order to get good grades, they must fulfil their teachers' expectations. For them, making their teachers happy means to closely follow what their teachers have taught in class. Students also commented that their teachers expected them to write at least two pages-long essays. This idea may also contribute to the misconception of writing long, winding sentences could help students in getting a better mark for their essay. For some, writing long essays is also important, but that does not mean they pay attention to sentence structure. When asked, they said that having enough ideas could help them to write more.

She said that if we have a lot of mistakes, we won't be able to get an A. Also, our teacher said that we need to write at least two pages long. If you write a really short essay, the chances for you to get an A is very low. So, make sure to write at least two pages long and minimise the mistakes. I always remember that during exams.

When asked about sentence variation, eight students felt that they do not think it is important in writing. This is because sentence variation was never mentioned in the classroom during writing lessons.

I've never heard of it. No. I think if the teacher didn't mention it, then it's probably not important. I mean, I don't want to do what my teacher didn't ask me to, so I might as well avoid that.

I'm guessing if it's never been mentioned, then, it's not important. I don't want to risk doing things that I don't know, not sure of. And most importantly, it's never been mentioned by our teacher before, so I think I don't really have to pay attention to it.

Students tend to rely on their teachers probably because they were used to being spoon-fed in class. This situation may explain why teacher's influence is so important in students' writing.

However, four more students reported that they have heard about sentence variation, but it was not stressed as much as other elements such as grammar, spelling or ideas. They said that their teacher only mentioned about using simple, compound and complex sentences in their essays, but it was not really stressed on and there were not that many lessons on them.

I'm not that sure, but I think I've heard of it. But my teacher always talks about grammar, so I think that's more important. And also ideas. I think those two are important because we always practice those in class.

I've heard about it. But I don't really know what it is exactly because our teacher doesn't really focus on it. She talks more about having good grammar and great ideas in writing. I think that's because she knows it is important, so we need to follow her advice.

Grammar:

In the interviews, grammar was found to be one of the most mentioned elements among students. There were 11 students who think that grammar is one of the most important elements in writing and it was mentioned 18 times in the students' interviews. There are three sub-elements under grammar that were discussed – verb agreement, tenses and sentence structure. Among the three sub-elements, **tenses** were mentioned the most among the students.

During writing lessons, students reported learning a lot about tenses and which to use for a specific essay. As an example, a student stated that present tense must be used in argumentative essays whereas past tense must be used in narrative essays.

I will always make sure that the tense that I use in my writing is the right one. In exams, I usually check for my tenses. For example, if I'm writing a narrative essay, I must make sure that I use past tense, and if I'm writing an argumentative essay, I have to use present tense.

There were a lot of practice in class, where we check for tenses errors with the teacher and our friends. We were asked to exchange our essays and check for errors in tenses, we identify, mark them with a red pen and return the essay to our friend.

The responses clearly showed that the goal of this practice is to achieve error-free essays and while this may help improve students' accuracy in writing, little to no attention is given to the effectiveness of the communication. Other than this error analysis activity done with the students, some students reported doing other activities in class to practise their tenses.

I remember doing those exercises in which we have to fill in the blanks? What do you call that? Cloze passage? Yes, so we need to fill in the blanks using the correct tense. Then we will discuss the answers together in the classroom.

Yes, sometimes we do some activities in class, our teacher will list down the verbs and we will write the verbs in the tense that we were asked to, for example, our teacher writes run, and the tense that's taught on that day is past tense, so we have to write ran.

From these responses, it can be indicated that writing was not taught hand-in-hand with English tenses. The activities or exercises given to them only tested

students' knowledge on English tenses alone. They were supposed to be incorporated with writing to help the students understand better in both grammar and writing.

Subject-verb agreement or **SVA** was the second most mentioned grammar element among students in the interview. Just like tenses, students reported that they usually check for SVA errors in their essay.

I think grammar is important in writing because a lot of our marks are based on grammar. Things like SVA is important because I usually have a lot of SVA errors and my marks are pulled down because of that. So, next time I think I will have to be really careful.

In class, we are trained to check for grammar errors by our teacher. Usually, we will exchange essay with our partners in class, then we will check each other's essay for grammar errors, grammar errors such as tenses and also SVA. We were told that these two things are the most common mistakes among students, so we need to focus on that.

Instead of integrating grammar lessons with writing lessons, SVA and tenses were both taught separately. Students reported being given cloze passages to practise their knowledge on SVA. Some students recalled being drilled to be able to identify SVA errors in essays and they were always asked to 'always check if

the subject agrees with the verb'. This error analysis practice was done more often towards exam week, where their teacher will usually show some sample essays, and they will discuss tenses, SVA, ideas, and the structure of the essay.

During revision week, we are given past year's exam papers and sample essays so that we can discuss on various things. We usually look at grammar elements, ideas and the structure of the essay. When we have the past year's papers, we then practice writing any of the topic from the paper and our teacher then marks them. We get our essay back during the next lesson, so that we can do error identification exercise in class.

The goal here is to have essays that are not only error-free, but also essays that are closest to the so-called template essays given to students during writing lessons. Drilling is seen normal and students seemed to accept it well. Some students even reported that it is a good method as he then knows what his teacher expects from his essay.

I think it is a good way because somehow students will know and understand what is wanted in their essays. Usually you need to know how to score in order to get good grades, so to do that, you need to understand what is important through a teacher's perspective, and that is grammar.

However, when students were asked if **sentence structure** is also an important element of grammar in writing, four students stated that it is important but not as important as tenses and SVA. They said that they were reminded about using simple, compound and complex sentences in their essay by the teachers, but that is about it, nothing more.

I think our teacher has discussed about sentence structure before, but it's not that often. So I think it's less important because there were less focus on sentence structure.

Also, when the students were asked if they were given any exercises on sentence structure, most of them were unsure, saying that they '*could not remember*'. They could only recall doing exercises on tenses and SVA but not so much on sentence structure. This suggests that teachers and students may be focusing on tense and SVA at the expense of other aspects of grammar which are more related to their learning needs. Despite the lack of focus on sentence structure, the students still believe that having good sentence structure in their essays could help them improve their writing. A student said that he was not aware of the importance of good sentence structure because he was '*not being told in class*'.

Ideas:

Having enough good ideas was also discussed by students during the interview. There were 11 students who reported that it is very important for them to have good flow of ideas in their writing, revealing that other than grammar, ideas are also key. According to the students, brainstorming for ideas was often done with their classmates during writing lessons. This activity was usually done with past year's question papers, so that they can 'get used to the pattern of the questions'.

During study week, our teacher will usually give us some past year's question papers in class. We then get into groups and try to brainstorm for ideas for each of the topic. Then, we will discuss them with the whole class.

After discussing the ideas for the topics, students said that they would write them down in their notebook. A student argued that by writing them down, it is easier for them to 'recall' or 'memorise' some of the ideas, if a similar topic were to come out in the exam. For them, this method may save a lot of time especially during examinations.

Our notebook is very important as it contains a lot of things that were discussed in class. Grammar, ideas, the dos and don'ts and other things, which I think help us when we are doing our revision. When we have, let's say, ideas for certain topics in our notebook, we can memorise them. If a

similar topic were to come out during exam, then it saves a lot of time as we don't have to spend so much time trying to think about new ideas. We just have to recall and adapt to the new topic.

Some students also reported how important it is to have a finished essay. They said that they were reminded by their teachers to not only write a finished essay but also to write a minimum of two pages.

To get at least a B and above, our teacher told us that we need to write a finished essay. We can't write an incomplete essay and expect to get a minimum of B. Our teacher said that once we write an incomplete essay, the highest we can get is a C.

We need to write an essay that is long and full of interesting ideas. I think I remember our teacher told us that we need to write an essay that is at least two-page long. Then, maybe we can get good grades, if other aspect such as grammar is also good.

Students are usually encouraged to have good ideas in their writing but to have students report that they were expected to write lengthy essay is something new. It seems rather unusual to tell students that they need to write lengthy and complete essays in order to get good grades. This may also contribute to the reason why students prefer to 'memorise' their ideas. They may feel worried

about not having enough time to complete their essays because of the planning that they may have to do before writing.

Vocabulary:

Vocabulary is also another element that was mentioned by the students during the interviews. Nine students believe that vocabulary is an important element in writing. These students mentioned '*bombastic*' words as the element that is always assessed by their teachers. The term '*bombastic*' that is used by students and teachers refers to low frequency words or infrequent words used in their writing. Teachers and students seemed to be very familiar with the term as it was used by all of them even though they were from different schools. This may suggest that the term '*bombastic*' is a term that is often used by teachers in schools across Malaysia.

The use of 'bombastic' to modify the word vocabulary was an obvious trait seen in almost all of these students' responses. According to them, 'bombastic' vocabulary means '*uncommon words*' that are used in their writing, and the more bombastic words used, the better.

When our teacher marks our essay, there is this merit tick, which is a tick for each bombastic words used in our essay. So, the more merit ticks, the

better our marks get. This combined with good grammar, and we may be awarded an A-.

If we get 20 merit ticks, we can definitely score a minimum of A-. That is if our grammar is also good. So if we want to get an A, just make sure that we use as many bombastic words as possible and make sure that our grammar is perfect.

Again, with grades in mind, students seem to think that essays are better by having infrequent words in them. Interestingly, the method of teaching vocabulary is also quite similar to the method of teaching grammar and ideas. The only difference is the students use Reader's Digest to pick uncommon words from various text featured in the magazine. They reported that they would have one specific day dedicated to using Reader's Digest in the classroom.

Every Wednesday, we will use the Reader's Digest in our class. The teacher will ask us to pick one article from the magazine, we then will have to read and also pick some bombastic words from the article. We will list down the words in our note book so that later on we can try to use them in our writing.

However, students said that before using the words in their essay, they would first look for the meaning of each word and try to recall words from their list if they

feel that any of the words are suitable to be used in their essay. Here, the concept of memorizing is still being applied. Although memorisation technique may be helpful in helping learners with lower proficiency (Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2000), the method may impede learners to develop their metalinguistic understanding as it promotes rote learning. Thus, learners may be less able to make decisions for themselves in other writing contexts.

Some students admitted that they were worried the words used in their writing might not be suitable. They said because the words were uncommon, they were unsure of how exactly to use them in the right context. However, because they were so focused on getting good grades, they said they had to *'risk it and try to use the words'* in their essay regardless. They then admitted that memorizing these words will not secure their chance in getting high grades because they might use them in the wrong context.

Spelling:

Spelling was least mentioned by students in the interviews and this element was mentioned by only three students with only three references. These students felt that spelling errors should be minimise in order to get good grades in writing. They reported that they usually allocate some time to check for spelling errors after they finished writing.

I think spelling is also an important thing in writing. I mean, you cannot have too many spelling mistakes, or else people might not understand what you write. Also, I think our teacher is really serious about spelling mistakes because she always reminds us to check for any spelling mistakes. So, I will always spend some time to check my spelling before submitting my essay.

I always check my grammar and spelling before I submit my essay. I think it's important to have good grammar and minimal spelling mistakes. If we have good grammar and minimal spelling mistakes, our chance to get higher grades is better.

These students also reported having to exchange their essays with classmates to check for spelling mistakes. This suggests that students were trained to write error-free essays and this may lead to students not having enough opportunities to develop various areas of their writing (Casanave, 2009; Lee and Coniam, 2013).

Overall, sentence variety and syntactical elements were not acknowledged by students as the important components in essay writing despite being identified for assessment in the marking rubric. In writing instruction, the students were also trained to focus more on accuracy and less attention was given to the effectiveness of the essay. This may result in less sophisticated essays written by

the students which creates a gap in expectations between school writing and academic writing in higher education.

6.4. Conclusion of students' interview findings

The study has generated extensive interview data about students' metalinguistic understanding and their perceptions of what is important in essay writing. A range of evident themes that are linked to the research questions emerged from the data presented in this chapter.

6.4.1. *Significant lack of confidence*

First of all, there was a particular lack of knowledge of the syntax of the sentence, beyond subject and verb; of clauses; of phrases; and of sentence variety. This was shown based on students' performance in the elicitation task, in which most students struggled and had very little confidence in completing the tasks. Had they known more about the syntax of sentence, clauses, phrases and sentence variety, they could have done better. With more metalinguistic understanding of these elements, students might have used grammatical reasoning to help them get the right answer to the task.

6.4.2. *Misconceptions*

Students' misconceptions of syntactic elements were also caused by the lack of metalinguistic understanding. Students were not able to use grammatical reasoning when completing the elicitation tasks as they relied on 'proxies' to work out the grammar of the sentence. Misconceptions such as phrases being shorter than clauses, simple sentences are short sentences and clauses are incomplete sentences that need more words are just some of the many misconceptions that caused problems to students.

6.4.3. *Apparent match between teachers' beliefs and students' knowledge*

Throughout the interviews, there is an apparent match between students' report about what teachers say is important in writing and what they are most confident with. As an example, students felt more able to discuss tenses and SVA because these two elements were often discussed by their teachers. As a result, students learn what appears to be most valuable for grade success – and this is confirmed in their reports on what counts as good writing for the exam.

6.4.4. *The importance of the teacher, exams and the teaching of writing*

Students repeatedly mentioned the importance of following teachers' suggestions on what is important for the exams. This shows how reliant they are

on teachers and the comments also suggest teachers are spoon-feeding them. There is very little evidence of students developing independency and agency as writers in English, which may cause problems in the future as in universities and colleges, students are expected to be independent learners.

The reports of the students also suggest the teaching of writing is more geared towards accuracy with no emphasis on communicative efficacy. The approach used by teachers, which involved cloze passages and error analysis, is very form-focused and not a functionally-informed approach to grammar. This method may be helpful in increasing the accuracy of students' essays, but it may not help students to effectively communicate their ideas through their writing. Students also seemed to accept this approach very well, probably because of the exam-oriented education system. It is also odd that the rubric rewards sentence variety, yet no attention seems to be awarded to it.

Finally, teachers' teaching approach results in students being principally concerned about getting good grades instead of writing well. Throughout the interviews with all of the students, it was surprising how often the word 'memorise' was used to describe their method of learning writing. This may suggest that students prefer to be spoon-fed because of how much they wanted good grades. None of them was concerned about how well they can convey the message through their writing.

CHAPTER 7

Teachers' Interview Findings

7.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the findings from students' interviews revealed the apparent match between their reports on what is important grammar said by their teachers and what they are most confident with in writing. It was also clear that students are very dependent to their teachers and seemed to be accepting the drilling teaching method very well because they focus so much on scoring A in the exams.

This chapter now presents the findings resulting from the data analysis of the teachers' interviews: mainly to see the impacts of teachers and their teaching methods to students. It also discusses teachers' metalinguistic understanding and their ability to use grammatical reasoning in discussing different grammar elements. Six English language teachers from three different schools participated in the semi-structured interviews; two teachers were chosen from each school, and all six chosen teachers were those who were teaching the student participants.

This chapter is divided into two sections, with each section representing the theme related to research question four: 'How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their judgement of students' writing quality?'. The first section looks at teachers' 'metalinguistic understanding' while the second section discusses 'teachers' perceptions in essay grading'.

7.2. Metalinguistic understanding

Metalinguistic understanding in this research is defined as the ability to explicitly reflect on language and its use; as an example, to identify each constituent in any given type of sentence, and to be able to articulate what category it belongs to.

The two parts of the interview schedule were created to inform one another so that richer data could be elicited from the participants. Any evidence of metalinguistic understanding was coded whenever it occurred, even if it was not from the elicitation tasks. The findings under this theme – metalinguistic understanding - are presented into two main sections: Syntactic knowledge and Teachers' reflections on metalinguistic understanding.

Each of these sections is further divided into sub-sections which will be reported thoroughly and separately.

7.2.1. Syntactic knowledge

Teacher participants' responses for the elicitation tasks were carefully identified and coded under this theme with more specific sub-sections of syntactical concepts. The table below summarises the correct identifications and explanation of syntactical concepts by each teacher: teacher 1 to teacher 6.

Sub-sections	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	Total
Identification of Syntactical Concepts							
Verb	4	5	2	2	2	4	19/36
Subject	5	5	3	2	3	1	19/36
Phrase	3	3	2	1	2	1	12/24
Clause	2	2	1	2	1	1	9/12
Adverbial	1	1	0	1	0	2	5/36
Object	1	1	1	1	0	1	5/6
Varied sentence structure	1	1	1	0	1	1	5/6
Complement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0/6
Explanation of Syntactical Concepts							
Phrases	2	2	1	1	1	1	10
Varied sentence structure	1	1	1	2	1	1	7
Clauses	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Metalinguistic Understanding of Simple Sentence							
Simple sentence with no errors	1	1	1	0	1	1	5

Table 7.1: Sub-sections of Syntactic Knowledge and the number of reference for each teacher

Identification of Syntactical Concepts:

During elicitation task, teachers were presented with a list of clauses and phrases and they were asked to go through them and label each one with 'clause' and 'phrase' cards. The teachers were then asked to explain their answers – i.e. what makes it a clause or a phrase. They were also asked to identify the sentence elements (i.e. subject, verb, object, adverbial, complement) in five different sentences with varying levels of difficulty. During this task, teachers were given several cards with 'subject', 'verb', 'object', 'compliment' or 'adverbial' on them and they were asked to label the structure in each sentence using the cards.

Out of 36 correct possibilities in the elicitation task, the **verb** element was correctly identified 19 times by the teachers. This means that they could only identify just over half the verbs, and this includes not being able to identify 'is' as a verb.

No.	Sentence	Verb element	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	are driven	3 first occurrence 2 first and second occurrences	12
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	is watching	5	6
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	is	3	6
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	lurked	2	6
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	stopped	4	6
	<i>Total</i>		19	36

Table 7.2: Identification of verb element

Only two teachers managed to identify the verb in sentence 7(b). The main problem identified among the teachers was that they were ‘*confused*’ and ‘*unsure*’ of the structure used in the sentences. Teachers appeared to be hesitating and contemplating when attempting to tag sentence 7(b), and some even changed their responses twice. One of the teachers nervously said that she was ‘*not sure*’ if ‘*the woods should be the subject*’, but she ended up labelling it as the subject of the sentence. Most teachers murmured ‘*what kind of sentence is this*’ to themselves, and this revealed that the teachers were probably not familiar with the *Adverbial + verb + Subject* structure in the sentence. Although sentence 7(e) also started with an adverbial, four teachers managed to identify the verb in the sentence. The comma used after the adverbial might have helped the teachers to tag the sentence. One teacher admitted that she did not know what ‘*walking*

home from school' is but she was sure '*the boy*' was the subject of the sentence. Following this, the teacher tagged '*stopped*' as the verb of the sentence. The structure used in sentence 7(d) also posed some problems to the teachers. Three teachers identified the first verb, but among those three teachers, only two managed to identify the second verb while the rest chose to skip the task. Two other teachers asked if this sentence was a single sentence or two separate sentences before deciding to skip the task. All teachers also admitted that they have never taught or introduced this type of sentence structure to their students. This shows that teachers probably prefer or are more confident to teach common sentence structures to the students.

Another confusion relates to the modified noun phrase, which was used in sentence 7(c). Despite its common *Subject + Verb + Complement* structure, half of the participants could not identify the verb in this sentence. The complex noun, which is also the subject of the sentence, may have confused the teachers. Furthermore, instead of an action verb as the main verb, this sentence features the verb *to be* as the main verb. It may be easier for teachers to identify action verbs rather than *be* verb, especially when the subject contains several pre-modifiers.

The **subject** element was identified 19 times out of 36 correct possibilities, which means none of the teachers managed to identify all six subjects in the elicitation

task. Again, complex sentence structures that were used in sentences seem to be a common problem to the teachers.

No.	Sentence	Subject element	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	a strange shadow	1	6
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	The cat	5	6
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	the boy	6	6
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	<i>The tall, handsome, young man</i>	4	6
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	Surface currents; deep currents	2 first subject 1 first and second subjects	12
	<i>Total</i>		19	36

Table 7.3: Identification of subject element

Sentence structure of sentence 7(b) was identified to be the problem that caused confusion among the teachers. Since English is teachers' second language, they may be used to having the subject element preceding the verb and the object element. This was evident when five teachers revealed that they were '*not sure*' which should be the subject of the sentence because both '*the woods and a strange shadow sounds like a subject*'. Following this, three teachers chose to ignore the subject element when tagging sentence 7(b). When they were asked if there is a subject in the sentence, they laughed and said 'yes' but admitted that they could not identify it. Similarly, teachers were also confused by the structure

used in sentence 7(d). The teachers reported that they were not confident to tag this sentence after seeing the linking word '*however*' used after the semi-colon. One teacher said that she is used to using linking words at the start of a sentence or in the middle with a comma.

