

Syntactic Awareness and Writing Ability of English Department Students

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Abstrak

This study aims to determine the correlation between English learners' syntactic awareness and writing ability. It was carried out with 30 students from the 2018 cohort of the Department of English at Universitas Negeri Malang. A syntactic awareness and descriptive writing tests were used to obtain data. The data was analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient formula, Pearson product-moment formula, and SPSS 21 software by the researchers. According to the findings, with a mean score of 83.2 for the syntactic awareness test and 83.3 for the writing test, both the syntactic awareness and writing test results are satisfactory. The results also show a positive correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability (the result was 0.702 with a significant level of 0.01, indicating a high-level correlation. Finally, the researchers suggests that lecturers emphasize the importance of syntactic awareness when it comes to improving their students' writing skills. It is also suggested that future researchers conduct further research on syntactic awareness as a strategy to improve the writing ability of English students.

Keywords: correlation, Pearson's correlation coefficient, syntactic awareness, writing ability

INTRODUCTION

Writing is undeniably an important productive skill to master, so developing writing ability is essential for English students. Writing is a complex skill that is difficult to learn. Learners should develop grammatical skills and the ability to comprehend information and the elements of good writing. In this case, a learner needs to have intellectual abilities to master writing in English. Some components of intellectual abilities affect learners' writing ability. Language use, mechanical skills, content treatment, stylistic skills, and judgment skills are the components. The first component is language use. The ability to write correct and appropriate sentences is referred to as language use. The reason for this is clear; to write a good sentence, first, learners need to understand how to use grammar. Learners need to pay attention to the arrangements of words, phrases, and clauses that make up a sentence. The majority of learners struggle with writing skills due to a lack of understanding of language use. As a result, understanding the arrangements of words, phrases, and clauses will help learners improve their writing skills (Fatimah & Masduqi, 2017; Heaton, 1991).

The second component is mechanical skills. It is about the ability to use correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Mechanics go hand in hand with grammar. It is important to know and observe mechanics skills in writing to avoid confusion. The treatment of content is the next component. It is about being able to think creatively and develop ideas. Then, stylistic and judgment skills are also the core components of writing skills. Stylistic skills are concerned with the ability to effectively organize sentences and paragraphs, as well as language, whereas judgment skills are concerned with the ability to write for a specific purpose with a specific audience in mind (Fatimah & Masduqi, 2017; Heaton, 1991). It can be said that learners will be able to write a good paragraph and essay if they have all four components.

Writing is an important academic skill that is widely used in higher education, and students must be able to write effectively (Fatimah & Masduqi, 2017; Walsh, 2010). Writing, according to Chappell (2011), is beneficial for expressing one's personality, fostering communication, developing thinking skills, making logical and persuasive arguments, and so on. Furthermore, Maley (2009) asserts that writing requires students to manipulate language in interesting and challenging ways to express uniquely

personal meanings. In line with these statements, Harmer (2004) asserts that there are five important benefits of writing. Those are, first, since students think as they write, writing encourages them to concentrate on correct language use, which can lead to better development when they solve problems that writing brings to their attention. Second, writing is also used to reinforce previously thought-out materials. They use their writing skills to keep track of what they have learned as the learning process unfolds. Third, writing is frequently beneficial as a warm-up for other activities. Fourth, writing may be incorporated into a broader task that focuses on something else, such as language practice, acting out, or speaking. Lastly, in questionnaire-type operations, writing is often used. To pass a questionnaire exam, one must be able to write. Students are asked to comment in written form during the test.

Another element of good writing which is important for English students is grammar understanding. Debata (2013) states grammar knowledge assists students in correcting errors and improving their written work. In reality, however, grammar is not easy to master. According to Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017, as cited in Toba, Noor, and Sanu, 2019), Indonesian EFL university students struggle with grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling errors in essay writing. Most EFL university students think that grammar is one of the most difficult subjects to learn. One of the persistent reasons is that English grammar has a different structure from their mother tongue, and this often confuses students.