Despite its uncommon structure, all teachers were able to identify the subject element in sentence 7(e). The clause after the adverbial features an obvious subject 'the boy' and the verb 'stopped'. Even though the clause ended with another adverbial '*to buy some food*', the apparent subject and verb may give away the hint to teachers. However, the teachers admitted that they were unsure of the structure of the whole sentence. Thus, when they were asked to tag '*walking home from school*', only four teachers managed to do so.

There were 12 correct **phrase** identification out of 24 correct possibilities, and none of the teachers managed to identify all four phrases correctly. The teachers were first asked to provide a definition of phrase before completing the task. It can be concluded that for most teachers, a phrase is '*part of a sentence*' and is '*incomplete*'. The teachers also mentioned that a phrase should not contain a verb and that '*it is usually quite short*'. Teachers' confusion when trying to identify the phrases may have been caused by the definition given and it could be shown in the following table.

No.	Phrase	No. of correct identification
6 (d)	<i>during the long, boring game</i>	3
6 (b)	<i>after our visit to the zoo</i>	3
6 (f)	<i>underneath the seat in front of you</i>	4
6 (a)	<i>on the street corner beside the mailbox</i>	2
	<i>Total</i>	12/24

Table 7.4: Identification of phrase

Contrary to students' responses, phrase 6(a) was least correctly identified by the teachers. The main problem resulting to this is that four teachers reported that *'it does not look like a phrase'* because of the *'length'*. One teacher then admitted that she had trouble identifying which is phrase and clause because *'they all look and sound the same'*. These teachers were not able to use grammatical reasoning or logic to identify the terms, instead they rely on proxies such as length, which is unreliable. Another teacher tried to explain her confusion was caused by the lack of focus on phrases and clauses in writing class because *'it would be complicated for the students'*. Another confusion relates to the definition that a phrase does not contain a verb. One teacher mentioned that *'after our visit'* was *'like'* a verb and so she did not identify phrase 6(b) as a phrase. She might have mistaken the word *'visit'* as a verb without realising that it was a noun phrase. Two teachers were unsure at first, but later were convinced that *'after our visit'* made it a clause instead of a phrase, most probably because of the same reason. The use of comma in phrase 6(d) also caused problems to the teachers

when two teachers argued that it *'does not sound like a phrase'* because of the comma used. They said that usually, a comma indicates a sentence. Although the teachers mentioned that a phrase does not contain a verb, it was evident that they had problems in identifying the element in each phrase.

Out of 12 correct possibilities, the **clauses** were identified nine times by the teachers. Three teachers managed to identify both clauses correctly in the elicitation task. When the teachers were asked to define a clause, three teachers mentioned that a clause consists *'a subject and a predicate'*. Two teachers defined clause as *'something'* that is *'part of a sentence'*, whereas one teacher tried to provide a definition but said that she *'could not find the right words'* to define a clause but that she knows what a clause is.

No.	Clause	No. of correct identification
6 (c)	<i>before the television show starts</i>	4
6 (e)	<i>now that you have arrived</i>	5
	<i>Total</i>	9/12

Table 7.5: Identification of clause

Among 6 teacher participants, only four of them managed to identify clause 6(c) correctly. One teacher who failed to identify the clause above believes that it did not feature a subject, thus making it a phrase, instead of a clause. Another teacher was using a proxy to justify her answer when she mentioned that it needs more words to make it a clause. On the other hand, five teachers managed to

identify clause 6(e) in the elicitation task. The teacher who failed to identify this as a clause believes that it is too short to be a clause and that it '*looks more like a phrase*' - another example of using a proxy for justification. It is possible that teachers' lack of understanding on syntactical structure may contribute to teachers' confusion in identifying these clauses. Although five teachers managed to identify clause 6(e), it was obvious from the interview that the teachers struggled to define and identify these clauses in the elicitation task. This can be seen as teachers hesitated and paused for quite a number of times during the task.

The **adverbial** element was identified six times out of 36 correct possibilities. None of the teachers managed to identify all adverbials in the elicitation task. It is also important to note that the teachers only identified the adverbial in sentence 7(b) and the first adverbial in sentence 7(e), so they did not mention about adverbials in other sentences.

No.	Sentence	No. of correct identification	No. of correct possibilities
7(a)	<i>The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.</i>	0	6
7(e)	<i>Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.</i>	4 on first adverbial; 0 on second adverbial	12
7(b)	<i>In the woods lurked a strange shadow.</i>	1	6
7(d)	<i>Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.</i>	0	6
7(c)	<i>The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.</i>	0	6
	<i>Total</i>	5	36

Table 7.6: Identification of adverbial

Just one teacher managed to identify the adverbial in sentence 7(b), which featured an uncommon sentence structure. It started with an adverbial, followed by a verb and a subject. When she identified the adverbial in this sentence, she was first unsure about the phrase ‘*in the woods*’. Initially, she tagged the phrase as subject, but after a while, she hesitated and changed her answer to adverbial. When she was asked what made her change her answer, she said that ‘*in the woods*’ could not be the subject as it could not ‘*perform the verb*’. Thus, she then tagged it as adverbial. This teacher demonstrated how having some input of metalinguistic understanding helped her in solving the task. Three teachers tagged ‘*in the woods*’ as the subject of the sentence, probably because they thought that the sentence featured the common *Subject + Verb + Object* structure

without considering the subject as the doer of the verb. One teacher chose to skip the task as she was *'unsure'* and *'confused'* of the structure of the sentence. Sentence 7(e) featured two adverbials, and four teachers identified the first adverbial, but none managed to identify the second. Most teachers reported that the comma used in the sentence helped them to identify the subject of the sentence and thus providing them a clue to tag *'walking home from school'*. A teacher mentioned that either a verb or an adverbial could precede a subject, and that the phrase *'Walking home from school'* could not *'possibly be the verb'*. Again, it was evident that this teacher tried to use some grammatical reasoning while completing the task. It was more challenging for the teachers to tag the second adverbial in the sentence. Most teachers did not know how to tag *'to buy some food'* because according to them, they were not really familiar with parts-of-speech of sentences used in writing. A teacher even tried to tag *'stopped to buy'* as the verb and *'some food'* as the object of the sentence, but changed her mind and decided to just tag the subject of the sentence. When asked how or what they would tag *'to buy some food'* as, all teacher participants could not provide a definite answer. They chose to skip because they were simply *'not sure'* about the structure.

There was only one **object** element in the elicitation task, and it was identified five times out of six correct possibilities. This means that one teacher did not manage to identify the object element during the elicitation task.

Sentence 7(a)

The cat is watching me with sad, droopy eyes.

Teachers did not have any problem identifying the object of the sentence probably because of the common *Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial* structure, although the adverbial element is not a well-known element among the teachers. Furthermore, this sentence also featured a straight-forward subject as the doer of the verb, which may give teachers the idea of the object as the receiver of the verb. This was evident when a teacher described that *'the cat is watching something, so that something is an object'* while tagging the sentence. However, one teacher only tagged the subject and the verb of the sentence and admitted that she was not sure what *'me with sad, droopy eyes'* was. At first, the teacher questioned if the word *'eyes'* should be the object, but she changed her mind and decided to just tag the subject and the verb of the sentence.

The teachers were then asked to define **sentence variation** based on their understanding before eliciting some examples from the students' essays. It is important to investigate teachers' understanding of sentence variation and their ability to identify them since it is one of the important elements in the standardised marking rubric. It is also key to see if teachers' understanding about sentence variation affects their judgement of students' essays. Five teachers were able to elicit several examples of sentence variation used in their students' essays.

Afian is a naughty student. She was quiet, shy and I was the loud one. No one dared to talk to us, as we were called troublesome partners in class.

Parents and teachers are oblivious of the problem affecting students. This has led to many students feeling stressful and depressed because of the expectations that they have to fulfil.

Sheena did not want to admit it. She refused to let the painful truth pop the bubble that she was living in. She wanted this to last forever, but deep in her heart, she knew it was coming to an end.

The above examples of sentence variation were given by three teachers. According to five teachers, sentence variation is achieved by using different types of sentence, which means students must use simple, compound and complex sentences in their writing. One teacher also mentioned that sentence variation could be achieved by using sentences with '*different length*' and '*different openings*'. The teacher reported that she taught her students to vary sentence opening by '*using however, furthermore, moreover, et cetera*'. Based on the teachers' definitions and examples, it seems that teachers' perceptions of varied sentence structure are achieved by using different types of sentences. Only one teacher mentioned about using length and syntactical variation to achieve sentence variation in essays. However, she only provided linking adverbs as

examples of syntactical variation. This suggests that teachers may have very limited understanding of syntactical variety as they seem to be more aware of using different clause types to achieve sentence variation. When the teachers were asked if sentence variation is taught in class, they replied that they have never explicitly taught sentence variation. Instead, they focus more on preparing students to plan for ideas, minimise errors and write the 'model' essay.

Finally, none of the teachers managed to identify the only **complement** element in the elicitation task. The complement element was featured in sentence 7(c):

The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.

In the elicitation task, sentence 7(c) has posed problems to the teachers, as they struggled to identify the subject, verb, adverbial and complement in the sentence. Generally, teachers' lack of knowledge in syntactic structure may be the cause of this problem. This was evident when two teachers contemplated if 'teacher' or 'school' should be tagged as the object of the sentence. None of the teachers mentioned or considered the complement element in the sentence. Also, the subject, which is a noun phrase, featured several pre-modifiers, and because of these elements, teachers became confused of the structure, which may further hinder their ability to clearly identify the elements.

It can be concluded that teachers were more familiar with common syntactic elements such as subject, verb and object and had less knowledge on other elements such as adverbial, phrase, clause and complement. Less correct identification was recorded for sentences that feature complex noun phrase even though the common Subject Verb Object structure was used. The misconception of phrase and clause was also evident among these teachers as most of them defined clause and phrase as *'something that is part of the sentence'* and *'incomplete sentence'*. They also reported that they have never really focus on teaching the use of phrase or clause in writing. These teachers' understanding on sentence variation was also very limited. To most of them, sentence variation is achieved by using different types of clauses, and so they focus on simple, compound and complex sentences. Only one was aware that sentence variation is also achieved by varied sentence length and sentence opening. However, it is important to note that this teacher only referred to linking adverbs when explaining varied sentence opening.

Explanation of Syntactical Concepts:

During the elicitation task, teachers were also asked to explain elements such as phrases, clauses and varied sentence structure. All teachers felt able to explain the **phrase** element and it was mentioned eight times. However, none of the teachers gave a correct explanation of what a phrase is. Teachers were expected

to use *'a group of words that stand together as a single unit'* to explain what a phrase is. Teachers were also expected to mention that a phrase does not contain a subject and a verb, thus cannot convey a complete thought. However, if teachers mentioned *'a word or a group of words'* to define a phrase, it was still accepted. The closest answer to the correct explanation provided by a teacher participant was *'an incomplete sentence with a combination of a few words'*. It is important to note that, five out of six teachers included *'incomplete sentence'* in their explanation or definition of a phrase. This misinterpretation may explain why most teachers had problems in phrase identification task. The following are some examples of teachers' responses.

Example 1

I: Okay. So what is a phrase? Can you define it?

P: (Laugh) I think a phrase is like... (pause)... combination of words..

I: Combination of words?

P: Well it's like an incomplete sentence, but with a combination of a few words...

I: An incomplete sentence with a combination of a few words? That's a phrase for you?

P: Yes, it is definitely incomplete, but it has to have few words...

Example 2

I: okay. Just curious, why is this a phrase to you?

P: Because... uh, it's not complete, I mean it doesn't have a subject and a verb, and it's only words...

I: For you this is a phrase because it is incomplete? And it contains a few words?

P: Yes, yes.. it is definitely incomplete... so, I think that's why it's a phrase...

A point that stands out from both these examples is how both teachers used 'incomplete (sentence)' to define a phrase. In the elicitation task, teacher in example 2 scored one out of four in phrase identification, and teacher in example 1 scored three out of four in phrase identification. Thus, it may be fair to say that teachers' definition of phrase may affect their performance in the phrase identification task.

A teacher also mentioned that a phrase is 'like a fragment' as it is seen like an incomplete sentence. It is rather interesting how this teacher used fragment, which is usually used to describe a type of error in writing, to define a phrase. Surely, her answer was not completely wrong, but it could not be accepted as the correct answer as well.

Apart from that, teachers were also asked to explain **varied sentence structure** which was included as one of the grammar features in the standardised marking

rubric. All teachers were able to discuss sentence variation and it was mentioned seven times in the interviews. It is apparent that the teachers' understanding of sentence variation focused on having different types of sentence such as simple, compound and complex sentences in the essay. Varied sentence structure is not limited to only having varied sentence types but is also could be achieved when syntactical variety, sentence length and sentence types are used in writing (Vivian & Jackson, 1991; Solikhah, 2017), which was only mentioned by one teacher. Thus, most of these teachers were only aware of varied sentence types in sentence variation, and they may not be aware of the two equally important features of varied sentence structure. This is worrying because sentence variation is obviously featured in the standardised marking rubric, proving that it is an important element which teachers are supposed to be aware of. It may also be possible that teachers' lack of understanding on sentence variation affects their judgement of students' writing and their method of teaching writing in classrooms.

Finally, six teachers tried to explain what a **clause** is and it was mentioned six times during the interviews. However, none of the six references was the correct explanation of a clause. Teachers were expected to use '*a group of words containing a subject and a verb*' to explain what a clause is. The teachers were also expected to include two types of clauses, which are the independent clause and dependent clause, together with the definition of each clause. The closest

answer to the correct explanation provided by a teacher was '*an incomplete sentence with a subject and a verb*'. Interestingly, the teacher who provided this answer was also the one who mentioned that a phrase does not contain a subject and a verb. However, the term '*incomplete sentence*' is partly true because a clause can be a complete sentence, in which is called the independent clause.

As all six teachers included the term '*incomplete sentence*' to define a clause, this misconception is worrying because it could greatly affect teachers' method of teaching, especially when the students are so used to being spoon-fed. This shows how important it is for teachers to be aware of the true definition of phrase and clause, so that they could help their students to improve their writing and perhaps be better writers themselves too.

Metalinguistic Understanding of the Simple Sentence:

Teachers were also asked to provide several examples of **simple sentence used with no errors** in their students' essays during the elicitation task. Five teachers managed to provide correct examples of simple sentence used with no errors from their students' essays. The correct examples provided by the teachers are as below:

- i) *She has found happiness.*
- ii) *We sold our tickets.*
- iii) *He was a really good artist.*
- iv) *Grades do not determine our future.*

v) *Parents have their expectations.*

The simple sentences that were provided by the teachers featured common sentence structures that were fairly straight forward. The examples featured either a pronoun or a noun as the subject or sentence openings. It is possible that the teachers only looked at these kinds of sentences when identifying simple sentences. Perhaps, the teachers were not aware that simple sentences could also feature noun phrase with pre-modifiers or post-modifiers as the subject. It is also important to note the length of the sentences provided by these teachers indicate similar length. None of the examples contain conjunctions such as ‘and’ or ‘but’ to link words or phrases; or any subject-verb inversions which can be one of the features in a simple sentence. One teacher provided wrong example of simple sentence – ‘*I wanted to run away*’. It was evident that this teacher was not aware that this sentence is a complex sentence which features a non-finite clause ‘*to run away*’. The teacher may have thought the sentence is a simple sentence because of the length.

7.2.2. *Teachers’ reflections on metalinguistic understanding*

After the elicitation task, the interview sessions with teachers were continued to elicit their reflections on metalinguistic understanding. The data from this interview and the elicitation task aimed to further explain the statistical findings of the study. Teachers’ comments and reflections in this theme were those which

are related to their feelings and beliefs in the importance of metalinguistic understanding in writing.

The teachers provided mixed opinions on the importance of metalinguistic understanding in writing. Three teachers believe that metalinguistic understanding may help both teachers and students in writing, whereas two teachers thought that metalinguistic understanding will only confuse the students and will not help them in writing. One teacher was on the fence as she said that obtaining metalinguistic understanding might have its pros and cons.

A teacher felt that metalinguistic understanding is somehow important especially to teachers because it will improve the effectiveness of their instructions. According to her, teachers are expected to have metalinguistic understanding, but somehow, she felt that most teachers were still uncertain of their level of understanding.

It's not that we don't have the knowledge, I mean, we are expected to have the grammar knowledge and all that, but I think most of us are just not confident of our level of knowledge. Sometimes, we forget certain things because we try so hard to finish the syllabus. So we just do what we can. But, of course, if you ask me, metalinguistic understanding is important, especially to us, teachers.

The teacher also admitted that she was nervous when she was told that she had to complete the elicitation task because she would be embarrassed if she could not answer any of the questions. She then said at that point she realised how important metalinguistic understanding is, not only to teach writing but also to teach English in general.

I think if I had more understanding, I mean, if I was more confident of the level of my knowledge, I think it'll be easier for me to teach English, especially writing in English. I can't imagine if my students ask any of the questions that you just asked, I think I will be embarrassed because I will not be able to answer correctly.

Another teacher mentioned a very important point about metalinguistic understanding:

I think all of us are aware of the grammar knowledge, we've probably learned about them in schools or university, but I think that is not enough for us as teachers. I think most of us just memorise most of them, without fully understanding them. So, if we obtain metalinguistic understanding, I think it would definitely be useful. Also, if we understand the rules, then we can explain them using the right terms.

Another important point made by a teacher was that how the students usually had problems to make form-meaning connections. As an example, most students know the form of the tenses taught in class, but not the meaning. This means that students know how to construct the forms, but most of the time, they are not sure when to use them, and this may explain the multiple tense errors in her students' essays. She further argued that if students had the knowledge to classify words in sentences, such as adverbs or nouns, they could easily use that knowledge to write better essays.

Two teachers also mentioned that students and teachers should be exposed to metalinguistic understanding and that can be a benefit to the process of teaching and learning writing. However, they felt that the pressure to follow and finish the syllabus has somehow deter them from this.

The English language syllabus has very specific goals. So we, the teachers feel pressured to make sure we are able to teach everything before the students go for their final exams. The students also rely so much on the textbooks and syllabus, so their way of learning becomes very rigid. We don't have enough time to really learn about the rules, to really understand them thoroughly.

There were two teachers who thought otherwise. According to one, metalinguistic understanding can be too complex for students, and it can further confuse them.

Thus, for the teacher, metalinguistic understanding is seen to do more harm than good to students.

I don't feel that metalinguistic understanding can help students improve their writing. Students can be easily confused with all the rules, they are already confused now, why add to the problem? Also, I don't think we have time to explicitly teach each rules to them. What about students with lower proficiency? That will be a problem too.

Another teacher also felt that students should read more to improve their writing. Having metalinguistic understanding will not bring any impact to students' writing if they do not read.

Most of my set A students are able to write good essays. I think this is because most of them love reading English novels, and they picked up the writing skills from there. I don't think any of them obtain metalinguistic understanding, yet they are able to get good grades for their writing. So, for me, reading is key in developing students' writing skills.

Finally, a teacher was on the fence when it comes to the importance of metalinguistic understanding. For her, it has its pros and cons for teachers and students. She mentioned that teachers could benefit from metalinguistic understanding as it could help them explain grammar rules and terms when

teaching writing. Instead of relying on rules in textbooks, having complete understanding of grammar can make teachers' instructions more effective. It also helps if students have the same understanding, so there will be a two-way communication in the teaching and learning of writing in the classroom. On the other hand, she also believes that metalinguistic understanding is not for all students. According to her, it could cause problems among students with lower proficiency. As mentioned by previous teacher, metalinguistic understanding could confuse these students and hinder their motivation to develop their writing skills.

7.3. Teachers' perceptions in essay grading

The data analysis also revealed a second theme, which was '*teachers' perceptions in essay grading*'. This theme presented teachers' views and opinions on what is important when grading students' essays. Under this theme, there are six different sections; each section representing the feature that is deemed important to teachers when grading essays. The six sections are error-free essay, tenses, vocabulary, ideas, sentence variation and Subject-Verb agreement.