Grammar can actually strengthen students' ability to write in English. Understanding the correct use of grammar helps learners write in English more effectively. This is where students' writing ability is thought to be affected by syntactic awareness. Soares et al. (2020) argue that syntactic awareness is just as important for the development of written language as all other metalinguistic skills (e.g., phonological awareness), emphasizing the importance of investigating the relationship between syntactic awareness and text elaboration. This finding is consistent with Flower and Hayes' (1981) assertion that syntactic and lexical choices guide the writing process.

The ability to reflect on grammar rules and manipulate the grammatical structure of sentences in a language is known as syntactic awareness, also known as grammatical awareness (Gombert, 1992). It refers to the intentional control and reflection of formal processes related to the organization of words into sentences (Soares et al., 2020). Simply put, syntactic awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate words in a sentence. Syntax and grammar are two components that are related to each other. Using syntactic awareness, learners are taught to organize words or symbols together into phrases, clauses, and sentences. The most basic syntax is subject + verb + direct object, as in "Jacob eat the orange."

Syntax and grammar are two factors that are intertwined. Grammar is a component of syntax, and syntax is frequently defined as the grammatical structure of sentences. Syntax refers not only to the rules for combining individual words into sentences, but also to how linguistic units are considered to express different meanings. For credibility, legibility, communication, and clarity, proper grammar is required. Mastering grammar will enable the writer to make his or her work more clear and easier to read. Syntactic awareness, or the ability to manipulate words in a sentence, may be a potential strategy for learners in developing their writing ability. This possibility has also been raised by Soares, Zuanetti, Silva, Granzotti, and Fukuda (2020). They contend that written language and syntactic awareness are inextricably linked.

Several studies have been carried out to investigate the link between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension. Cain (2007) discovered that there was little evidence for a link between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension; rather, the data suggested that the link could be due to differences in language and memory skills. Reading and syntactic awareness, on the other hand, seem to have a particular difference that is not clarified by vocabulary, grammatical understanding, or memory. In line with these statements, According to Abatjihun (2018), instructions for developing reading comprehension should prioritize vocabulary knowledge competencies before focusing on

activation of background knowledge and use of reading strategies, as well as the development of syntactic awareness. All the studies mentioned previously discuss the correlation between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension. It should be noted that syntactic awareness and writing ability also have a good chance to be correlated and therefore, need to be explored or investigated.

Only few studies have examined the correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability. The following research discusses the comparison between written narratives among children with and without difficulties in syntactic awareness. Soares et al. (2020) pointed that students who have a good understanding of this metalinguistic ability produce better texts, with a more elaborate written narrative that includes anything from spelling to text coherence formation. They discovered that children with syntactic awareness difficulties made a high percentage of spelling errors, with a typology close to that seen in studies evaluating writing in children with learning disabilities. They also struggled with pronoun use, preferring to use "noun repetition" during text elaboration. They also wrote short messages, which were generally more descriptive. The studies included 60 schoolchildren enrolled in the fourth and fifth grades of public elementary schools in a municipality in the Brazilian state of So Paulo. The current researchers have not found a similar study in Indonesia, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesian universities.

Based on the background of the study, the researchers decided to conduct a study entitled *A Syntactic Awareness and Writing Ability of English Department Students at Universitas Negeri Malang*. In theory, there should be a connection between syntactic awareness and writing ability. Here the researchers were interested in finding out how much the influence is and how syntactic awareness affects English students' writing ability. This study is, therefore, aimed at answering the question, "*Is there any positive correlation between students' syntactic awareness and their ability in writing?*". The assumption in this study is syntactic awareness influences the learners' writing ability. As a result, this study hypothesised that there was a positive correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability among English Department students at Universitas Negeri Malang.

RESEARCH METHOD

The subject of this study was students of the 2018 cohort at the English Department, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang. 175 students in the cohort were registered in two different study programs, i.e., English Language Education (ELE) and English Language and Literature (ELL). Only students who passed writing classes were involved in this study. Using Gay, Mills, and Airasian's quantitative research theory (2009), the researchers decided to have 30 out of 175 students as a sample in the present study.

In this study, the instruments were used to assess students' syntactic awareness in relation to their writing ability. Student's syntactic awareness was measured using three kinds of grammar tests: matching, true-false, and essay. The student's writing ability was then assessed using an essay test. The researchers used the Capovilla, Capovilla, and Soares syntactic awareness test in the syntactic awareness test (2004 cited in Soares, Zuanetti, Silva, Guedes-Granzotti, Fukuda, 2020). Furthermore, in the syntactic awareness test, there were several questions regarding grammatical judgment, grammatical correction, and word categorization. The total score of the syntactic awareness test was 100 if the students could answer it all correctly. The test items were taken from two different sources. The first one was taken from *Understanding and Using English Grammar* 4th Edition written by Betty Azar and Stacy Hagen, whereas the second one was a self-tailored syntax handout commonly used in the syntax courses at the English Department, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang.

Writing descriptive tests were used to measure the student's writing ability. The theme was about the historical place. The students had to write a text of 150-200 words in 40 minutes. The students were

allowed to open a dictionary to look up words they were not familiar with. There were some aspects to be scored in the writing of descriptive text. In doing so, the researchers adapted the scoring criteria taken from Brown (2007) including the content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Brown (2007) uses the level of criteria from 1 (which is the lowest score for one aspect) up to 4 (which is the highest score for one aspect). The highest score that the student could get was 100.

Online tests were used to collect the data. The tests were written in Google Form and the link was shared to WhatsApp groups of the offerings that the researchers had chosen for the sample in ELE and ELL study programs at Universitas Negeri Malang. The data collected consist of the student's scores on the test. With regards to Latief's argument (2017) that validity is the correctness of the assessment and the valid results correctly reflect the skills that are to be tested, the researchers already consulted the validity of the syntactic awareness test and the writing test to the first supervisor who is also an expert of language assessment. The researchers also tested the tests with some of the chosen respondents. Having obtained constructive feedback from the respondents, the researchers revised the instrument accordingly.

The researchers adapted the concept of Latief (2017) that reliability of the results of a language skill assessment belongs to the preciseness of the language skill assessment results which represent the actual level of the students' skills. In so doing, the researchers had tried out the syntactic awareness test to measure the reliability of the test results. The researchers had also tried out the scoring rubric to get the same perception of two raters who tried out the scoring rubric. Inter-rater reliability was also done to investigate the degree of agreement level in scoring the writing test. If everyone agrees, the IRR is 1 or 100%; if everyone disagrees, the IRR is 0 or 0%. If the result is greater than 75%, the data is reliable. The inter-rater reliability formula is as follows:

$$IRR (\%) = \frac{A}{N}$$

IRR : Inter-rater reliability

A : Total number of agreements between the two raters

N : Total number of rating

After trying out the instruments, the researchers revised them based on the result of the try-out. The revision was done by changing the duration and the minimum words of the writing test.

The collected data were analyzed using Carl Pearson's correlation product-moment to determine whether there is a correlation between students' syntactic awareness and their writing ability. The following steps were taken to implement the data operation technique:

- a. Finding the number of correlations using the formula:

$$r_{xy} = \frac{N \sum xy - (\sum x)(\sum y)}{\sqrt{\{\sum x^2 - (x)^2\} \{\sum y^2 - (\sum y)^2\}}}$$

(Arikunto, 2006: 72)

- b. The interpretation in Table 1 was used to interpret the index of scores of "r" correlation, product-moment (r_{xy}).

Table 1. The Interpretation of Correlation "r" Product Moment

The score of "r" Product Moment	Interpretation
0.00-0.199	There is a correlation between X and Y, but the correlation is very weak or little. So, it is considered as no significant correlation in this rating.
0.20-0.399	There is a correlation between X and Y, but the correlation is very weak or little.

0.40-0.599	There is a correlation between X and Y. The volume is medium.
0.60-0.799	There is a high correlation between X and Y.
0.80-1.000	There is a very high correlation between X and Y.