Sub-sections	No. of reference	No. of teachers	Definition
Error-free essays	20	5	Participant reported that it is important to have minimal or no errors in students' essays in order for them to award higher grades
Tenses	10	6	Participant reported that good use of tenses in essays may contribute to higher grades
Vocabulary	9	6	Participant reported that students are encouraged to use more uncommon words in their essays to get good grades
Ideas	7	6	Participant agreed that having good ideas contribute to good grades
Sentence variation	5	4	Participant reported that sentence variation is an important element in determining students' grades
Subject-verb agreement	1	1	Participant reported that subject-verb agreement is important in determining students' grades

Table 7.7: Sub-sections of teachers' perceptions

Error-free essays:

Five teachers firmly believe that it is important for an essay to have minimal or no errors in order for them to award higher grades. This feature was mentioned 20 times, suggesting that most error-free essays may be awarded with the best grades. According to these teachers, they train the students to identify errors in essays so that students will be more aware of the mistakes and will not repeat them when writing. Students are usually asked to exchange essays among them and identify errors before discussing them with the teacher during writing lessons.

Here we have you know, peer marking... Students will mark their friends' essays, so they have to know how to look for mistakes. Tenses, subject verb agreement et cetera. We train them for this, so they will also learn and minimise their mistakes when they write their own essay.

The teacher also mentioned that when the examination is approaching, this kind of practice is done almost every day, so that students will *'get the hang of it'* and hopefully will be more careful of mistakes when writing. Students are also asked to go sentence by sentence to identify and correct the errors that could range from spelling, tenses and SVA errors. Some teachers also reported that they offer one-to-one sessions to weaker students. This is so that the teacher can focus on the student in helping them to identify and correct errors in their essays. These sessions are usually done during after-school hours. Apparently, to these teachers, this method helped the weaker students to improve their writing in terms of minimizing the errors. They mentioned that weaker students showed improvement in terms of the number of errors in their writing, and according to them, that helps the students in obtaining better grades. Moreover, the teachers also believe that the *'drilling'* method of identifying errors in essays is one of the effective ways in decreasing tenses and SVA errors among students.

The teachers also reported that students who write essays with minimal errors are most likely to be awarded with better marks. This is because, according to

them, essays with minimal errors are 'cleaner essays', which are with less red markings that represent errors in essays. This shows how teachers were more interested in the technical accuracy.

No matter how flowery, beautiful your essay is, if your essay is infested with all the grammatical errors, in terms of tenses, you cannot get... okay it's like this, once I can identify any errors here, you cannot get an A already. No matter how good you write.

A teacher, who is also an examiner for the English paper in national examination, mentioned that she usually determines how serious the errors are in an essay before pulling down the bands or grades. She said that all examiners for the national examination are trained to mark essays that way. Bands or grades may be hugely determined by the number of errors, apart from other elements, which play only minor role in determining the grades.

What is interesting from the analysis of teachers' interview is that all of the teachers mentioned about how errors in students' essays distinguished good and bad essays. This can also be supported when four teachers identified an essay with less red markings as the better essay and an essay with more red markings as the bad essay. Only two of them mentioned other elements such as sentence variation, essay structure or ideas to separate good essays from the bad ones.

Tenses:

Among the errors mentioned by the teachers, tenses were found to be one of the most mentioned elements in contributing good grades. They reported that students were taught the important and most used tenses for writing – simple present and past tense - so that they will use the correct tense in their essays.

Two teachers maintained that the tense would determine how proficient the student is in English writing. Thus, to these teachers, the English tense is majorly important in determining the quality and grade of the essay.

It is normal for students with lower proficiency to get lower grades because of the number of errors they make, especially in tenses. The tense is very important as it determines if the students are proficient in English writing. More able writers usually don't have problems in using the correct tenses.

Another teacher also said that correct use of tense shows that students understand the question or the prompt of the essay. As an example, a prompt that requires students to end their essays with 'we had never laughed so much in our lives' need to be written in past tense. The teacher also explained that if the student failed to use the correct tense, the student may not understand the question or the prompt, and this may suggest the student is less proficient in English.

Argumentative essays usually are written in present tense, and narrative are written in past tense. If the student failed to realise this, then he or she might not understand the prompt, or simply he or she is not really proficient in English.

The above excerpt shows how this teacher judges students' performance based on the tenses used, however, this teacher's argument is not entirely true. Writing an argumentative essay involves using both present and past tense; the argument is written in present tense, but the evidence will be written in past tense. School students may have not been exposed to writing argumentative essay which includes factual evidence to support their argument as the topics only involved discussing one's preference or beliefs (i.e. good grades do not determine one's future, school uniforms should be abolished, et cetera). Thus, teachers tend to drill students by 'assigning' certain tense to certain type of essay. This method of teaching somehow will cause problems to students in the future, especially in higher learning institution where they will have to write essays with argument and factual evidence. Four other teachers shared the same opinion, stating that the tense plays an important role in determining the quality of students' essays and that it is the first thing they look at when grading. One of them said that in some serious cases, tense errors even affect readers' understanding of the essay. She also believes that is the reason why the tense

is one of the most important element in determining the quality of students' essays as it determines the effectiveness of the writing.

Because of the importance of tense in writing, these teachers said that they usually tell students to focus on their tenses when writing. Teachers also mentioned that students were usually given cloze passages or multiple-choice questions to '*practise their tenses*'. The exercises were rarely integrated with writing because, according to one teacher, it does not help students with lower proficiency.

From the teachers' responses, it can be indicated that writing was not taught hand-in-hand with tenses. This is because the exercises given to them only tested students' knowledge on tense alone. The Form four English language syllabus suggests teaching grammar items in the context of topics, but it does not explicitly state teaching grammar hand-in-hand with writing. This may be one of the reasons why grammar is taught separately from writing.

Vocabulary:

The next element that was frequently mentioned by teachers during the interview is vocabulary. This element was mentioned nine times by the teachers. From the interviews, it is apparent that teachers often take into account the number of '*bombastic*' words used by students in their essays. A merit tick is used to identify

these words, and grades are also given based on the number of these merit ticks, apart from other things.

When marking, we have the merit ticks. You see, we use this tick to identify the bombastic words that the students use. If we can see more than 20 merit ticks, then the student may deserve an A. That is if the student also has very few errors and good grammar.

Interestingly, all of the teachers used the word 'bombastic' to refer to uncommon words used by students. For them, 'bombastic' words are big words, which are rarely used or low frequency words and may be found in articles in the Reader's Digest (RD henceforth). The teachers mentioned that students are encouraged to pick up words from RD, list them in their notebook, and use any of the words later in their essays. They said that there is a specific day dedicated for students to use RD in English lessons for this purpose. For example, one teacher reported that she uses RD in her lesson every Wednesday. Whereas another teacher said that RD is used in her lesson every Monday. It is also important to note that all the teachers mentioned that they have been using RD in their lessons since the Reader's Digest Reading Program was introduced in Malaysian secondary schools.

These teachers also commented that they often use RD because the worksheet provided with the magazine helps students in improving their reading and

vocabulary skills. The worksheets are reported to be convenient and relevant, and students are often able to complete them in class or on their own. The teachers also believe that RD helps students because by reading them, students can learn new words – they can then pick up the words and use them in their writing.

Another important point shared by a teacher is that she believes that one of the effective strategies in learning vocabulary is by memorizing, repeating and note-taking. She reported that she has tried to apply the strategy with her students and admitted that it was helpful to some students especially the weaker ones.

Another teacher also said that the more merit ticks a student gets, the wider his or her vocabulary is, which definitely deserves a higher grade. Students were also encouraged to use the dictionary to find meanings of new words, and the teacher believes that this method promotes independent learning among the students. That way, students are believed actively learning about the word which includes knowing enough about the words; forms, uses and meanings.

One teacher shared that learning vocabulary is key in writing, so she made sure that all of her students – those with higher and lower proficiency – got the chance to learn new words every day. Each day in her lesson, she made sure to list down two to four words on the board, so that her students can ‘copy’ them into their

notebook. The teacher then encouraged the students to use the words in their writing.

Based on the interviews, the teachers believe that vocabulary is almost as important as tense in writing. Thus, apart from grammar, teachers tend to also focus on teaching vocabulary in writing class.

Ideas:

Idea is also another element that was mentioned by the teachers during the interviews. This element was only mentioned seven times by the teachers, not as frequently as the other elements. The teachers reported that it is important for students to have good flow of ideas in order to gain readers' interests. Two teachers said that in order to train their students to come up with good ideas, group discussions are usually held in class so that students could brain storm and exchange ideas for different writing topics. This activity is conducted especially when the examination is just around the corner. In some sessions that consist mixed-ability students, teachers usually pair or group the more able students with the weaker ones, so that the more able students can help the weaker ones.

Some of these teachers admitted that some students, especially the weaker ones tend to memorise the ideas that they have discussed in class. This is because

the students were usually asked to write down the ideas in their notebook, so that they could refer to them in the future. Thus, this may allow students to be very dependent to their notebook, since all of the elements that are deemed important are jotted down. However, the teachers believe that if this method helps the students, then it should be continuously used in lessons. Two of them said that because of time constraints, they are left with no other options and this method seems to be the quickest and the most effective among students.

Some teachers also think that idea or content is also important in determining the quality of students' essays. These teachers reported that the content will portray first impressions to readers, and this is crucial as it will determine readers' interests in reading the essay. Furthermore, students were also expected to write lengthy essays.

I always tell my students to write at least two page long. One page may be too short and may lack of ideas, so it will be better, or safer if they write longer. So, it is important for students to have enough ideas, enough for them to write for two or more pages.

However, the teacher did not consider if the font or the structure may affect the length of the essay. She highlighted that she always reminds her students to write essays that are long enough, in order to be graded better. This particular teacher also believes the idea is the most important element in writing before other

elements such as grammar, sentence variation or vocabulary. In addition, she encourages her students to write complete essays, as she said incomplete essays could lead to grades being pulled down.

Sentence variation:

During the interviews, four teachers mentioned about sentence variation as one of the important elements in writing, but it was mentioned for only five times. These teachers mentioned sentence variation only after discussing grammar in writing. As an example, according to one teacher, sentence variation comes second after grammar when it comes to determining students' essay quality. She believes that good grammar leads to students' ability to vary their sentence. This teacher also believes that only when students are able to correctly use and understand the tenses in writing, they are able to use varied sentence structures in their essay.

On the other hand, another teacher believes that sentence variation is not as important as tenses and SVA, hence must come second in determining the quality of students' essays. As second language learner, she believes that proper use of tenses and SVA in writing portrays students' proficiency in English.

Usually, tenses and SVA are two important things in measuring second language learners' ability or proficiency, be it in writing, speaking and so

on. So, I think they must come first before sentence variation. So, when I mark, I will look at those two first, then sentence variation. But, that does not mean it is not important. I think if students are taught more on sentence variation, it will definitely help them in improving their essays.

A teacher also mentioned that sentence variation might make essays look more 'presentable' and sound more interesting. Essays that consist similar sentence types may also sound repetitive and boring. Hence, the teacher stated that students must know how to use different sentence types – simple, compound and complex – in their writing so that readers will be more interested in reading the essay. Another teacher also mentioned that she always tells her students to use different types of sentences in their essays as they may provide dramatic effect to the essay – a good example of a communication, meaning-making reason for using variety, unlike other comments which are form-focused.

However, none of them discussed sentence length and sentence openings which are also ways to vary sentences in writing. This may suggest that teachers only focused on sentence types when discussing or teaching sentence variation to students. This may also be the reason of lack of awareness on sentence variation among students. Furthermore, complexity and sophistication of students' sentence structure may not be the focus in essay grading since tenses and SVA were given more emphasis.

Subject-verb agreement:

Lastly, subject-verb agreement (SVA henceforth) was the least mentioned element by the teachers in the interviews. This element was mentioned only once by a teacher when discussing about important elements in essay grading. However, SVA was mentioned by other teachers for quite a number of times, but it was not referred to as an important element in essay grading. Instead, it was mentioned to refer to error-free essays, which is the most important element in essay grading. These teachers mentioned more about SVA when they were discussing about the importance of writing error-free essays in order to be graded better.

The teacher who mentioned SVA as one of the important elements in essay grading believes that it goes hand-in-hand with tenses. She said that both tenses and SVA are equally important as they determine second language learners' ability or proficiency in English. Thus, the teacher believes that teachers must focus on both tenses and SVA when grading essays and these two elements must also be emphasised to students in writing lessons.

7.4. Conclusion of teachers' interview findings

On the basis of the dataset presented in this chapter, there are several significant themes that could be linked to the research questions.

7.4.1. *Lack of grammatical subject knowledge*

It became clear that these teachers have very limited grammatical subject knowledge when they struggled to justify their responses especially in the elicitation task. They were not able to use grammatical reasoning in trying to determine word classes or structures, instead relied on proxies, which are misleading. Relying on proxies also may have caused the teachers to have misconceptions such as phrases being shorter than clauses or that clauses and phrases are incomplete sentences. Their lack of knowledge on grammatical subject has definitely affected the number of correct identifications in the elicitation task.

7.4.2. *Lack of understanding of syntax*

There was also a lack of understanding of syntax beyond subject verb object among teachers: particularly limited knowledge of the adverbial, which is a key structure in English writing. The number of correct adverbial identification was significantly low among teachers and this was supported when they did not feel able to discuss adverbials during the interviews. Some of them admitted being confused about adverbials and complement and could not tell them apart. Sentences that feature complex noun phrase also clearly posed problems to these teachers.

7.4.3. *The importance of accuracy in exams*

It was evident that the comments shared by these teachers were very form-focused in relation to both grammar and to writing as they expect students to write error-free essays for good grades. There were almost no reference to the importance of communication and meaning-making in writing because they were more interested in looking at technical accuracy and not students' communicative competence. Students were often given 'template' essays and were trained to look for errors in their writing as an attempt to train students to write error-free essays. Teachers' limited repertoire of attention is clearly not supported by the marking rubric and this may affect their judgement on the quality of students' essays.

7.4.4. *Lack of interest in grammatical metalinguistic knowledge*

Although some teachers admitted that having grammatical metalinguistic knowledge is important to both teachers and students, it was largely not valued in the classroom. Some teachers even argued that grammatical metalinguistic knowledge will only bring more harm to students and does not help in improving students' writing. They commented that students are already confused with so many terms, especially the weaker writers. Despite their strong views, these teachers emphasised tense, grammatical accuracy and set drilling grammar exercises in their lessons.

CHAPTER 8

Discussion

8.1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between syntactic complexity in writing, and teachers' and learners' metalinguistic understanding of writing. In order to accomplish this, a mixed-method research design was employed. A total of 92 students' essays were analysed systematically in order to answer research questions one and two, and several writing conversations were conducted in order to answer research questions three and four. Given the importance of syntactic complexity in second language learning and the scarcity of metalinguistic understanding studies, this mixed-method study positions itself to bridge this gap by investigating both syntactic constructions in second language learners' writing and the metalinguistic understanding of teachers and learners. By conducting both detailed corpus work and interview analysis, this study aims to provide more comprehensive findings to discuss the relationship between what syntactic choices they make in their writing and what they understand about those choices. This chapter summarises the results and discusses the findings of the present research in relation to the previous research

in second language acquisition and second language writing. The chapter is organised according to the four research questions addressed in this study:

- i. What is the nature of syntactic constructions in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency?
- ii. Is there a difference in the nature of syntactic constructions in narrative and argumentative essays?
- iii. How does students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing?
- iv. How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their judgement of students' writing quality?

8.2. The relationship between syntactic complexity and levels of proficiency in writing

The first research question sought to determine the nature of syntactic constructions in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency.

The measure of *overall syntactic complexity* of students' writing show that there was no significant difference between the advanced and intermediate writers. This was measured using two ways: by computing the *average sentence length*

and secondly, by computing the *ratio of sentence complexity* - the number of clauses divided by the number of sentences. The measures are based on the assumption made in many previous corpus-based studies (e.g. Wolf-Quintero et al., 1998; Lu, 2011), that longer sentences will be more complex, and that complexity is indicated by a higher proportion of clauses per sentence.

Although there was no significant difference between the two groups, the increase in *mean sentence length* and *ratio of clauses per sentence* with level of proficiency coincide with previous corpus-based studies. In their research synthesis of 39 writing studies, Wolf-Quintero et al. (1998) reported that length-based measures such as mean length of sentence (MLS), mean length of clause (MLC) and mean length of T-unit (MLTU) “consistently increased in a linear relationship to proficiency level across studies”. Hunt (1965) also stated that ‘more’ often signals complexity. Therefore, the amount of embedding, the length and the frequency of certain syntactic structures can be an indicator of syntactic complexity and language proficiency. He further argues that longer production units is considered more complex than shorter units (Hunt, 1965).

The increase in *sentence length* and *sentence complexity* between the two groups can further be explained by referring to other measures of syntactic complexity, such as the *clausal complexity* measures. According to a study by Vyatkina (2012), writers with higher mean sentence length also show higher

amount of subordinate or coordinate clauses. The present study also reports similar results, in which higher *mean sentence length* can be explained by the increased use of *subordination* or *coordination*. However, previous studies have provided mixed results regarding clausal complexity measures. Although there are different opinions, there have been some arguments and evidence that support the notion that clausal measures of syntactic complexity may be useful in terms of analysing second language writing (e.g. Ortega, 2003; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). Norris and Ortega (2009) argues that clausal-level complexity is syntactically significant, especially for intermediate proficiency writers. They also recommend looking at subordination to analyse clausal complexity in second language writing. On the other hand, Bardovi-Harlig (1992), found that clausal coordination can be an important measure for beginner second language writers. This notion is supported by Crossley and McNamara (2014) who report that there are significant changes in coordinated clauses over the duration of a course in their study among writers with lower levels of proficiency. Furthermore, they also found positive correlation between raters' judgement of writing quality with clausal complexity. The findings on *clausal complexity* in this present study confirm the previous research findings (e.g. Ortega, 2003; Vaezi & Kafshgar, 2012) that indicate higher mean in *clausal complexity* among more able writers, particularly in *relative clause* and *finite subordinate clause*. As mentioned above, higher mean in *clausal complexity* may contribute to the increase of *sentence length* and *sentence complexity*. Furthermore, the use of dependent clauses is one of the

most important element of syntactic complexity in second language writing (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Willis, 2003) and teachers, who are also markers, tend to identify writing that uses more dependent clauses to be of a higher quality.

There are also some researchers who argue that subordinate and coordinate clauses are more strongly associated with speech rather than academic writing (Ortega, 2009; Biber et al., 2011) , thus calling the use of clausal complexity measures into question. However, in this study, it is also important to highlight the two genres – argumentative and narrative, which could explain higher mean in clausal complexity. Narrative essays are very similar to telling a story, thus the use of more *relative clauses* or *finite subordinate clauses* may be necessary to add more details to the story telling. In analysing linguistic performance in second language writing, some researchers have developed coordination indices and the results show that beginner writers tend to have higher coordination values compared to more able writers (Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989; Lu, 2010). The results for the *amount of coordination* used by both groups were consistent with previous studies, in which these measures may indicate the level of proficiency. Intermediate writers significantly used more *coordinate clause* compared to their counterparts. The results also support Rodriguez's (2009) and Veliz's (1999) argument that one of the obvious indicators of syntactic immaturity is a high amount of clause coordination. It may also reflect the lack of confidence among the intermediate writers in using alternate structures, such as subordinate clause.

This is because *coordination* is a simpler linear chaining of related ideas, whereas *subordination* can express linguistically more complex non-linear relationships between ideas.

As writers progress from secondary school to higher learning institutions, they are expected to move from general academic writing task to more discipline-specific academic writing (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). More complex academic writing is often associated with elaborated form of discourse. Wright (2008) reports that chemistry lab reports written by students consist of information that is often arranged “into more complex and explicit representations” (p.292). He further explained that the complexity of the reports is achieved with long noun phrases, which contain multiple noun modifiers. Although traditionally, grammatical complexity is often related to embedded clauses (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Chafe, 1982; Hughes, 2005), Wright (2008) reported that there were fewer embedded clauses in the chemistry reports. These findings also concurred with previous and more recent studies by Biber et al. (1999), Biber (2006) and Biber & Gray (2016) whose results show that more advanced academic writing contains more *phrasal elaboration*. The results of the present study also show that advanced writers tend to use more *phrasal elaboration* compared to intermediate writers, especially the *adjectival* and *adverbial prepositional phrases* which were used significantly more to expand sentences and add vivid details. Although *phrasal elaboration* is still used by intermediate

writers, they were rather limited, which could be explained by the higher mean in *finite subordinate clause* used by intermediate writers. Intermediate writers also tend to use *appositive noun phrases* differently than advanced writers. This study found that intermediate writers tend to use nouns and simple noun phrase as *appositives*. Although this trend is expected of second language learners, some advanced writers managed to use more complex appositives: noun phrase with adjectival prepositional phrase in a sentence. This structure could only be found in advanced writing and not in any of the intermediate writing.