(Sugiyono 2011:184)

Finally, SPSS ver.21 software was used to reanalyze the data regarding a possible correlation. Results from this tool were expected to be more accurate and efficient, with less human error.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the syntactic awareness test used in this study included grammatical judgment, grammatical correction, and word categorization items. For the word categorization test, all the students managed to do it well with the score above 7. Then, there were fourteen students who impressively obtained full marks or 10 points. For the grammatical judgment test, the result of the grammatical judgment varied. With a total of ten questions, this test was expected to be more difficult than the word categorization test. Seven students failed to reach points above 7 with one student got lower than 6. There were only two students with 7 points, twenty students with more than 8 points, and ten students with the impressive 10 points. The last was the grammatical correction test that was expected to be more difficult than the other tests. Ten students could not reach 7 points and even one of them got 3, the lowest point. Two students got 7 points. The rest got more than 8 points (five of them got perfect 10 points). Overall, the students performed well on the syntactic awareness test. The mean score was 83.2, indicating that at least 83 percent of the students answered the test correctly.

Writing descriptive tests were utilized to measure the student's writing ability. The topic was about the historical place. The students had to compose 150-200 words in 40 minutes. The students were also permitted to open a dictionary. There were some aspects to be scored in the writing descriptive text. In doing so, the researchers adapted the scoring criteria taken from Brown (2007) that include the content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Brown used the level of criteria from 1 (which is the lowest score for one aspect) up to 4 (which is the highest score for one aspect). The most elevated score is 100.

Firstly, in the content aspect, most of the students got a satisfactory score. They reached the highest point of 4. Some students got 3 points and only three students got 2 points as the lowest point. This shows that the level of student creativity in writing is quite good. In the organization aspect, most of the students were able to write with complete identification, and the descriptions were also arranged with proper connectives. Most of them reached 3 points with eighteen students getting the highest score. In the grammar aspect, most students got 3 points. Here two students earned the highest marks and seven students got 2 as the lowest point. Then, in the vocabulary aspect, the lowest point among students is 3 indicating that the students were quite good at choosing and forming words. In details, eleven students got the perfect 10 points and the rest obtained 3 points. Lastly, in the mechanic aspect, only six students got the impressive 10 points. Most of the students earned 3 points. The lowest point was 2, obtained by two students.

The writing descriptive test result revealed that the lowest score was 63 and the highest score was 95. The mean score for the descriptive writing test was 83.3. It can be concluded that the student performed well in writing descriptive text in general.

There were two pieces of data to be analyzed. The first data was the correlation between students' syntactic awareness (X) and the second was their writing ability (Y). Then, there were 30 students as the research participants. To see the correlation between the two data, the researchers used the Pearson Product Formula in the following steps.

Firstly, the researchers input the students' score of syntactic awareness in the column labeled as X and the student's writing ability in the column labeled as Y. Secondly, the researchers multiplied the first students' score in syntactic awareness test and writing test to the 30th student's score. In the table, it was labeled as XY. Thirdly, the writer squared the students' score in syntactic awareness test. It was labeled as x^2 in the table. Afterwards, the writer squared the students' score of writing test and labeled as y^2 . The researchers then computed the total of the students' score of syntactic awareness test, students' score of writing test, the XY, the x^2 , and the y^2 .

Having applied the formula, the researchers found that the total of students' syntactic awareness score was 2469. The total of students' syntactic awareness score was 2499. The total score of XY was 209588. The total score of x^2 was 211000. Then, the total score of y^2 was 209865. The Pearson formula was used to enter all of the data in the table as follows:

$$r^{xy} = \frac{N\sum xy - (\sum x)(\sum y)}{\sqrt{(N\sum x^2 - (\sum x)^2)(N\sum y^2 - (\sum y)^2)}}$$

$$r^{xy} = \frac{30x209588 - (2496)(2499)}{\sqrt{(30x211000 - (2496)^2)(30x209865 - (2499)^2)}}$$

$$r^{xy} = \frac{6287640 - 6237504}{\sqrt{(99984)(50949)}}$$

$$r^{xy} = \frac{50136}{71372.85}$$

$$r^{xy} = 0.702$$

To make sure that the calculation above is valid, the writer used SPSS ver.21 to recheck the result. The use of SPSS was to know whether there is a mismatch or not. The SPSS calculation was described in Table 2.