In terms of *syntactic construction* in advanced and intermediate writing, both groups used more constructions with *subject + verb* order in their writing, but this is expected as *subject + verb* syntactic pattern in English is common. However, higher frequency of using *adverbials* as sentence opening is seen evident in advanced writing. The results also show statistically significant differences in using *AVS* and *ASV* patterns between the two groups which suggests that advanced writers were more confident in using more non-standard *subject + verb* syntactic patterns to begin their sentences. In second language learning, English sentence construction is taught to learners because it is considered as one of the key elements that learners need to master in reading and writing skills (Hostmeyer, 2016; Su, 2001). However, the form-focused teaching method that has been used in Malaysia (as discussed in Chapter 3) may have contributed to learners being less confident in using more varied syntactical patterns. The

interview data shows how students were only taught to write only to be able to scrape through the writing portion of a standardised examination with more attention given to error correction. Having good grammar was emphasised by teachers so much so that it made students extremely conscious of their errors in writing. The exam-oriented education system in Malaysia may also somehow contribute to teachers and students using learning strategies that do not require them to be analytical and critical (Nambiar et al., 2008). Thus, less effort is put into considering the vast linguistic choice that could be made in writing. It is important to teach students why they should write, rather than just tell them how to. In other words, students need to be taught the different purposes of writing and how different linguistic choice could help with that, but with the current writing pedagogy in Malaysian classrooms, the rhetorical goals of writing seem to be the last thing to be considered.

The overall statistical results show the patterns of difference in syntactic complexity between advanced and intermediate learners are based on several features: *coordinate clause*, *relative clause*, *finite subordinate clause*, *adjectival prepositional phrase*, *adverbial prepositional phrase* and *adverbial sentence opening*. In general, this study seems to support most corpus-based research that look at syntactical elements in order to measure second language learners' writing performance. However, a more detailed analysis of students' essays revealed several key findings that should be considered, which also suggest

syntactic complexity should not only be measured based on the presence of certain linguistic elements. Apart from accuracy and the ability to use varied syntactic elements in their writing, the ability to achieve their rhetorical goals by making the right linguistic choice should also be evaluated.

8.2.1. *Syntactic complexity representing writing quality*

Many corpus-based studies that focus on syntactic complexity or syntactical variation in second language writing have always been form-focused, relying heavily on statistical data to measure second language writing performance (e.g. Ajimer, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Crossley & McNamara, 2014; Lu, 2011; Ortega, 2003). Thus, these studies tend to assume that greater syntactic complexity represents higher writing quality and writer proficiency. There has been very little or no discussion on how certain structures affect complexity and the rhetorical aspects of learners' essays. Furthermore, individual differences or certain syntactic features (e.g. minor sentences) that are not included in the complexity measures should also be considered. Complexity is often portrayed or reported based solely on these assumptions, without considering if the syntactic elements were used effectively by the writers:

- i. length is assumed to signal higher complexity (e.g. greater word, phrase, clause, sentence or text)

- ii. more varied is more complex (e.g. more different types of grammatical forms)
- iii. more (higher frequency) is more complex (e.g. more grammatical derivations, phonemes)
- iv. more embedded is more complex (e.g. more embedded subordinated features)
- v. more frequent or later acquired features are more complex.

In the present research, difference in using certain syntactic structures between the two groups was also analysed. Although advanced writers produced significantly more complex texts (based on the statistical results), this does not conclude that advanced writers necessarily produce more effective, higher quality essays.

In Chapter Five, students' essays were discussed and compared in terms of their frequency information and the syntactic structures of writing. The detailed analysis in this study often reveal that statistical results alone are not an indicator of writing quality, as shown in essay 1 and 2 below. Based on the corpus analysis results, overall, essay 2 is significantly more complex than essay 1, scoring higher mean number for most syntactic structures that were analysed (e.g. sentence length, clause length, finite subordinate clause, adverbial prepositional phrase, et cetera).

Essay 1: intermediate	Essay 2: advanced
<p>It was clear that she did not like the girl that came to the party last night. I saw how she looked at her. Jealousy. Pure jealousy. It was her that seemed to have problems with everyone. I should have known better! Why was I so naïve to think that she would be the perfect match for my brother? My brother. The kindest, most considerate man I've ever known. Oh, what have I done?</p>	<p>The hospital room was cold, the atmosphere damp. The patient who the man attacked began to wake. His family gathered around his bed, hopeful. The mother who has been crying has now calmed down. As the man began to speak, the mother quickly stood up to hold her child's hands. With tears rolling down her cheek, she cried "Who did this to you? Tell me, who?". The nurse who was still in the room signalled the father to calm the mother. Swiftly, he held her shoulders and whisper "Shhh...let him rest".</p>

Table 8.1: Students' essay discussed in chapter 5, sub-section 5.2.2.

Although the statistical results show that essay 2 is indeed more complex than essay 1, detailed analysis showed that complexity did not equate to effectiveness. Although the advanced essay consists longer sentences, the repetitive use of Subject to start the sentences is rather awkward. The repetition somehow makes the sentences rather choppy and the ideas disconnected. On the other hand, although the intermediate essay scored lower in mean sentence length, it may be caused by the use of minor sentences, which makes the writing more effective in comparison to the advanced essay. The intermediate writer successfully used minor sentences to shape and craft his writing. The use of one word 'jealousy' followed by another minor sentence 'pure jealousy' adds

emphasis to what the writer was trying to describe. Minor sentences have never been included in any syntactic complexity measures in previous studies, but after observing its effects on learners' texts, it should then be considered for future research. Furthermore, second language teachers and learners may not be aware of the effect of minor sentences in texts, so it may not be emphasised in second language classrooms.

Previous research on syntactic complexity also tend to treat sample groups as homogeneous without considering the possibility of individual differences among the samples as shown in the examples above. According to Dornyei (2005), these individual differences are also a key theme in Second Language Acquisition research. Durrant and Schmitt (2009) also argue that disregarding individual differences among learners will eventually lead to misleading results as researchers focus on comparing corpora as wholes. While it is undeniable that corpora can provide details of the linguistic patterns developed by second language writers or learners (Adel, 2015; Callies, 2015; Granger, 2012), its frequency information should be treated and reported with more caution. Recently, researchers have also started to argue problems that arise relating to the methodology involving interpreting and comparing information in corpora (Adel, 2015; Gries, 2015; Gilquin & Granger, 2015). Most importantly, corpus studies may overlook limitations of the generalisation of these linguistic data to individuals for informing policy and practice.

Furthermore, there are several key findings that were derived from the analysis of teachers and students' interviews. The most evident and consistently mentioned by both groups of participants relate to the misconception of 'more' or 'longer' equals better. They believe that writing 'longer' essays will somehow help students to achieve better grades. In the examples shown below (Table 8.2) taken from Chapters Six and Seven, length, which is easy to see and understand, is being used simplistically as a proxy for quality. However, there is no discussion of how length may be related to sentence level characteristics, which increase length but most importantly, may also improve essay quality. Some examples taken from students' essay include the expansion of the noun phrase that provide greater descriptive detail and the use of adverbial starts to sentences to foreground information.

Student 1	Student 2	Teacher 1
<p>We need to write an essay that is long and full of interesting ideas. I think I remember our teacher told us that we need to write an essay that is at least two-page long. Then, maybe we can get good grades, if other aspect such as grammar is also good.</p>	<p>Also, our teacher said that we need to write at least two pages long. If you write a really short essay, the chances for you to get an A is very low. So, make sure to write at least two pages long and minimise the mistakes. I always remember that during exams.</p>	<p>I always tell my students to write at least two page long. One page may be too short and may lack of ideas, so it will be better, or safer if they write longer. So, it is important for students to have enough ideas, enough for them to write for two or more pages.</p>

Table 8.2: Teachers' and students' interview data

The interview data also suggest that students tend to rely on teachers' feedback without any accompanying depth of understanding, especially the understanding about writing. Studies by Ferris (1995) and Montgomery and Baker (2007) suggest that learners usually have strong views about the amount and the types of feedback received from their teachers. Thus, from the example above, it is clear that students tend to take teachers' feedback and opinion very seriously, and they may see essay length as one of the important aspects in writing simply because "*my teacher said so*", potentially without being aware of the effects of expansion in their texts. According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) and Hyland and Hyland (2006), because learners are active participants in writing classrooms, they tend to view teachers' feedback on their writing as useful, valuable and helpful regardless if the feedback is actually helping them improve their writing.

Students' and teachers' metalinguistic understanding may also be limited to the idea of length alone, instead of what the expansion of phrases, clauses or sentences can do in their texts. This may also lead to the aforementioned misconception of 'longer' equals better. The nature of teacher-centered lessons in Malaysian classrooms has somehow made learners become concerned with the look of their writing, so pleasing teachers, who are also markers, becomes the main goal of their writing. Writing lengthy essay may result in longer sentences, repetition and redundancy. While longer (or more complex) sentences

can be good at times, they can reduce the effectiveness of a writing. Longer, winding sentences may also lead to more errors and readers tend to lose focus when the idea is not emphasised.

To summarise, although the corpus findings of this research indicate that advanced writers significantly achieved higher mean frequency of most syntactic structures, this statistical result should not be used to conclude that all of the advanced writing is more effective than the intermediate writing. Some advanced writing may have more embedded features or longer sentences, clauses and phrases; however, these features do not always make the writing more effective and some advanced writers were not as successful in achieving their rhetorical goals. On the other hand, some intermediate writers managed to successfully use certain features such as minor sentences, which are not included in any syntactic complexity measures, to shape and craft their writing. Some intermediate essays were also more effective in delivering the message across to their readers. This suggests that having 'more' of certain syntactic features should not be regarded as being of better quality.

8.3. Syntactic complexity and different discourse modes in writing

The second research question investigated the differences in the nature of syntactic constructions in narrative and argumentative essays. Narrative and argumentative essays are two different discourse modes with very different

communicative functions (Grabe, 2002, Paltridge, 2001). This means that writers are required to make decisions on different grammatical options related to the functional purposes to respond to the various demands of different tasks (Schleppegrell, 2004). In contrast to the findings for the first research question, the overall complexity between narrative and argumentative essays shows a significant difference. Overall complexity was measured by computing the average sentence length and the number of clauses divided by the number of sentences. Because of this, argumentative essays tend to score higher means in overall complexity as their communicative function requires writers to present their arguments and display cause-effect relationship which may naturally call higher use of certain syntactic complexity structures that could contribute to longer sentence production. Thus, compared to narrative, argumentative essays have been reported to have longer clauses (Malvern, Richards, Chipere & Duran, 2004) and more complex noun phrases (Ravid & Berman, 2010) – all of which may result in higher means in sentence length and clauses per sentence. The results for clause length in this study were also consistent with previous studies, in which argumentative essays scored significantly higher means in clause length.

The detailed analysis of the essays also revealed that there were fewer minor sentences but more subordinate clauses used in argumentative essays. Since the argumentative task is to discuss if good results in school can guarantee

students' success in the future, writers are required to use causal reasoning that requires juxtaposing the relationship between two or more ideas, in which result in the use of multi-propositional sentences that contain subordination. Overall, the findings support the study by Robinson (2011) who hypothesised the relationship between causal reasoning and syntactic complexity. According to Robinson (2011), syntactic complexity of language production increases with the use of causal reasoning in writing. Although there was only a significant difference in mean clause length between argumentative and narrative essay, overall, the findings of this study support Robinson's (2011) hypothesis concerning with the amount of subordination in writing with different discourse mode.

In terms of phrasal-level measures, the results show that argumentative essays have significantly higher mean in adjectival prepositional phrase and coordinate phrase. The findings on prepositional phrase coincide with Beers and Nagy's (2009) study, who found that there was more clause-lengthening prepositional phrase in argumentative essays compared to narrative essays. Writers may use more adjectival prepositional phrases due to providing additional information and examples when writing their arguments. However, the formal register of the genre requires learners to write their arguments in a more compressed and sophisticated structure, and to achieve this, more noun phrases combined with adjectival prepositional phrases were used by writers, especially of those with

higher level of proficiency. Studies by Lu (2011) and Yoon and Polio (2016) also found that argumentative essays consist of more complex structures especially on phrasal-level measures. Although the present study supports Lu's (2011) and Yoon and Polio's (2016) result, the results on clausal complexity seems to contrast with both of the studies when comparing structures between two different discourse. Narrative essays may not require writers to use as much phrasal elaboration to provide additional information in a concise manner. This can be explained by the higher frequency in appositive noun phrases used in narrative essays. Because narrative essays focus on people, things or events, it may naturally call for writers to use more appositive noun phrases or even relative clauses to provide additional information.

The results for syntactic construction between narrative and argumentative essays show significant mean differences in sentence with adverbial as openings: AVS, ASVA and ASV syntactic patterns. To date, there has not been a study that looked at syntactic patterns across different writing discourse. These results may be significant to the current literature as it can help teachers to understand the effect of using certain syntactic patterns in writing to achieve the different communicative goals of the essay. Evidently, the significant difference in using adverbials in sentence openings between narrative and argumentative may be caused by different communicative or functional requirements of each genre. Furthermore, because argumentative tasks are usually more complex or

difficult compared to narrative, writers may have less confidence in using different syntactic patterns in their writing as they need to think about presenting and communicating their arguments. As narrative tasks are very similar to story-telling (oral communication), there may be more chance for writers to manipulate and shape their text using different variation of syntactic patterns.

Based on overall statistical results, the different patterns in syntactic complexity between narrative and argumentative essays are based on these elements: mean sentence length, sentence complexity, mean clause length, coordinate phrase, adjectival prepositional phrase and adverbial sentence opening. The results contrast to the findings comparing syntactic patterns between different levels of proficiency which do not include any length-based measures. The difference in syntactic patterns between narrative and argumentative essay includes measures that relates to the communicative and functional requirements of the essay; whereas, the difference in syntactic patterns between intermediate and advanced proficiency level includes measures not only related to the communicative requirements of the essay but also the ability of writers to use certain syntactic elements to shape their writing. Although the findings to the second research question may be expected because of different functional goals, the findings somehow help illuminate the syntactic structures that could be regarded as typical characteristics of certain writing discourse. This could help teachers to plan a more effective writing lesson in order to help students achieve

their goals. Instead of the typical 'memorization' method, teachers should help students to understand how different syntactic structures could be used in the attempt to achieve their rhetorical goals.

8.4. Students' syntactical construction and their metalinguistic understanding of syntactical complexity

The third research question sought to explore the relationship between students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity and their writing. In order to answer this question, writing conversations consisting semi-structured interviews and elicitation tasks were conducted with the students. The results were presented in two sections: 1) students' awareness on syntactic elements and 2) students' reflection on sentence variation. Although there were no questions that specifically elicited students' ability in discussing and making linguistic choices for their writing, the pre-determined sets of open questions provided the opportunity for the researcher to further prompt participants' responses in making linguistic choices in writing. The findings to this research question are divided into two sections: Syntactic knowledge and Students' reflections on important aspects in writing.

It is important to highlight that the term metalinguistic 'understanding' and 'knowledge' are used interchangeably in this present research as both terms not only refer to participants' linguistic knowledge but also their ability to discuss and

make linguistic decisions in their writing. The first part of the writing conversation elicited students' syntactic knowledge which explored their ability to explain and identify syntactical concepts and their understanding of sentence construction. Results from the interview show that, when identifying syntactical concepts, students were more familiar with subject and verb elements compared to others such as object, adverbial, complement, phrase and clause. There were also only two students who managed to identify and elicit varied sentence structures that were used in their writing. In the elicitation task, students were asked to identify syntactic elements in sentences that were of varied levels of difficulty (or complexity). It was evident that students were more confident in identifying these elements in easier (less complex) sentences – sentences with the usual subject-verb construction. Interestingly, some students were not able to identify any element beyond the subject-verb construction despite receiving English instruction that is very form-focused.

Similarly, students were less confident in differentiating clauses and phrases in the elicitation task. They often rely on proxy when explaining or discussing what clauses and phrases are. Most of the students had a misconception that clauses and phrases are '*incomplete sentences*', hence contributing to their confusion in differentiating the two elements. Other proxies that were used to describe phrases and clauses include '*short sentences*' and '*sentences that need more words*'. This finding may support the studies by Green and Hecht (1992) and

Sorace (1985) that found students did not necessarily acquire the rules even though they had been taught grammar explicitly. Furthermore, based on the results elicited from teachers' interviews (discussed in 8.4), it may be caused by the lack of instruction and discussion on certain syntactic elements in the writing classroom. According to most students, writing lessons often involve error identifying especially in spelling, vocabulary and the use of tenses. Students reported doing a lot of 'copying' from various sources such as magazines, previous exam papers and essay templates. The reductionist approach used in Malaysian English classrooms to teach writing separates it from other language skills and is extremely teacher centred. This method of teaching also tends to overemphasise identifying and correcting surface errors which eventually robs the opportunity for students to develop their writing skills (Tan, 2011).

Although most students lacked metalinguistic knowledge, some of the participants demonstrated good use of linguistic elements in their writing.

Student 3

However, parents and teachers need to acknowledge the issue of misconception and unnecessary stress among students. Failure in resolving this matter will eventually lead to bigger problems among youth in general. This obsession with grades is also creating unhealthy competition among students and teachers in schools.

Table 8.3: Student's essay discussed in Chapter 5

In the elicitation task, student 3 above was not able to identify elements beyond the subject-verb construction and she received one of the lowest marks. However, her essay was pulled out from the sample so a detailed analysis could be conducted to explore the student's syntactic construction. It was found that the student managed to successfully use several syntactic elements that increases the complexity and sophistication of her essay. Compared to other essays, student 3 demonstrated her ability to write her argument concisely using several embedded features. However, when she was asked to talk about using these embedded features in her writing, she was not able to discuss and explain because she only *"follow[s] what [her] teacher taught in class"* and that she is used to *"reading sample essays that have that kind of structures"*. Although the student managed to produce these structures despite her insufficient verbalisable metalinguistic knowledge, it is important to point out the inevitable process where writers make decisions about their text at multiple levels. These linguistic choices are not only technical choices related to on-the-surface grammatical accuracy; they are important parts of the writing process that help writers shape their ideas to achieve the rhetorical goals (Micciche, 2004). Thus, metalinguistic knowledge allows for discussion and conscious decision-making in the writing process. It is a useful tool for the classroom, allowing discussion to move from form-focused to function and purpose of the writing. Based on the response provided by student 3, it could be suggested that she was able to produce those structures as a result

of the drilling method used by the teacher to encourage accuracy among students.

Another student who did well in the elicitation task were also asked to discuss certain linguistic choices she made in her writing.

Student 4

Rob did not feel like going out. As he sat on his bed, looking out the window, he felt the emptiness creeping slowly into his life. His mind started to drift off to the day he met the love of his life. Love. He never knew what love was before. Not until he met Jo. With his eyes shut, he buried himself further into the comfort of his bed. Ever so faithful, Rob's seven-year-old beagle, waited patiently for him in front of his bedroom door.

Table 8.4: Excerpt from a student's essay

There were a few interesting linguistic structures found in this student's essay. During the semi-structured interview, the student was first asked to identify the structure of the three sentences underlined above. She could only partially identify the sentence "With his eyes shut, he buried himself further into the comfort of his bed". Although she was not able to use grammar terms, she mentioned the reason is so that her essay "doesn't sound monotonous" because her sentences are more varied. It was evident that this student tried to use some grammatical reasoning although she was not able to use any terms in her description. Using the reason "doesn't sound monotonous" somehow shows that

she was trying to achieve her purpose for writing the essay. When she was asked about the minor sentence “love”, she mentioned that she saw this kind of structure being used in many novels, and that her teacher “allows [her] to use it in essays”. Her statement suggests that although this student tried to experiment with different language use in her writing, she made sure to get her teacher’s approval before using it in her essay. Furthermore, the student may lack knowledge and awareness in verb-less or minor sentences, as well as their effects on writing, as she was not sure how to refer to the sentence. This situation could explain or portray most students’ experience in the writing classrooms. Teachers clearly play a major role in students’ writing process as they tend to do as their teacher say – focusing only on certain linguistic or grammar elements in class.

Compared to student 3, student 4 who did better in the elicitation task did try to use grammatical reasoning when discussing her linguistic choice in her writing. This may suggest that if students have more metalinguistic understanding of the relationship between linguistic choice and effect, it may help them in making linguistic decisions that could improve their writing. Although student 3 did use some interesting linguistic features in her writing, she was not able to discuss it and only referred to her teacher and sample essays that were shown in class. Although there has been a great debate on the relationship between explicit and implicit grammar knowledge and language performance, Sorace (1985) and Hu (1999) found that explicit knowledge of particular linguistic structures result in

significantly accurate production of the said structures. However, both studies mentioned that the ability for students to access that knowledge varied according to task demands (error identification, explanation, et cetera). While this result may suggest that linguistic knowledge is important in second language writing, it also suggests that the linguistic decision-making may help students in writing as well. Having linguistic knowledge alone is not enough to facilitate students' learning, it should be used in metalinguistic discussion during writing instruction to help students become aware of the effects of their linguistic choices (Myhill et al., 2016). The example taken from student 3 and student 4 illuminates the importance of having grammar knowledge and using them to foster metalinguistic discussion about writing. Evidently, this notion is not only new in the field of first language classrooms, but it also has not been introduced in the second language classrooms.

When it comes to deciding what is important in writing, most students believe that having perfect grammar will help them to achieve better grades. Interestingly, grammar is one of the aspects that was always highlighted by their teachers – which is why they think that it is the most important element in writing. Most students mentioned about the importance of following what their teacher often says are important in class: grammar, spelling and ideas. This suggests that the writing instruction in these classrooms are extremely teacher-centred and often does not involve a two-way communication between teachers and students. A

study by Hu and Lam (2009) that look at collaborative learning among second language Chinese students revealed their participants' strong preference for teacher feedback because they distrust the accuracy or validity of peer feedback. This study supported the findings on how second language learners are too focused on the accuracy rather than the effectiveness of their essays. Learners should not only be aware of surface-level errors, but teachers need to support them in justifying their own thinking and choices in writing (Memari-Hanjani & Li, 2014).

Students also revealed that they were used to the drilling process in classroom and believe that it helps them to write a 'perfect' essay. For them, a perfect essay (with less or no errors) will definitely be graded with good marks, and this has become their goal in writing. Students were too focused to fulfil teachers' expectations that they lost the chance to develop their writing skills. Most students reported that they often learn from reading sample essays, novels or Reader's Digest – all suggested by their teachers in order to do well in exams. In Malaysia especially, the phenomenon of 'privileging examination' is dominant across the education system (Koo, 2008). Because of the exam-oriented education system, English teachers tend to focus on the teaching of grammar and neglect the communicative aspects – which leads to the method of drilling and teaching grammar and writing in isolation.

Overall, students seem to have insufficient metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding of linguistic form, and the relationship between linguistic choice and effect which result in the inability to identify features beyond the subject-verb elements and using their knowledge to discuss about their linguistic choices in writing. Most students reported learning to write by 'copying' sentences in sample essays, magazines and novels. Students were not encouraged to talk about their writing process but were drilled to identify errors so that they can minimise them in their writing. Students also believe that grammar and spelling are important in writing because their teachers have been highlighting them in classrooms. Thus, students' writing may be influenced by novels, magazines and sample essays – almost none of the students were able to use their metalinguistic understanding to discuss the linguistic choices they made in their writing.

8.5. The relationship between teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical complexity and their judgement of writing quality

The fourth research question investigated how teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity affect their judgement of writing quality. Writing conversations consisting several elicitation tasks and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers. Although the elicitation tasks used were the same as the students' tasks, the set of questions used for the teachers'

interviews was different from the students'. Teachers' ability to hold metalinguistic discussion about writing was also elicited from their responses to the pre-determined set of open questions in the semi-structured interviews. The findings from the teachers' interviews are divided into two sections: 1) teachers' syntactic knowledge and 2) teachers' perception in essay grading.

Similar to students, the results from the elicitation tasks show that teachers also lacked metalinguistic understanding and knowledge about writing. Most teachers were not able to identify features beyond the subject-verb construction. There have been numerous studies that looked at the importance of linguistic knowledge among non-native English teachers (Andrews, 1999; Andrews and McNeill 2005, Shuib, 2009, Tsang 2011, Wach, 2014). A study by Shuib (2009) which investigated the level of grammatical awareness among Malaysian English teachers in primary schools found that the mean score for overall test was only 39.5% which was regarded as very low for teachers. Among the tasks given to teachers in the study, Shuib (2009) reported that teachers scored a mean of 52.9% in error correction. Although the number of teachers who did well in this particular task was not high (mean: 52.9), the task did not present as much difficulty to the teachers – this may explain the interview findings in the present study in which teachers are reported to focus on error correction or identification in their English lessons.

Although the present study did not include error correction in the elicitation task, Shuib (2009) provided metalanguage recognition tasks as well as rules and explanation tasks which are similar to the tasks included in this study with the findings coinciding with one another – that teachers found it hard to explain and recognise certain linguistic features. Andrews (1999) explained that error correction tasks usually pose less challenge because the task primarily tests language proficiency rather than explicit knowledge about language. The low number of correct responses provided by teachers can also be explained by the type of task provided in the elicitation task. As an example, teachers struggled to provide correct answers beyond the subject-verb construction because the task required teachers to identify grammatical functions instead of only grammatical forms of the sentences. The findings seem to support Tsang's (2011) study which reported that teachers found it easier to identify examples of grammatical forms than grammatical functions.

However, despite the lessons being extremely form-focused, teachers are still not confident to discuss many linguistic features, raising the question of how they are using their subject knowledge to teach writing to students. This may also raise the possibility of teachers teaching grammar and writing in isolation. As reported by students, teachers often rely on past-year question papers, sample essays and various resource books, thus limiting the chances of any metalinguistic discussion about writing between teachers and students during writing lessons.

As discussed in 8.3, students' knowledge about writing is very much dependent on their teachers. As the English lessons in Malaysian classrooms are very much teacher-centered that involve chalk-and-talk drilling method (Ambigapathy, 2002), teachers' perceptions of a good essay reflect what students have in their essay. Evidently, most teachers reported that they tend to reward higher grades to a piece of writing that has perfect tenses and less or no errors in spelling. A comparison of this finding to students' writing and what they reported as important elements in their essay seem to correlate. Furthermore, essays that consist of less errors were graded higher than others – regardless if other essays contained other interesting linguistic features.

Essay 1	Essay 2
<p><i>Debts, loans <u>and financial issues</u>. Wedding fees, college fees, thousands of money to be spent but an income so little <u>and a thirsty bank account</u>. What have we become? We were brainwashed to believe that a good examination result is everything. We then work so hard, day <u>and night</u>, forgetting everything <u>and anything</u>, just to get that desirable results.</i></p>	<p><i>Although some students are not interested <u>in scoring their examinations</u>, they are forced to do so to fulfil their parents' expectations. Nowadays, most students are stressful in school <u>because people say that good results will determine one's future</u> but somehow, the reality is that <u>good results do not guarantee success in the future</u>.</i></p>

Table 8.5: Student's essay discussed in Chapter 5

In the examples above, both essays were written by advanced learners; however, essay 2 was graded with a higher mark compared to essay 1 by the same

teacher. When both essays were compared, it seemed that essay 1 has slightly more errors and was written slightly shorter than essay 2. Based on the students' and teachers' interviews, these two aspects are considered important in writing. According to studies by Read, Francis, and Robson (2005) and Ross-Fisher (2005), mechanical aspects of writing, particularly spelling and grammar, have been found to be highly influential factors relating to how an essay is rated. Thus, students who demonstrate better writing mechanics usually tend to receive higher grades compared to students who lack this skill despite their similar attention to content (Bull & Stevens, 1979). Another study by Scannell and Marshall (1966) also supports the findings of the present result – essays with errors such as punctuation, spelling and grammar mistakes usually resulted in lower grades or scores compared to essays free of these mistakes, even when the raters were asked to grade based on content alone. Teachers' perceptions of good writing in this study were mostly influenced by the marking criteria with more focus placed on mechanics of the writing. Although there were several other equally important features in the criteria, the traditional method of error-analysis in teaching writing may have affected the way Malaysian teachers teach and judge writing. Interestingly, despite the heavy attention placed on the form of writing, the teachers were found to have very little confidence in their linguistic knowledge and understanding which raise question with the validity and reliability of teachers' judgement of writing quality. This also may suggest that these teachers

may have less awareness if not at all to the purpose of the writing and the audience aimed for the writing.

When the teacher was asked to justify the grades given to both essays shown above, she reported that Essay 2 '*obviously*' had fewer '*red markings*' compared to Essay 1, in which she confirmed was her first reason for the grades. She then continued to argue that Essay 2 had more complex sentences. She explained that Essay 2 had longer, more complex sentences compared to Essay 1. She was then asked about the minor or verb-less sentences used in Essay 1 – what she thought about them and if they are effective. She admitted that she was not sure what 'minor sentences' meant, but after being shown some examples, she reported that the sentences made the argumentative essay '*sound*' like a narrative and that they may not be appropriate for this type of essay. It is evident that this teacher was unaware of minor sentences or irregular sentences used in writing and how it may be useful for writers to craft their writing when it is used effectively. Furthermore, the teacher was unable to discuss the linguistic choices made by the different writers – only referring to and emphasizing on mechanics of the writing.

However, teachers' perception may have been affected by the assessment criteria used to mark the students' essays. As shown in 4.4.3, it is important to highlight that one of the first points or guidelines in the criteria suggested teachers

to assess students' essays based on impression. Furthermore, the second guideline also emphasised teachers to *"underline for gross or minor errors or put in insertion marks (^) where such errors occur"*, which encouraged teachers to focus on errors, especially grammar or spelling errors. Whereas, the third guideline suggested teachers to *"mark for good vocabulary or expressions by putting a merit tick at the end of such merits"*, which mirrors most of the teachers' responses in the interviews. The criteria for marking the essays only covers features such as language, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, paragraphs, topic and interest. The words used in the criteria mostly describe accuracy: wide and precise, entirely accurate, correct but misspelt, just to name a few. Only the criteria for grade A (with the mark ranging from 44 to 50 over 50) lists *"achieve particular effect"* as one of the criteria for sentence structure. Linguistic effect was not mentioned in any of the other grade criteria for sentence structure as they focused mostly on accuracy.

This may explain why Malaysian English teachers are extremely form-focused as they were trained to do so. However, there may be the need to review the assessment criteria used to mark these essays because of some discrepancies in the criteria itself. While the first guideline encouraged teachers to mark essays based on impression, which can also be categorised under holistic scoring method, the rest of the guidelines emphasised that teachers looked for errors and accuracy. Does this mean that the word 'impression' in the criteria refer to

teachers' impression of accuracy? The holistic scoring method promoted the notion that "writing is a single entity which is best captured by a single scale that integrates the inherent quality of the writing" (Hyland, 2003, p. 227). Furthermore, White (as cited in Salmani, 2014) explains that the holistic scoring method focuses on what the writers "can do well" rather than finding their incompetency and deficiencies in writings. Evidently, based on the interview data, teachers tended to focus more on accuracy rather than effectiveness of the essay. Words that were used in the criteria as description may also affect teachers' judgement of essay quality and teaching method in the classrooms.

Based on the findings from the teachers' interview, it is evident that teachers are more concerned with the mechanics of students' writing, specifically on tenses and spelling. Teachers also tend to associate perfect grammar (perfect tenses) to good essay quality. Similar to students, teachers had more confidence in explaining rules on tenses – present and past tense – and often rely on proxy when discussing other grammar features. Teachers seem to lack the ability to make explicit their knowledge about language for the benefit of learners, which may indicate their lack of metalinguistic understanding. This situation also may suggest that the idea of metalinguistic understanding about writing has not been introduced in the Malaysian classrooms. It is also important to re-evaluate teachers' subject knowledge in writing before the notion of metalinguistic understanding could be introduced in the Malaysian education system. This is

because, both metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding are important to facilitate second language learning, especially in second language writing. However, the current situation suggests that only grammar knowledge is being emphasised in the English classrooms, even then, students and teachers are still lacking grammar knowledge as the findings in the interviews suggested. Most importantly, grammar and writing seem to be taught in isolation and this may deter students' meaning-making skills in writing.

8.6. Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the nature of syntactic constructions in second language learners' writing and explore the range and depth of students' and teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactic complexity. In addition, this study aimed to highlight how metalinguistic understanding affects students' writing and teachers' judgement of writing quality. While the research has revealed the findings on syntactic complexity in line with many previous important corpus-based studies (e.g. Hunt, 1965; Wolf-Quintero et al., 1998; Ortega, 2003; Vaezi & Kafshgar, 2012; Vyatkina, 2012), it has also illuminated an important new insight: Simplistic correlation between syntactical complexity and students' performance or essay quality should be carefully reconsidered. While the importance of previous corpus-based studies cannot be denied especially in the field of linguistics, the present study highlighted how the findings from corpus-

based studies may be used more purposefully specially to inform individuals in the teaching and learning of writing in first or second language learning. The detailed analysis of students' essays has shed light on the importance of individual differences and the effective use of linguistic features to achieve the rhetorical goals in writing. This means that essays that score higher mean for several syntactic complexity measures may not indicate that they are better in quality. Using 'more' of certain linguistic features in writing may make it more 'complex', but it does not determine if the writing is effective.

The interview findings also elicited the common teaching practice shared among English teachers in Malaysian schools. There was a common trend among the teacher participants to emphasise form-focused teaching of writing in their classroom. The teacher participants evidently focused on eliminating errors, especially grammar and spelling errors, through drilling students using decontextualised grammar exercises and error identification. Accuracy was made the goal of writing and efficacy through rhetorical effect – the why of a grammatical choice in writing – was almost non-existent in writing classrooms. The method used by these teachers to teach writing has also indirectly affect students' writing. They tend to focus on meeting teachers' expectation and ignoring other important aspects of writing. The lack of focus on discussing grammatical choice in writing may also hinder students from developing their writing skills as they tend to rely on 'template' or 'model essays'. Despite the form-

focused classroom instruction, metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding in both teachers and students remain relatively low, which then questions teachers' pedagogy in the classrooms and their judgments of writing quality.

The timing of this research is also particularly pertinent. It is important to finally forward the importance of placing greater focus on metalinguistic understanding in second language learning, particularly second language writing. Accuracy has been the focus in measuring second language learners' performance, especially in writing, without addressing the rhetorical effect. Perhaps, by placing greater focus on metalinguistic understanding in writing, syntactical complexity or variety would be used purposefully for rhetorical effect instead of it being used superficially by writers to meet teachers' expectations. Encouraging students to discuss their grammatical choice in the classroom may also help them develop their writing skills to become better writers, as well as to being more critical writers. In today's writing classroom, it seems that learners were trained to only be aware of the surface-level errors, with no support to justify their own thinking and choices in writing.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion and implications

9.1. Introduction

This chapter revisits the aims of the research by summarising the findings that emerged and presenting key issues raised in the data analysis. The research implications and possible directions for future related research will also be outlined.

The present study sought to investigate the syntactic construction of Malaysian secondary school students based on different proficiency levels and genres of writing. In addition, the present study also aimed to explore the relationship between syntactic complexity in writing, and teachers' and learners' metalinguistic understanding of writing. The study aimed to answer the four research questions addressed in this study:

- i. What is the nature of syntactic constructions in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency?
- ii. Is there a difference in the nature of syntactic constructions in narrative and argumentative essays?

iii. How does students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing?

iv. How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their judgments of students' writing quality?

As discussed earlier in previous chapters, the answers to these research questions revealed potentially useful information for multiple stakeholders in the field of education and linguistics. Curriculum and material developers may also use the findings as guidelines on what areas to focus on when they prepare textbooks, modules, lectures and related matters for L2 classrooms, especially writing lessons. The study also highlighted the importance of metalinguistic understanding in the teaching and learning of writing, which may also break the rigid concept of form-focus pedagogy in Malaysian classrooms. The findings of this study will also benefit educators, parents, students and future researchers to understand the current condition of Malaysian learners' writing competence and possible reasons behind the problems of writing among these second language learners.

9.2. Summary of findings

When it comes to measuring syntactic complexity in second language learners' writing, the present study has confirmed earlier work by Wolf-Quintero et al.

(1998), Ortega (2003), Vyatkina (2012) and Vaezi and Kafshgar (2012), just to name a few, which found that syntactic complexity features such as relative clause, finite subordinate clause, adjectival prepositional phrase, adverbial prepositional phrase and adverbial sentence opening may indicate higher level of proficiency among learners. The statistical results also revealed the different linguistic patterns in syntactic complexity between narrative and argumentative essays. Although the findings may be expected because of the different functional goals, it illuminates the structures that could be regarded as typical characteristics of certain writing discourse, which could help teachers to plan a more effective writing lesson in order to help students achieve their goals.

Texts written by more able writers showed consistent pattern of using higher frequency of these features in their writing. However, this study also attempts to apply a more systematic or detailed analysis of learners' writing to challenge the common assumptions in measuring second language performance in writing which is often shared and discussed in most corpus-based studies. One of the most important findings of this study may suggest that syntactic complexity should not only be measured based on the presence of certain linguistic elements, which may question simplistic correlation between syntactical complexity and students' performance or essay quality, often made in previous research. The study also highlighted the importance of being able to make the right linguistic choice to achieve the rhetorical goals in writing. Based on the

interview data, students tend to be dependent on their teachers and their writing may be influenced by their teachers' form-focused teaching. Most of them found it difficult to discuss the linguistic choice made during the writing process.

Teachers' interview data also revealed that despite the form-focused method of teaching writing in their classrooms, these teachers may not have enough metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding of writing. Too much focus is placed on error identification, particularly on tenses and spelling, whereas other equally important elements of writing were almost completely abandoned. Teachers tend to prefer teaching using the drilling method which consist of decontextualised grammar practice and activity. Students tend to be drilled to identify errors in their writing – a method which is believed to help students minimise errors. Teachers also tend to believe that accuracy is an important aspect to consider in determining essay quality. However, based on detailed analysis of students' essays, accuracy and greater syntactic complexity in writing may not necessarily represent the quality and effectiveness of the essay.

9.3. Implications for theory

The research has several important implications that can inform the fields of second language writing, second language acquisition and second language assessment. The study highlights the importance and usefulness of syntactic

complexity measures that have been used in the field of second language to measure second language proficiency and second language writing quality. While previous literature has pointed out the lack of reliability in reporting results which was caused by different measures and vague conceptualisation of syntactic complexity (e.g. Lu, 2011), this study has overcome the problems by outlining and discussing the conceptualisation of syntactic complexity explicitly based on Bulte and Housen's (2012) concept of second language complexity. Methodologically, this study may have provided a useful and effective example to examine syntactic complexity by looking beyond the statistical results. Although previous corpus-based studies have several important contributions in the field of second language writing, this study also attempts to challenge previous researchers' simplistic correlation between syntactical complexity and students' performance or essay quality.

Furthermore, there has been very little discussion on how certain syntactic structures affect complexity and the rhetorical aspects of essays, so teachers especially, may not be able to benefit from the statistical findings from previous corpus-based studies. The data gathered from the interviews furthers our understanding of the important relationship between metalinguistic understanding and writing – how metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding may help improve the quality and effectiveness of writing. Teachers' metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding may also

enable them to function appropriately and effectively in their professional environment while developing their students' understanding of the language (McNamara, 1991). Most importantly, the study highlights the importance of metalinguistic understanding among teachers in shaping their professional capacity to plan for and respond to their learners' language needs (Myhill et al., 2013).

Some longitudinal data could also be collected in order to investigate the development process of learners' writing skills to get a better understanding of how syntactic complexity develops with metalinguistic understanding among certain groups with different levels of proficiency, which could help to explain the developmental process of language progression. Longitudinal research on writing at syntactic level can contribute useful information given the scarcity of such studies in the field of second language learning. Furthermore, future studies could benefit from the findings of the present study by designing 'knowledge about language' to be taught to teachers and students to see the effect this has on the participants, especially on the teaching and learning of writing. Since the concept of metalinguistic understanding is considered very new in second language, it seems to be appropriate and necessary to introduce it. Classroom observations could also be carried out to enhance the findings from the interview data.

9.4. Implications for practice

The results of this study offer several implications that are relevant to practices in teaching and assessing second language writing. The statistical results and detailed analysis of syntactic complexity for different levels of proficiency and modes of writing inform the second language teaching and assessment by providing insights of linguistic features that need to be considered when teaching and assessing writing. Furthermore, the interview data provides further understanding for teachers especially, on how these syntactic structures affect the complexity and the rhetorical aspects of essays. Apart from accuracy, various elements in sentences should also be focused in classrooms: sentence connectors, sentence length and sentence patterns. Teachers and students should also be exposed to other equally important elements in writing, suggesting that the writing assessment in Malaysia may need to be reevaluated. The study also shed light on the potential crisis of competence within the teaching profession, suggesting that a well-developed linguistic knowledge or understanding is essential, especially in the context of Malaysian English instruction where the curriculum emphasises mastering good writing skills.

The teaching of English in the Malaysian classrooms that emphasises rote-learning and the mastery of certain language skills should be re-evaluate. Although it would be challenging for teachers to turn away from standardised

examinations, imagine how much teachers would be able to do if they were given the freedom, good purposes and the right skills to teach in class. Teachers are often pressured to complete the entire English syllabus while trying to focus on preparing the learners for the examinations. These factors may lead to teachers opting for the drilling method for fast results. Although the findings of the present study cannot be generalized as the sole examples of English teaching and assessment in Malaysia, it offers a view into the shortcomings of English instructions in Malaysian schools, especially in terms of teaching writing. The teacher participants in this study also offer narratives that suggest that the teachers in Malaysia may be confined and restricted to lessons that prepare students for the national standardised examinations. The relatively low metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding among teachers also suggests that students cannot begin to improve their writing skills unless teachers are equipped and confident with good linguistic knowledge.

There is also a shared belief among the teachers regarding what is important in writing, and all of them believe that linguistic accuracy should be prioritized in writing. Hence, teachers' personal construct of writing quality may have determined their practice and decision-making in classrooms. It was evident that because of this belief, teachers were more concerned, almost obsessed about getting learners to write error-free essays. As a result, learners in this study also reported sharing similar beliefs with their teachers about what is important in

writing. Their references to what they had been taught in class about good writing mirrors what the teachers reported. All of them seem to be very concerned about meeting teachers' expectation. The learners also seem to think that the drilling method used in classrooms to teach writing is a good way to help them achieve good results. As Wenger (1998) argues, teachers' belief of what matters in the classroom is very likely to influence learners' understanding, suggesting that teachers' preparatory programmes in Malaysia may need to be reviewed. Teachers' lack of metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic understanding showed in this study should not be taken lightly as they may compound learners' language problem. As suggested by Edge (1988), teachers must take on three major roles in the classroom: language user, language analyst and language teacher, thus, in order to achieve professionalism, teachers should not only be proficient in the language but also have sufficient linguistic knowledge (Andrews, 2005).

The findings of the present study could be used to conduct future studies that look at how teachers are trained to teach English, especially writing. Such studies might provide insights into ways to improve teachers' pedagogy of teaching and assessing writing among second language learners. Furthermore, such studies could also break the cycle of using the traditional method of rote-memorization that seems to be the choice of most teachers in Malaysia, given the circumstances they are in. The exam-oriented education system in Malaysia

should be revised, especially for language learning. Although completely abolishing examinations would be impossible, policy makers should start considering limiting the number of times students are assessed to allow more 'real' learning to happen in classrooms. Teachers should not be pressured with endless list of goals in order to achieve their key performance indicator (KPI) so that they will have the opportunity to design more effective lessons for students. Finally, the present study also suggests that teachers may not receive enough instructions in linguistic subject knowledge during their teacher training as most of them are still not confident to discuss them. This suggests the need for future studies on effective instructions to support both teachers and students in developing the ability to discuss language features and their purposes in writing.

9.5. Implications for policy

It was evident that the assessment criteria may have affected teachers' personal construction of writing quality. The standardised assessment criteria used to grade 1119 English paper for the public examination in Malaysia indicates that more weight is being placed on language accuracy rather than other important elements of writing. Furthermore, the criteria specifically suggest that essays should be marked based on impression and that examiners should '*underline errors*' and '*mark for good vocabulary and expressions*' - all of which may lead to rote-learning. Policy makers and curriculum developers should then review how

students are being assessed in Malaysia, especially when it comes to language learning, to ensure learners' language development as well. More detailed and balanced assessment criteria should be developed to replace the current one being used in our public national examinations. According to the Malaysian Blueprint (2013-2025), "the aspiration of the education system is to create students that are at least operationally proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English" (p. 108). However, learners need to be more than "operationally proficient", and the term '*celik ujian*' or "test proficient" promoted by the ministry should be revised.

More focus should also be put into the teachers preparatory programmes in Malaysia. Policy makers should understand that teachers play such an important role in developing students' language skills, so it is important to encourage teachers to push the boundaries beyond test preparatory teaching. Teacher training programmes should be able to prepare them to be more effective in teaching English with a deeper approach rather than only being able to teach English using the traditional method of rote memorisation and repetition evident in the teachers and students' interview data. Although it was not this study's aim to make judgements about teachers' personal teaching pedagogy, it might be argued that teachers could have taught their lessons very differently if they were not constrained to getting their students exam ready. It is also important to note that even if teachers are equipped with enough knowledge and understanding,

as well as different sets of skills to teach, the administration may not have given them the freedom to use their expert skills to the students' best advantage. Therefore, not only they should be provided with training that is parallel to teacher training in developed countries, but also the policy makers, school administrators and curriculum developers in the Malaysian education world will have to work together with the teachers to design an English curriculum that balances examination preparation and deeper approach levels of teaching.

Policy makers and curriculum developers should consider the importance of linguistic knowledge and understanding of how to improve the quality of writing among teachers and students. It may be important to consider training teachers to manage effective linguistic discussion with their students during English language lessons, particularly in writing lessons, which includes the ability to define and explain metalinguistic terminology appropriately. Thus, instead of only listing down the vocabulary and tenses that are expected to be taught to students, the Malaysian national English curriculum should also provide grammar terminology and glossary that teachers and students could use when discussing their writing. A clear rationale and context for using the terminology may help teachers to firmly link grammar to the purpose of improving writing besides providing a more meaningful and effective feedback to students.

9.6. Personal reflections and future directions

The process of preparing and completing the thesis was overall very intriguing and exciting. One part that was challenging during this process was to remain objective while thinking through how this research should be conducted as it will somehow shape the results. According to Nadin & Cassell (2006), there are various elements that could have an impact on the research process, which may lead one to interpret the results in a certain manner. Thus, being an insider, I have tried to use a reflexive stance to comprehend the effects of these factors. While the analysis of the essays was objective and straightforward, the coding process of the interview data was slightly challenging. As argued by Pullen (2006), there is a possible research bias in qualitative research that researchers should be constantly aware of. Thus, as I was conducting a mixed-method research, I continuously questioned my understanding of each phase of the research, from writing the research questions through to writing about the subject matter, to the role I play in the research process and the ethical issues related to the study.

In conducting semi-structured interviews, I made sure that I remained as objective as possible, although during the interviews I realised that many of the situations discussed by the student and teacher participants mirrored the issues I have as a second language educator and learner. I conducted the interview as

an outsider, making sure that the participants explained their claims and responses in details so that there was no room for assumptions that could be easily made, given that I could immediately understand the context of the issues discussed in the interviews. Also, I tried not to lead the participants during the interviews, instead, I probed for more details to ensure in-depth understanding of the issue discussed.

All in all, during this journey, I gained valuable experiences which help me grow as an individual and enhanced my skills as a researcher. There were also setbacks and delays along the way, due to unforeseen circumstances, but they have taught me to be patient and to always be prepared for any possibilities. I have learned that conducting a research was indeed not an easy or quick process; there are no shortcuts.

Finally, the present study has been primarily concerned with the syntactic constructions and metalinguistic understanding of writing among Malaysian secondary school students. I should stress that the findings of this study should not be used to represent all second language learners or teachers. Due to various constraints, the number of essays and participants had to be limited. However, I would be interested to expand two areas in this study: 1) comparison of results between syntactic complexity measured manually and using an automated tool

and 2) classroom observations in both second language classrooms and teacher training classrooms to bridge possible gaps between theory and practice.

Appendix A: Instructions for in-class writing sessions

Before writing.

- 1) Consent forms are passed to students. Each student should get two copies.
- 2) Explain to students regarding the research. This can be done by reading the research synopsis in the consent form.
- 3) At the last page of the consent form, ask students to sign their names and write their email address in the space provided in the form. This should be done for both copies.
- 4) Tell students to write their names and school on the paper (top right of the answer sheet).
- 5) Explain to students that this is not a test (to avoid making students feel stressful). Give students 5 - 10 minutes to read the question and plan/draft their essay. Students are allowed to ask the teacher any questions regarding the essay topic.
- 6) When students are ready, they can start writing.

During writing.

- 1 Minimise intervention. Ask students to write on their own without teacher's or friends' help.
- 2 Give students around 1 hour to write their essay.
- 3 Collect one of the consent forms from the students (these will be passed to me). Students should keep a copy of the consent form.

After writing.

- 1) Remind students to check if they have written their names and school on their answer sheet.
- 2) Remind students to take the consent form with them.
- 3) Mark the essays according to the assessment criteria which is usually used by the school.
- 4) Once they are graded, pass the essays to me, together with the consent forms. I will have to look at the essays and the grading to choose participants for the interview session. Students will be chosen based on their levels of proficiency and the sentence structures used in the essays.
- 5) We shall contact each other to discuss the interview dates.

Appendix B: Essay questions for students

Name: _____

School: _____

**Time suggested: 1 hour
(50 marks)**

Write a composition of about 350 words on the following:

A story ending with: "We had never laughed so much in our lives."

Name: _____

School: _____

**Time suggested: 1 hour
(50 marks)**

Write a composition of about 350 words on the following:

Good results in school do not guarantee success in the future. Discuss.

MARKING SCHEME FOR CONTINUOUS WRITING

(SECTION B)

1. The candidate's response will be assessed based on impression.
2. The examiner shall read and re-read the response carefully and at the same time underline for gross or minor errors or put in insertion marks (^) where such errors occur.
3. The examiner should also mark for good vocabulary or expressions by putting a merit tick at the end of such merits.
4. The examiner shall fit the candidate's response against the most appropriate band having most of the criteria as found in the band. The examiner may have to refer to upper or lower bands to the band already chosen to BEST FIT the student's response to the most appropriate band. The marks from the band decided on for the script also depend on the number of criteria that are found in the script.
5. Justify the band and marks given, if necessary, by commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate's response, using the criteria found in the band.

CONTINUOUS WRITING

(50 Marks)

MARK RANGE	DESCRIPTION OF CRITERIA
A 44 – 50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – entirely accurate, with occasional first draft slips • Sentence structures, varied and sophisticated – achieve particular effect • Vocabulary – wide and precise – shades of meaning • Punctuation and spelling – accurate and helpful • Paragraphs – well-planned, unified and linked • Topic – consistently relevant • Interest – aroused and sustained throughout writing
B 38 – 43	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – accurate, with occasional minor errors or first draft slips • Sentence – varied lengths and types, some complex sentences • Vocabulary – wide and precise – shades of meaning • Punctuation and spelling – nearly always accurate • Paragraphs – evidence of planning, appropriately linked • Writing – relevant, interest aroused and sustained throughout
C 32 – 37	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – largely accurate • Sentences – some variety in length and type, tendency to use one type • Simple structures – error-free, errors with more ambitious structures • Vocabulary – wide enough to convey meaning but lack precision • Punctuation in simple sentences – accurate, with errors in more complex use • Spelling – simple words, correct but misspelt with more sophisticated words • Paragraphs – show unity, at times inappropriately linked • Writing – relevant, lack originality and interest aroused and sustained throughout • Some interest – aroused but not sustained
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language – sufficiently accurate • Patches of clear, accurate language – especially, when simple structures and vocabulary used

<p>26 – 31</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some variety in sentence type and length • Vocabulary – adequate but not developed to show intended precision • Punctuation and spelling – generally correct • Writing – relevant but lacks interest
<p>E 20 - 25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning – never in doubt • Single Word Errors (SWE) – frequent and serious to hamper reading • Sentence structures – accurate but not sustained for long • Vocabulary – limited, too simple or when more ambitious, it's imperfectly understood • Spelling – simple words spelt correctly • Paragraphs – lack unity or haphazardly arranged • Some relevance – topic partially treated • High incidence of linguistic errors
<p>U (i) 14 – 19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning – fairly clear • SWE – very frequent and impedes reading/blurring • Vocabulary – many serious errors of various kinds, mainly single-word type, but could be corrected without rewriting • Sentences – very few are accurate, often simple and repetitive • Punctuation and spelling – sometimes used correctly • Paragraphs – lack unity or no paragraphs at all
<p>U (ii) 8 – 13</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some sense • Multiple Word Errors (MWE) – very frequent, requires rereading before being understood, impedes reading / blurring • Only a few accurate sentences – mostly simple sentences • Length – short
<p>U (iii) 0 – 7</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost entirely impossible to read / blurring • Whole sections make little or no sense at all • Occasional patches of clarity (marks awarded) • Vocabulary – simple words used • “0” to scripts with no sense from beginning till the end



**A STUDY ON SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY AND METALINGUISTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF WRITING AMONG MALAYSIAN UPPER SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS**

STUDENTS' CONSENT FORM

Details of Project

This project aims to study the syntactic constructions that you use in your essay – I am going to look at this in both narrative and argument essays. I will collect samples of writing and then analyse them to find out what syntactical constructions are used. In the interviews, I will be asking what you think about your writing and the choices you make in your writing. This study will help us find ways to improve students' writing and teachers' method of teaching writing.

Interview recordings and transcription

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. A transcription may be provided and you can make any correction to any factual errors. The recordings of interviews will be deleted as soon as authoritative transcripts of the interviews are obtained by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar). The transcripts and any documents that contain interviewees' information will be stored in Udrive, which is password protected and can only be accessed by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar). All data will be destroyed once the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar) is awarded PhD. Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely for future use.

Writing samples

The writing samples will be used to create a corpus of writing which can be analysed to determine its characteristics. It will be retained at the end of the research and may be added in the future to create a larger corpus.

Confidentiality

All data will be held in confidence. Interview tapes and transcripts will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties will not be allowed access to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript so that you can comment on and edit it as you see fit (please give your email below so that I am able to contact you at a later date). The writing samples will form a corpus, which in the future may be accessed by other researchers for analysis purposes, and you have the right to request that your writing sample is not used subsequently. Your data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Data Protection Notice

The information you provide will be used for research purposes and your personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation and the University's notification lodged at the Information Commissioner's Office. Your personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties. The results of the research will be published in anonymised form.

Anonymity

All data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of your name, but we will refer to the group of which you are a member.

Contact Details

For further information about the research /interview data, please contact:

Name: **Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar**

Postal address:

Graduate School of Education, St, Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter,
Devon, EX1 2LU, United Kingdom

Telephone: +44 (0) 7946287419

Email: nz226@exeter.ac.uk

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the University, please contact:

Prof. Debra Myhill,

University of Exeter, Knightley, Streatham Drive, Exeter, EX4 4PD

Telephone: +44 (0) 1392 724767

Email: D.A.Myhill@exeter.ac.uk

Consent

I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project.

I understand that:

- There is no compulsion for me to participate in this research project and, if I do choose to participate, I may withdraw at any stage;
- I have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about me;
- Any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications or academic conference or seminar presentations;
- All information I give will be treated as confidential;
- The researcher(s) will make every effort to preserve my anonymity.

I wish to see a transcript of my interview

I do not want my writing sample to be accessible to other researchers in the future.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

.....

(Printed name of participant)

.....

(Email address of participant if they have requested to view a copy of the interview transcript.)

.....

(Signature of researcher)

(Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar)

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher(s).

Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.



**A STUDY ON SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY AND METALINGUISTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF WRITING AMONG MALAYSIAN UPPER SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS**

TEACHERS' CONSENT FORM

Details of Project

The present study aims to explore the nature of syntactic complexity of writing in Malaysian secondary school students' essays. This study also aims to investigate how students' and teachers' metalinguistic understanding affect students' writing and teachers' judgment of writing quality. Two types of data will be collected for the study, which are students' essays and semi-structured interviews with teacher and student participants. There will be a total of 120 students' essays and 12 semi-structured interviews to be collected from three secondary schools around the state of Selangor. Only students with lower-intermediate and higher level of English proficiency are chosen as participants, whereas all English teachers from all three selected schools are included as participants in this study. The findings of this study may provide a more in-depth understanding of the current issue in writing among Malaysians as it will not only comprise statistical findings, but it will

also include in-depth explanation from both students and teachers regarding the problems that they face in writing.

Contact Details

For further information about the research or your interview data, please contact:

Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar,

Graduate School of Education, Exeter University, Devon UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 7946287419, nz226@exeter.ac.uk

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the University, please contact:

Prof. Debra Myhill,

Graduate School of Education, Exeter University, Devon, UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 1392 724767, D.A.Myhill@exeter.ac.uk

Confidentiality

Interview tapes and transcripts will be held in confidence. They will not be used other than for the purposes described, and third parties will not be allowed access

to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript so that you can comment on and edit it as you see fit (please give your email below). Your data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Anonymity

Interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of your name, but we will refer to the group of which you are a member.

Consent

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the interviewers.

TICK HERE:

DATE.....

Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data

Name of interviewee:.....

Signature:

Email/phone:.....

Signature of researcher.....

2 copies to be signed by both interviewee and researcher, one kept by each

Appendix F: Essay analysis coding frame

CODING FRAME FOR 200 WORD SAMPLE: SENTENCE ANALYSIS				
UNIQUE IDENTIFIER				
Feature	No.		Examples	
Number of words				
Number of sentences				
Number of clauses				
Subordination				
Number of dependent clauses				
Coordination				
Number of coordinate phrases				
Number of coordinate clauses				
Connectors				
Number of causal connectives				
Number of logical connectives				
Number of temporal connectives				
Number of contrastive connectives				
Number of additive connectives				
Phrasal				
Clausal post-modifiers				
i) Relative clause				
ii) -ing clause				
iii) -ed clause				
iv) -to clause				
Phrasal post-modifiers				
i) Prepositional phrase				
ii) Appositive noun phrase				
Number of adverbial phrase				
Clause patterns				

S + V		
S + V + O		
S + V + C		
S + V + A		
S + V + O + O		
S + V + O + C		
S + V + O + A		
S + V + C + A		
A + V + S		
A + S + V + A		
A + S + V		
A + S + V + O		
Other comments:		

Appendix G: Letter of approval to conduct research in Malaysia



BAHAGIAN PENGURUSAN SEKOLAH BERASRAMA PENUH
DAN SEKOLAH KECEMERLANGAN
(Fully Residential And Excellent Schools Management Division)
KEMENTERIAN PENDIDIKAN MALAYSIA
(Ministry of Education Malaysia)
ARAS 3, BLOK 2251, JALAN USAHAWAN 1,
63000 CYBERJAYA, SELANGOR.



KEMENTERIAN
PENDIDIKAN
MALAYSIA

Telefon : 603-8321 7400 (Talian Umum)
Faks : 603-8321 7401 / 7402 / 7403
Laman Web : <http://www.moe.gov.my/>

"MALAYSIA, RAKYAT DIDAHULUKAN, PENCAPAIAN DIUTAMAKAN"

Ruj. Kami : KPM.600-3/2/3 JLD50(71)

Tarikh : 27 Julai 2017

Nur Najla binti Zainal Anuar
No. 1, Jalan Impian Murni 1/1
Saujana Impian
43000 KAJANG
SELANGOR DARUL EHSAN

Tuan,

**KEBENARAN MENJALANKAN KAJIAN DI SEKOLAH-SEKOLAH
BERASRAMA PENUH**

Dengan hormatnya perkara yang tersebut di atas dirujuk. Surat tuan bertarikh 17 Julai 2017 dan surat kelulusan Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia bernombor rujukan KPM.600-3/2/3 Jld.45(71) bertarikh 15 Mei 2017 adalah berkaitan.

2. Bahagian Pengurusan Sekolah Berasrama Penuh dan Sekolah Kecemerlangan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM) mengambil maklum dan tiada halangan kepada pihak tuan untuk menjalankan kajian penyelidikan yang bertajuk "*Syntactic Complexity and Sophistication in Writing among Secondary School Students in Malaysia*" bagi guru-guru mata pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris dan murid-murid Tingkatan Empat di Sekolah Berasrama Penuh negeri Selangor.

3. Walau bagaimanapun, pihak tuan perlu berurusan dengan pihak pentadbiran sekolah untuk mendapatkan kebenaran sekiranya ingin melaksanakan sebarang aktiviti bagi mendapatkan data maklumat yang berkaitan dengan penyelidikan tersebut. Untuk makluman tuan juga, pihak KPM sentiasa berusaha Melindungi Masa Instruksional (MMI) dan mencadangkan supaya pelibatan guru serta murid diadakan di luar waktu pengajaran dan pembelajaran (PdP) agar tidak menjejaskan proses dan perjalanan PdP seperti yang telah dijadualkan.

Sekian, terima kasih.

"BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA"

Saya yang menurut perintah,

(DATO' HAJAH RASHIDAH BINTI MD ARIF)
Bahagian Pengurusan
Sekolah Berasrama Penuh dan Sekolah Kecemerlangan
b.p Ketua Setiausaha
Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia



UNIT PERANCANG EKONOMI
Jabatan Perdana Menteri
Blok B5 & B6
Pusat Pentadbiran Kerajaan Persekutuan
62502 PUTRAJAYA
MALAYSIA

Tel : 603-8000 8000
Laman web : www.epu.gov.my

Ruj. Tuan:
Your Ref.:

Ruj. Kami: UPE 40/200/19/3434
Our Ref.: (9)

Tarikh: 30 May 2017
Date:

Ms. Nur Najla binti Zainal Anuar
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Jalan UPM, 43400 Serdang
Selangor.
Email : najlazainal16@gmail.com

APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA

With reference to your application, I am pleased to inform that your application to conduct research in Malaysia has been approved by the **Research Promotion and Co-ordination Committee, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department**. The details of the approval are as follows:

Researcher's name : **NUR NAJLA BINTI ZAINAL ANUAR**

Passport No./ I.C No : **860916-56-6144**

Nationality : **MALAYSIAN**

Title of Research : **"A STUDY ON SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY AND SOPHISTICATION OF WRITING AMONG MALAYSIAN UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS"**

Period of Research Approved : **4 years and 4 months (30.5.2017-20.9.2021)**

2. Please take note that the study should avoid sensitive issues pertaining to local values and norms as well as political elements. At all time, please adhere to the conditions stated by the code of conduct for researchers as attached.

Appendix H: Researcher Pass



Text analysis guidance

Before the essays were analysed using the coding frame, the relevant units were first identified in each text. A text analysis guidance was used for this purpose in order to avoid inconsistencies.

1. Identifying 300 words sample

Each text will be analysed based on 300 words. To determine the start of the 300 words, analysis will begin from the first sentence after the 30th word of the text. To be clear, a word is indicated by a space before and after. If the writer's partition of word is wrong, e.g. *bed room*, the word will still be counted as two words because of the space in between.

Some texts may be less than 300 words when analysis starts after the 30th word. In this case, 300 words are counted back from the end of the text, and analysis

starts at the beginning of a sentence. For texts that are less than 300 words, the whole text will be analysed but a note is necessary to address this.

2. Number of words

Wrongly-spelled words must also be counted. The same goes to words that are not actual words (not in the English dictionary) and also Malay terms. However, words that are crossed or cancelled by the writer should not be counted. Only count words that are within the 300 word boundary.

3. Number of sentences

A sentence is a group of words punctuated with an end-of-sentence punctuation mark such as a period, exclamation mark, question mark or closing quotation mark. In the case of sentence fragments punctuated as complete sentences, they are considered as sentences as well. Only whole sentences are counted. Incomplete sentences affected by the 300-word count should not be counted. Minor sentences or verb-less sentences should also be counted (e.g. *jealousy!*, *Debts, loans and financial issues.*). However, minor sentence that seems to be

an error rather than for effect should not be counted and this should be noted in the coding sheet.

4. Number of clauses

Both finite and non-finite clauses should be counted. Clauses are identified as structures with verb(s) which are marked by subject(s):

She eats apples = 1 subject, 1 verb, 1 clause

She likes eating apples = 1 subject, 2 verbs, 2 clauses

She ate the apple and she liked it = 2 subjects, 2 verbs, 2 clauses

She ate the fruits and she liked the apples but she hated the peaches = 3 subjects, 3 verbs, 3 clauses

5. Mean length of sentences

To compute the score of mean length of sentences, count the total number of words analysed in the text divided by the total number of sentences analysed in the text.

6. Number of finite subordinate clauses

Finite subordinate clause is identified as a subordinate clause with a finite verb and a connective conjunction:

While she was shopping, a man stole her purse = 1 finite subordinate clause

She was angry because her purse was stolen = 1 finite subordinate clause

She was angry because her purse and phone were stolen = 2 finite subordinate clause

Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She was angry because her purse/ 300 words was stolen = 1 finite subordinate clause

She was angry/ 300 words because her purse was stolen = 0 subordinate clause

7. Number of coordinate phrases

First of all, a phrase is identified as a group of words that does not contain a subject that is marked by a verb. A coordinate phrase is a phrase that is linked by coordinate conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet), this includes coordinate adjective, adverb, noun and verb phrases:

She likes apples and oranges = 1 coordinate phrase

She likes apples and oranges but hates peaches and grapes = 2 coordinate phrases

Her mother and sister like apples and oranges but hate peaches and grapes = 2 coordinate phrases

Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She likes apples and oranges = 1 coordinate phrase

She likes apples and oranges but hates peaches/ 300 words and grapes
= 1 coordinate phrase

8. Number of coordinate clause

Clauses are identified as structures with verb(s) which are marked with subject(s). A coordinate clause is a clause that is linked with the previous one by coordinate conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet):

She likes apples and she likes to share them = 1 coordinate clause

She just bought the apples but she would not share them for she loves them so much = 2 coordinate clauses.

Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She likes apples and she/ 300 words likes to share them = 1 coordinate clause

She likes apples/ 300 words and she likes to share them = 0 coordinate clause

She just bought the apples but she would not share them/ 300 words for she loves them so much = 1 coordinate clause

If a comma or semi-colon are used in the sentence, they should also be counted as coordinators:

She likes apples, she likes to share them = 1 coordinate clause

She likes apples; she likes to share them = 1 coordinate clause

She dropped by her office, picked up some files, drove to the mall and met her friend. = 3 coordinate clause

9. Number of non-finite clauses (ed-, ing- and to- clause)

A non-finite clause is identified as a clause that consists a secondary verb which is not inflected by number, person or tense. In this study, a non-finite clause is a dependent clause which may serve as a subject, verb complement and prepositional complement:

Discussing in an examination is prohibited = non-finite as subject

She loves to discuss current issues with her classmates = non-finite as verb complement

She is interested in discussing the answers = non-finite as prepositional complement

Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She loves to discuss/ 300 words current issues with her classmates = 1 non-finite clause

She is interested/ 300 words in discussing the answers = 0 non-finite clause

10. Number of relative clause

A relative clause is identified as a finite subordinate clause that describes or modifies a noun using a relative pronoun (e.g. who, that, which):

She waved to the man who was driving a red car

The mansion, which was owned by the Fosters, was enormous

Zero 'that' must also be counted. The relative pronoun 'that' is sometimes omitted from a sentence:

This was the car she wanted

The relative pronoun 'that' is omitted from the sentence above; it could be placed after the word 'car' – This was the car that she wanted.

Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She waved to the man who/ 300 words was driving a red car = 1 relative clause

She waved to the man/ 300 words who was driving a red car = 0 relative clause

11. Number of adjectival prepositional phrase

An adjectival prepositional phrase is used to modify a noun or pronoun using a preposition (e.g. for, with, in, on, et cetera). Adjectival prepositional phrase comes after the noun or pronoun that it modifies:

The windows in the master bedroom needs to be cleaned = 1 adjectival prepositional phrase

The shrubs behind the house and near the gate needs trimming = 2 adjectival prepositional phrases

The number of occurrences must be counted within the 300-word limit. Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

The windows in/ 300 words the master bedroom needs to be cleaned = 1 adjectival prepositional phrase

The shrubs behind the house/ 300 words and near the gate needs trimming = 1 adjectival prepositional phrase

12. Number of adverbial prepositional phrase

An adverbial prepositional phrase is used to modify the verb using a preposition.

An adverbial prepositional phrase is usually placed after the verb, but it can also be moved away from the verb:

She was sitting near the window = 1 adverbial prepositional phrase

She placed the jar on the table = 1 adverbial prepositional phrase

She placed the jar on the table and the box in the cupboard = 2 adverbial prepositional phrases

Also, the number of occurrences must be counted within the 300-word limit. Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure is within the 300th word boundary:

She was waiting near/ 300 words the window = 1 adverbial prepositional phrase

She placed the jar on the table/ 300 words and the box in the cupboard =
1 adverbial prepositional phrase

13. Number or appositive noun phrase

An appositive can be a noun or noun phrase that renames the noun that comes before or after. Count the occurrences within the 300-word limit. Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure starts within the 300th word boundary:

Mimi, the prettiest girl in the class, invited him to the party = 1 appositive

The prettiest girl in class, Mimi invited him to the party = 1 appositive

Mimi, the prettiest girl in class/ 300 words invited him to the party = 1
appositive

Mimi/ 300 words the prettiest girl in class, invited him to the party = no
appositive

14. Mean length of clause

To compute the score for mean length of clause, count the total number of words analysed in the text divided by the total number of clauses analysed in the text.

15. Clause patterns

When analysing the first text, each of the syntactic structure used in the essay must be listed in the coding frame. From then on, each essay will be coded against this list. If there is a new structure found in any of the essay during the coding process, the new structure must be added to the existing list. Count the occurrences of the listed structures within the 300-word limit. Any incomplete sentences caused by the 300th word boundary should still be analysed as long as the unit that marks the structure starts within the 300th word boundary:

She likes apples/ 300 words = SVO

She/ 300 words likes apples = no structure

She likes apples/ 300 words and oranges = SVO

Although she likes apples/ 300 words she dislikes apple juice = no
structure

Appendix J: Letter to conduct research

Daripada:-

13 Julai 2017

Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar
2 Codrington Street,
EX1 2BU
Exeter, Devon
United Kingdom

Kepada:-

Puan Norhairin Binti Othman
Penolong Pengarah Kanan
Unit Dasar dan Pengurusan Kualiti,
Bah. Pengurusan Sekolah Berasrama Penuh & Sekolah
Kecemerlangan,
Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM),
Aras 3, Blok 2251, Jalan Usahawan 1,
63000 Cyberjaya, Selangor.

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ

Puan,

PERMOHONAN UNTUK MENJALANKAN KAJIAN DI SEKOLAH-SEKOLAH BERASRAMA PENUH SELANGOR

Dengan hormatnya, saya merujuk perkara di atas berhubung permohonan untuk menjalankan kajian di empat buah sekolah sekitar negeri Selangor.

2) Saya, Nur Najla binti Zainal Anuar, ingin membuat permohonan untuk menjalankan kajian di sekolah berikut:

- i) Sekolah Seri Puteri, Cyberjaya
- ii) Sekolah Menengah Agama Persekutuan, Kajang
- iii) Kolej Islam Sultan Alam Shah, Klang
- iv) SBPI, Gombak

3) Kajian saya yang bertajuk 'Syntactic Complexity and Sophistication in Writing among Secondary School Students in Malaysia' bertujuan untuk mengkaji masalah syntax Bahasa Inggeris dalam penulisan pelajar tingkatan 4. Ia juga mengkaji hubungan di antara pengetahuan syntax Bahasa Inggeris guru dan murid dengan hasil penulisan Bahasa Inggeris murid.

4) Oleh itu, saya memerlukan penulisan atau karangan Bahasa Inggeris murid- murid tingkatan 4 dari sekolah- sekolah yang disebut di atas sebagai data kajian saya. Saya juga perlu menemubual 8 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris dan 12 orang murid tingkatan 4 dari sekolah terbabit. Temubual akan di jalan kan di luar waktu pembelajaran agar sesi pembelajaran tidak di ganggu. Selain itu, temubual akan di rekod menggunakan alat rakam suara untuk dijadikan data kajian ini.

5) Sehubungan itu, saya berharap agar pihak tuan dapat meluluskan permohonan saya dan memaklumkan pihak Pejabat- Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah dan sekolah-sekolah yang terlibat. Saya mohon agar pihak tuan dapat menghantar surat kebenaran menjalan kajian kepada alamat saya di Malaysia:

Nur Najla binti Zainal Anuar
No. 1, Jalan Impian Murni 1/1,
Saujana Impian,
43000 Kajang
Selangor D.E

6) Saya juga lampirkan surat- surat kelulusan dan pengesahan daripada pihak Unit Perancang Ekonomi dan Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia yang telah memberi kebenaran untuk saya menjalankan kajian ini. Selain itu, saya lampirkan pas kajian yang diberi oleh Unit Perancang Ekonomi.

7) Akhir sekali, segala bantuan dari pihak tuan amatlah saya hargai dan di dahulukan dengan ucapan terima kasih. Sekian.

Yang benar,

Nur Najla Zainal Anuar
No. K.P.: 860916-56-6144

Salinan kepada:-

1.

2. Dato' Hajah Rashidah Binti Md Arif

Ketua Jabatan – Bah. Pengurusan Sekolah Berasrama Penuh
& Sekolah Kecemerlangan
Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM)
Aras 3, Blok 2251, Jalan Usahawan 1,
63000 Cyberjaya, Selangor

rashidah.mdarif@moe.gov.my

Appendix K: Ethical approval application form



Ref (for office use only)

D/16/17/42

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

When completing this form please remember that the purpose of the document is to clearly explain the ethical considerations of the research being undertaken. As a generic form it has been constructed to cover a wide-range of different projects so some sections may not seem relevant to you. Please include the information which addresses any ethical considerations for your particular project which will be needed by the SSIS Ethics Committee to approve your proposal.

Guidance on all aspects of the SSIS Ethics application process can be found on the SSIS intranet:
Staff: <https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/research/researchenvironmentandpolicies/ethics/>
Students: <http://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/student/postgraduateresearch/ethicsapprovalforyourresearch/>

All staff and students within SSIS should use this form to apply for ethical approval and then send it to one of the following email addresses:

ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk This email should be used by staff and students in Egenis, the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, Law, Politics, the Strategy & Security Institute, and Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology.

ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk This email should be used by staff and students in the Graduate School of Education.

Applicant details	
Name	Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar
Department	Graduate School of Education
UoE email address	nz226@exeter.ac.uk

Duration for which permission is required		
You should request approval for the entire period of your research activity. The start date should be at least one month from the date that you submit this form. Students should use the anticipated date of completion of their course as the end date of their work. Please note that <u>retrospective ethical approval will never be given.</u>		
Start date:10/07/2017	End date:30/09/2020	Date submitted:19/05/2017

Students only	
All students must discuss their research intentions with their supervisor/tutor prior to submitting an application for ethical approval. The discussion may be face to face or via email.	
Prior to submitting your application in its final form to the SSIS Ethics Committee it should be approved by your first and second supervisor / dissertation supervisor/tutor. You should submit evidence of their approval with your application, e.g. a copy of their email approval.	
Student number	650018361
Programme of study	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) If you selected 'other' from the list above please name your programme here
Name of Supervisor(s)/tutors	1) Prof. Debra Myhill 2) Dr. Ruth Newman

c:\Users\nts202\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.Outlook\7FPH6QFY\NajlaZainalEthics.docx

Dissertation Tutor	
Have you attended any ethics training that is available to students?	Yes, I have taken part in ethics training at the University of Exeter For example, i) the Research Integrity Ethics and Governance workshop: http://as.exeter.ac.uk/rdp/postgraduateresearchers ii) Ethics training received on Masters courses If yes, please specify and give the date of the training: Ethics training received on Master courses 01/12/2015

Certification for all submissions

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given in this application and that I undertake in my research to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research. I confirm that if my research should change radically I will complete a further ethics proposal form.

Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar

Double click this box to confirm certification

Submission of this ethics proposal form confirms your acceptance of the above.

TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT

A Study on Syntactic Complexity and Sophistication of Writing among Malaysian Upper Secondary School Students

ETHICAL REVIEW BY AN EXTERNAL COMMITTEE

No, my research is not funded by, or doesn't use data from, either the NHS or Ministry of Defence.

If you selected yes from the list above you should apply for ethics approval from the appropriate organisation (the NHS Health Research Authority or the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee). You do not need to complete this form, but you must inform the [Ethics Secretary](#) of your project and your submission to an external committee.

MENTAL CAPACITY ACT 2005

No, my project does not involve participants aged 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent (e.g. people with learning disabilities)

If you selected yes from the list above you should apply for ethics approval from the NHS Health Research Authority. You do not need to complete this form, but you must inform the [Ethics Secretary](#) of your project and your submission to an external committee.

SYNOPSIS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Maximum of 750 words.

Research on writing in Malaysia has been focused on error analysis for quite some time. Despite the findings of previous error analysis studies that report on possible ways to minimize errors in L2 writing, the quality of writing among L2 learners in Malaysia continues to deteriorate. This is because error analysis research tends to focus more on students with lower proficiency hence a more capable student is left without any idea or suggestion on how to improve their writing. Also, less focus was positioned on L2 secondary school students and their writing development throughout the years of learning English, which may help understand the root of the bigger problem plaguing our L2 learners of English in Malaysia.

Thus, instead of focusing on error analysis, this study aims to investigate second language

learners' syntactic complexity and sophistication of writing, with special reference to Malaysian upper secondary school learners of English. Therefore, the present study is particularly relevant and timely as it will not only look at second language learners' syntactic constructions in their writing, but also it will consider the influences that may affect how they produce those constructions. This is so that better understandings can be achieved for questions that relate to the relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality or the influence of proficiency and genre to syntactic complexity and sophistication, especially in the field of L2 writing in the Malaysian context, which were not given much attention in previous literature.

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of syntactic constructions (complexity and sophistication) in continuous writing tasks produced by Malaysian upper secondary school students with different L2 proficiency?
2. Is there a difference in the nature of syntactic constructions (complexity and sophistication) in narrative and argumentative essays?
3. How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affects their judgments of students' writing quality?
4. How does students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing?

The research will involve empirical elements to answer these questions:

A. Interviews with English teachers in the selected schools

English teachers in Malaysia have always been expected to follow the English syllabus provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia and this has somehow impacted the way English is taught to students. English lessons often involve one-way communication and students are very dependent on teachers and textbooks. Writing is often taught based on exam rubrics, which may affect students' learning and production of essays. In order to investigate if these factors affect the quality of students' writing and teachers' judgments of writing quality, it is crucial to talk directly to them, accompanied with graded students' essays.

B. Interviews with students from selected schools

Students in Malaysia often aim to do well in exams as exam results play an important role in the university application process. Also, it has been a norm that every child in Malaysia to do well in exams in order to be considered successful. Thus, lessons in classrooms are often very exam-oriented. Writing is taught based on exam criteria or rubric and this some how affect the way students learn and produce their essays. Thus, interviews with students will be conducted to see how these factors affect their syntactic construction in their writing.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

I intend to conduct my research in my home country, Malaysia. Interviews will be conducted with teachers and students from selected schools around the state of Selangor. A research pass is needed before a researcher can conduct any study in Malaysia. Hence, I have applied for a research pass and it will be collected once I am in Malaysia to start my research. I will comply with the Malaysian law of conducting research. Prior to applying for the research pass, I have read and agreed (signed) to all the rules of conducting a research in Malaysia. I have also informed the Ministry of Education about the selected schools and they have approved my application to conduct a study in all four schools. As soon as I arrive in Malaysia, I will have to report myself at the Ministry of Education and Malaysia Economy Planning Unit and they will issue a research pass for me to continue my research in the schools selected

The following sections require an assessment of possible ethical consideration in your research project. If particular sections do not seem relevant to your project please indicate this and clarify why.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research will consist of:

Collection of essay samples from student participants
Semi-structured interviews with English teachers
Semi-structured interviews with secondary school students

Characteristics of sample

English essays will be collected from 120 students with lower-intermediate and higher-intermediate proficiency levels. Students are aged between 15-16 years old (form four) from the four selected high school. Essays consist of narrative and argumentative essays.

I aim to interview eight English teachers and 12 students from four selected schools. The schools are selected based on students' overall English language results, since the study focuses on lower-intermediate and higher-intermediate students only. Students' English language proficiency levels are determined by their English language results from a national examination that they have done the previous year. Teachers that will be interviewed must be the teachers who are teaching the student participants involved in the research.

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, English essay samples from 120 student participants will be collected. I intend to analyse students' syntactic construction based on their essays. The essays consist of narrative and argumentative English essays.

PARTICIPANTS

The writing samples will be taken from 120 participants, aged 15-16 years. I intend to interview 12 student participants, aged 15-16 years and 8 English teachers. I plan to offer some book vouchers to both student and teacher participants as incentive to take part in the interviews. The vouchers can be used in most bookshops in Malaysia.

THE VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION

With both the writing sample and the interview sample, I will ensure voluntary participation by seeking informed consent to participate. The consent form will inform them of their right to withdraw, and this will be reiterated orally at the start of interviews.

At age 15-16, the students are on the boundary of ethical requirements for parental consent. I do not intend to seek parental consent because I feel these students are able to make their own decisions, following the Gillick principle. The level of participation required is not too demanding nor does it put them at any risk. I will, however, be particular attentive to ensuring they understand what they are consenting to (see section below)

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS

N/A

THE INFORMED NATURE OF PARTICIPATION

I attach the consent forms that will be given to the student and teacher participants. The consent form includes information about my study. I also plan to explain about the research to the participants before beginning the interviews. If participants have any questions before or after the interview, I will answer them.

ASSESSMENT OF POSSIBLE HARM

Interviews with students and teachers

The possibility of harm from participation in this study is low. In the interviews, I will elicit knowledge about syntactic construction using type of sentence identification. Apart from that, I will also ask teachers to judge the quality of students' essays based on some marked essays. Their knowledge about the marking rubric will also be elicited during the interview. As for the students, questions about how their teachers' method of teaching and judgement of writing quality affect their way of writing will be asked.

The interviewees will be promised anonymity and confidentiality. Numbers as reference will be used, as their names will not be revealed in the transcription. Any information that might reveal the identity of the interviewee will be omitted.

Interviews with students and teachers will be conducted separately. Students might be worried having to talk about their teachers, but I will assure that their identity will not be revealed and that whatever that has been discussed will be confidential and can only be seen by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar).

DATA PROTECTION AND STORAGE

In the interview, participants will be numbered, as their names will not be revealed. The real names of the participants and the numbers used as their reference will be recorded and kept in a password protected document and stored in my Exeter Udrive, which is also password protected. I will make sure that these documents are only stored in my Udrive and not in any personal computers or flash drive.

My consent form will also include a written privacy notice:

1. The interview will be recorded and transcribed.
2. Transcribed interview can be provided and correction can be made to any factual errors.
3. The recordings of interviews will be deleted as soon as authoritative transcripts of the interviews obtained by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar).
4. The transcripts and any documents that contain interviewees' information will be stored in Udrive, which is password protected and can be only accessed by the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar).
5. All data will be destroyed once the researcher (Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar) is awarded PhD.
6. Anonymised data will be stored indefinitely for future use.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

N/A

USER ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

If participants require a copy of the interview transcript, I will provide a copy of the transcript and correction to any factual errors can be made by the participants. The participants will be provided with the summary of key findings once the research is completed.

Appendix L: Certificate of Ethical Approval



GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

St Luke's Campus
Heavitree Road
Exeter UK, EX1 2LU

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/>

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Title of Project: A Study on Syntactic Complexity and Sophistication of Writing among Malaysian Upper Secondary School Students

Researcher(s) name: Nur Najla Binti Zainal Anuar

Supervisor(s): Debra Myhill
Ruth Newman

This project has been approved for the period

From: 10/07/2017
To: 30/09/2020

Ethics Committee approval reference:

D/16/17/42

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Durrant", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Signature:
(Dr Philip Durrant, Graduate School of Education Ethics Officer)

Date: 25/05/2017



RQ4: How does students' metalinguistic understanding of syntactical construction affect their writing?

Writing conversation (Student)

Background

Age:

Total number of years learning English:

First language:

English results for UPSR/PMR:

How often do you use English outside of the classroom? (Please check only ONE)

_____ Never

_____ Almost never

_____ A few times a week

_____ At least once every day

_____ All the time

Questions on the Assessment of Grammar

Thank you very much for taking the time today for this interview. I need your help in understanding how the assessment affect the way you write. When your teacher assesses your essays, he/she uses an evaluation rubric. The following questions all refer to this evaluation rubric.

- 1) What do you think your teacher looks for in your essays when he/she assesses it?

- 2) Based on the assessment criteria, could you explain to me what you understand about varied sentence structures?

- 3) Could you show me an example of varied sentence structures from your essay? (prompt if varied sentence structure has ever been discussed in classroom)

- 4) Could you show me an example of a simple structure sentence used without error in this paragraph? (prompt for minor sentences if needed)

- 5) Could you explain to me what a clause and a phrase are? (prompt for examples if needed)

- 6) Could you identify each group of words below as a clause (C) or a phrase (P)?

___ on the street corner beside the mailbox

___ after our visit to the zoo

___ before the television show starts

___ during the long, boring game

___ now that you have arrived

___ underneath the seat in front of you

7) Could you identify the structure (Subject, Verb, Object, Complement, Adverbial) in the sentences below?

___ The cat is watching me with sad droopy eyes.

___ In the woods lurked a strange shadow.

___ The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.

___ Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.

___ Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.

8) Do you understand why you receive a particular grade for grammar on your essays?

___ Yes ___ No ___ don't know

Comments:

9) What do you focus on when you are writing an English essay in a test or an exam?

10) Do you think about the grammar mark when you write an essay exam in English?

_____ all the time _____ Sometimes _____ Not really _____ don't know

Comments:

11) Do your teacher's expectations on grammar affect how you write your English essay? Explain why or why not?

12) Would you like to add on about anything if there's something that we've overlooked/missed?

13) Is there any more comments on what we've discussed about just now?



RQ3: How does teachers' metalinguistic understanding affect their judgement of students' writing quality?

Writing conversation (Teacher)

Name:

First language:

First Degree:

School:

Trained as an English teacher: Yes/No

Thank you very much for taking the time today for this interview. I would like your help in understanding your expectations in terms of grammar performance in students' essays and your beliefs when grading them. It is very important for me to hear what you have to say about the assessment, as it will allow me to understand the assessment process much better.

Background

Total number of years teaching English:

Class assigned to you:

- 1) Based on the assessment criteria, could you explain to me what you understand about varied sentence structures?

- 2) Could you show me an example of varied sentence structures from this essay? (prompt if varied sentence structure has ever been discussed in classroom)

- 3) Could you show me an example of a simple structure sentence used without error? (prompt for minor sentences if needed)

- 4) Could you explain to me what a clause and a phrase are?

- 5) Could you identify each group of words below as a clause (C) or a phrase (P)?
 - ___ on the street corner beside the mailbox
 - ___ after our visit to the zoo
 - ___ before the television show starts
 - ___ during the long, boring game
 - ___ now that you have arrived
 - ___ underneath the seat in front of you

6) Could you identify the structure (Subject, Verb, Object, Complement, Adverbial) in the sentences below?

___ The cat is watching me with sad droopy eyes.

___ In the woods lurked a strange shadow.

___ The tall, handsome, young man is a teacher in this school.

___ Surface currents are driven by wind; however, deep currents are driven by density.

___ Walking home from school, the boy stopped to buy some food.

7) What are the characteristics of this particular essay (show three different essays with three different grades in front of him/her) that cause you to assign mark XX?

8) In class, during writing lessons, what do you usually tell your students to focus on when writing an essay? (prompt if linguistic decisions have ever been discussed in class)

9) What is the most important aspect to you when deciding marks for students' essays?

10) Which criteria of grammar (sentence variation, spelling and punctuation, vocabulary, et cetera) do you emphasise to distinguish between the different grades levels for an essay (A, B, C, et cetera)?

- 11) If the student who wrote this essay asked you about why he/she received this particular mark on grammar, what would you tell him/her? Can you give an example of your explanation?

- 12) When you discuss grammar marks for your students' essays with your colleagues, what do you usually **agree** on? (any particular characteristic or aspect?)

- 13) When you discuss grammar marks for your students' essay with your colleagues, what do you usually **disagree** on? (any particular characteristic or aspect?)

- 14) I have asked you a lot of questions and you've been very helpful. But do you think there's anything we've missed out? Or anything more that you would like to share?

Appendix O: Sentence labelling cards

S	S
V	V
O	O
C	C
ADV	ADV

Appendix P: Student's sample narrative essay I

I wake up to black and white reruns of Bonnie & Clyde. Breakfast was a bowl of cereal dipped in depression. My heavy footsteps didn't cause an earthquake of destructible magnitude today. I woke up today. I'm alive again today. Unfortunately, I still heave for today which is only another day. They say, when you do something so often you get used to it. Lies. I've been living for the past 24 years and I still don't feel alive. I still feel dead even when death has never come my way. I scrambled my ~~wardrobe~~^{closet} and through all the 9 outfits I put on, I still look the same. Dressing ~~is~~ up in ~~my~~ lonely is my notable forté. As I scurry down the stairs, the echoing whispers of morning and moaning ~~is~~ accompanied my footsteps. Today, just like every other day is just another day.

The sadder you are, the more empty you feel. As I walk down city blocks, I become more observant ~~of~~ the world I now view in technicolour. I notice every little something be it anything. I see how the ~~ping~~ pigeons knock for snacks how their necks stiffen and their body shifts into fight mode. I notice the children running down fountains basking in their youth. How the curly hair bounces like springs and how the straight ones flow in like river streams. I notice when the clouds move, sometimes I move with it, without my consensual notice. ~~is~~ When you're empty, you caress yourself into a blackhole, a void of emotions, ~~is~~ a numbness you scratch and bruise your skin into. When you're empty, you're desperate to live in anything that can make you feel again. I long ~~to~~ for comfort but ~~is~~ if my very existence is only at the entitlement of pain, so be it. I just wanna feel again. I feel nothing. 3 months ago I strolled down lanes I now call memory. 3 months ago I was so full of life, that the only thing that mattered was the now. I snapped out of my mind's drift of reality and reminded myself that nothing lasts, ~~is~~ and if my happiness was temporary, my suicidal tendencies should be too. I arrived in front of a museum, only to remind myself that other things have history too.

It was purely my fault, I fell in love with a man who couldn't love me in return. I fell in love with someone so distant that he felt like a dream. Maybe he was a dream, but I'm currently wide awake. Battling insomnia with dozes of sleeping pills that I'll later puke out. Wanting to shut my eyes so I can finally feel him again. Knowing that when ~~is~~ I see him, I can't touch him. When I see him, I feel nothing. Or maybe I just feel everything at once that nothing seems to register. Maybe I'm not empty, maybe I'm just too ~~fat~~ full to call myself anything else. Come to think of it, I'm always too much and never enough. I ~~got~~ ~~myse~~ I cut my dystopic thoughts to a glass of

champagne and a warm welcome. God bless the curators who curate their art shows on weekdays. My little black dress felt oversized today. I ran along, intsted - canvas - walls to find a mirror. As I stared down my own reflection, ~~we~~ our fingers touched the parallel sides, seperated by glass. I was somehow looking for an answer. This is not Harry Potter as much as I want it to be. This is not the mirror of Erised, this is merely a fraction of light. I looked at myself and wondered if everyone else saw me like this too. The pores that spread on my upper cheek, the enlarged features that goes against beauty ~~and~~ narratives. The blemishes that pictures can't crop out. The subtle wave of my hair that run down my neck. The bangs that I will have ~~not~~ triam again, soon. My fingers that are too short for my palm and the weights of longing stored ~~and~~ under the bags of my eyes. I wish I could disallow myself from my impulsive behaviour. I wish I don't have ~~to~~ to see him in all the places he's absent. I can't force you to love me nor can I make you love me. There's nothing I can change and there's nothing I can do. "An unrequited love is a one man's cult."

In the museum, I found emotions hidden in the walls. I was so desperate to extract them all that I might just end up tearing the building apart. Heartbreak is not about wanting to be okay, it's about trying to remember that you were okay before. But it's not only about this heartbreak. I have so many reasons to leave but I just need I to stay. ~~currently~~, currently, I haven't any. My sole purpose of living is to become a backdrop, I was his manic pixie dream girl why do I thirst to become lead? Maybe I thirst to feel human. To feel acknowledged not only to acknowledge. As I returned to my apartment I arranged the letters at the ~~bed~~ bottom of my lamp. One for my mother, for my best friend, for the waiter at my usual cafe and one for him. I kissed them all at the tip of the flap and tucked it beneath the fluorescent LED. I got over to my closet and ~~emptied~~ emptied it out. I carefully pack them into a luggage and left it beside my bed. I took my bedsheet out and placed it aside as well. I went to my fridge and ~~threw~~ threw everything into the dustbin. I took a shower and wore my black dress again. I undo the bandage that covered the red fault lines on my wrists and let out a sigh. I took all my pills out and flushed them down the drain. I stepped on the chair, with trembling feet. I let out a sigh and was ready for what's to come. I slip the noose along my head like a necklace and pulled it over like a tie. If I left, I wanted to be with my happiest thought. I remembered us, the night I finally

realised I loved you. I remembered how we laugh. And as I jump from the chair I realised, we had never laughed so much in our lives.

Language is sufficiently accurate.

C-30

Appendix Q: Student's sample narrative essay II

There was a hustle-bustle in front of my small cottage. My mother and I peeped from our window, realizing that this year's circus poster has been hung. My mother stole a glance at me, sending my despair building up. She hugged me quietly and all I could do was hug her back with a faint smile. Going to the circus was my dream since I was about four years old. I dreamt of laughing at the hilarious clowns, dancing with the circus bears and gasp at the greatness of the lion tamer in guiding the lion to do circus tricks. Unfortunately, my family could never afford the expensive tickets. I never complained.

The clock ticked by and it was the day the circus was showing. I sat alone on the doorstep, indulging everyone's excitement that shined on ^{their face} ~~me~~. All of them walked into the red and yellow tent which was only a stone's throw away from my house. I sighed. What was I to do when everyone was at the circus tent, enjoying the show? I decided to take a walk around my village, bringing along my basket to gather berries along the way.

It was such a windy day and the trees shook left and right, left and right. I was collecting strawberries from a thick bush under an apple tree, when I heard a loud meow coming from between the leaves. I looked up to see a grey tabby kitten helplessly looking down with a glint of fear in his eyes. As an animalophile, I panicked as to save the kitten immediately. I rushed to a nearby farm and borrowed their ladder. I saved the kitten in a split second. He licked my face as if to say thank you. I looked around to see a tall man on stilts wobbling over to me in a rush.

He scolded me, asking what I was doing with his circus kitten. I told him the whole story. His white-painted face changed from anger to grateful. He thanked me and introduced himself as Fyora, the village circus man-on-stilts. He questioned why I was not at the circus. I told him the truth. He pitied me and bade me to follow him. I did.

He brought me to the backstage and offered me tea. There was scones with cream and blueberry jam, not to forget warm jasmine tea. I almost declined the kind offer, but he insisted. I ate in joy, swallowing every

bite is satisfactory as it was a long time ago since I last ate a meal as good as this. After tea, Fyos^u asked if I wanted to watch the news show. I looked at him, puzzled, because the show ended two hours ago.

B 40

Appendix R: Student's sample argumentative essay I

For a start, I would like to state the obvious; we all hate school. And while there may be the good ones who are the minority who actually live for school, I am not bluffing when I say the majority of us do not. I would not want to blame the men who created the education system, now running through all parts of Earth, Horace Mann because it well shaped this world we are currently living in.

Indubitably, examinations and tests became the soul reason and main object of this system. Although it does quite seem unworthy, as we are just cramming ruled information in our brains and checking if we remember it or not during the examination until we ultimately forget about it all after that. Well, we have come to the most undeniable truth, the results. Results. Such a sensitive term for students and practically now, teachers and even parents. While it does look like the score we would get after a memory game, results define us students.

Somehow and in some other worldly way, the results are able to show just how weak or strong our brain's function is. It displays our level of thinking, or may I add the stages of how book smart we are. This particular subject must have its pros but as well as cons, like any other thing would. As useless as it may sound, it is the only thing to hold onto, for it is how we will make it in life, get an actual activity that we would do routinely, on a daily basis, for the rest of our lives. I am not saying it makes us 'is', because human's natural inevitability would not want to just do work all life long, but it is something we are willed to do for ourselves, our family, even our country and the future. We are obligated to do charity, and that is not touching the subject to the poor, it is actually for us as beings that inexplicably have the need to feel needed.

Apart from all the books, pens and paper, there comes

the extra-curricular activities. As beings with the need of balance, being outdoors is another subject to be taken account of, by marks. No matter how you put it, it always, ~~always~~ comes to the marks, results. It is as if we need everything like reputation or any kind of deed to be documented as proof as a living, breathing thing. Nevertheless, there are much, much more goodness in this, the way it works. ✓

Without wanting to end, I must conclude that systems in general are made to create order, for us humans. Life would not be as safe if the world were to be horrendous and in anarchy, and we would end up not being alive. As unfortunate as it sounds, I am still a growing high schooler who needs school more than anything and I must say hate (for school) is just another word for may. ✓

Language is largely accurate.

B-36.

Appendix X: Student's sample argumentative essay II

These days, students are being stressed to achieve good results in school. This is because parents and teachers want their child or student to be successful in the future or at least to continue their studies to a higher level. Although ~~to~~ it is good that students in school are obtaining good results, it does not actually determine the success of their future.

One of the possible factors of this case is probably the lack of competition ~~that~~ among the students when they proceed to college or university. Most students that achieve good results in school would probably continue ~~there~~ their studies in ~~a well-known or~~ an excellent university, but since there are many ~~students~~ high-achieving students nowadays, there is a probability that ~~the~~ some students ~~are~~ placed in regular universities with ~~a~~ other people that may not be as competitive as they are. Therefore, the high-achieving students may feel as if there is ~~not enough~~ no competition and ~~start~~ ^{start} to relax and get all comfortable during classes ~~+~~ ~~not~~ not focusing in class nor constantly ~~not doing~~ ~~revision~~ ~~do~~ studying often. This will lead to a bad performance ^{of the student} in class. ~~that will cause the student~~ ~~student~~ ~~to re~~ ~~As this continues,~~ ~~As this continues,~~ the student may have to retake his or her course and will cause. As said before, good results in school does not determine success later on.

Other than that, most students these day are easily influenced, influenced with the negative side of the world, especially after finishing school. Although they have ~~achie~~ Usually, the students that achieve good results in school would feel as if they are stress-free and can do ~~wa~~ whatever they want to after ending school. As this happens, the ~~student~~ ~~in~~ ~~students~~ ~~may~~ the student might ~~be~~ ~~cross~~ the border and do things that are ~~try~~ to do things that are ~~be~~ crossing the line. The students might be influenced with all the fun that is happening and until they with partying or even even taking consuming drugs. ~~too much of these~~ and will lead to. These negative influences would nevertheless destroy one's future although the the person has obtained good results in school.

Next, ~~this could also happen~~ this case could also occur when the student does not continue in a field that he or she is fond of. ~~As an example~~ This usually happens when the student does not do + not do enough research on what course he or she likes and ends up choosing the wrong ~~too~~ course to continue in. It is also possible for a person to achieve well although he or she does not like the particular course that he is learning but ~~it is also pos~~ there is also a high chance of the person ~~ending up~~ failing the course due to his lack of interest ~~in the~~ towards the course. As the person fails, it would lead to a bad ~~he or she would~~ have a bad record and this may affect her job application. As this continues to happen, it would be hard for the person to look ~~for a job that he or she wants to do~~ and would end up get a good job good or high-paying job. Therefore, as you can see, ~~your~~ obtaining good results in school does not determine the success of one's future.

As In conclusion, school is just the beginning of ~~or the~~ one's education. There is still a long way to go until success is obtained. Along the way, a lot of surprises are up your sleeve and you should just be prepared ~~for or~~ to overcome any situation well. Therefore, even if you achieve good results in school, it does not guarantee the success of your future.

D30

Patches of clear accurate logical language.
Some validity of sentence type or

References

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