Table 2. SPSS Correlation Table

		Correlations	
		SA Test	Writing Test
SA Test	Pearson Correlation	1	.702**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
Writing Test	Pearson Correlation	.702**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The result of those calculations (the manual calculation and using SPSS) was the same, showing that the value of r was 0.702. It means that there is no mismatching in the process of calculating the data. The Pearson Correlation revealed a coefficient of correlation of 0.702 between students' syntactic awareness and writing ability, with a significance level of 0.01. A significance level of 0.01 indicates that the calculation's percentage of validity was 99 percent. These findings answered the research question about the correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability, confirming that there is a significant correlation between the two.

As stated in the study's introduction, the researchers formulates the study's hypothesis, which is that there is a positive correlation between students' syntactic awareness and their writing ability at English Department students Universitas Negeri Malang. The researchers then applied the following formula:

1. If $r^{xy} > r_t$ means there is a correlation. H_a is accepted and H_0 is rejected.
2. If $r^{xy} < r_t$ means there is no correlation. H_a is rejected and H_0 is accepted.

Based on the calculation above, the result is compared by r_{table} in the significant of 5% and 1% and $n=30$. To find the critical value of r_{table} the researchers must find the df first with the formula

$$\begin{aligned}df &= n - 2 \\ &= 30 - 2 \\ &= 28\end{aligned}$$

From $df = 28$, it was obtained in the r_{table} of 5% = 0.374 and 1% = 0.478. It shows that the coefficient correlation was higher than r_{table} ($0.702 > 0.374$ and $0.702 > 0.478$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This finding implies that there is a positive correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability.

The overall test result showed that the students were able to correctly answer the syntactic awareness test and write a good text on the writing test. They generally demonstrated a good understanding of word categorization, grammatical judgment, and grammatical correction. They also demonstrated good performance in writing as shown in the effective choice of words, their creativity in developing the ideas of the assigned topic, good organization, grammar, spelling, and punctuation in the writing test.

The main finding of this study was that syntactic awareness was positively related to writing ability. The correlation was found to be 0.702, with a level of significance of 0.01. The correlation was strong enough to predict writing ability. The high correlation indicates that the higher the student's score on the syntactic awareness test was, the higher students' score in writing was. It is reasonable to conclude that students' syntactic awareness plays an important role in their writing ability.

Brown (2007) contends that in order to write a good text, the writer must consider five components: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Syntax, on the other hand, is the study of sentence structure and construction. Grammar is a general term that refers to a set of rules in a specific language that includes syntax, morphology, and syntax studies sentence structure. According to Frodesen and Eyring (1997, as cited in Fatemi, 2008), a focus on form (grammar) in composition can help writers develop and enrich the linguistic resources required to effectively express ideas. This theory is related to this research where student's syntactic awareness has a positive correlation with their ability in writing.

Because the level of correlation found in this study was classified as high, it can be predicted that syntactic awareness will increase and contribute to writing ability. This is consistent with other empirical research evidence indicating that syntactical or grammatical skills have a positive effect on writing composition (Andrews et al., 2006; Weaver, 1996). In this case, Andrews et al. (2006) assert that the teaching of syntax emphasizing knowledge about the construction of sentences is crucial for students' writing ability, while Weaver (1996) state that attention to sentence structure (construction of sentences) and mechanics during the process of writing would result in better products of writing. As a result, it is safe to say that syntactic awareness can help students improve their writing skills.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the researchers discovered a positive correlation between syntactic awareness and writing ability. The correlation was strong, at 0.702, with a level of significance of 0.01. Because this correlation coefficient exceeds the critical value of ($0.702 > 0.374$ and $0.702 > 0.478$), the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Based on the findings, syntactic awareness has the potential to be used as a strategy to improve students' writing ability. The high correlation indicated that syntactic awareness might contribute to the students' writing ability. As a result, the researchers recommends that writing lecturers provide their

students with more knowledge and instructions/tasks related to syntactic awareness so that students can potentially improve their English writing ability.

Finally, because this is a correlational study with limited data, a causal relationship between the two variables cannot be assumed. As a result, this study is expected to serve as a springboard for future researchers to conduct more comprehensive research on the correlation between the two variables from various perspectives. As a result, other studies such as experimental, survey or longitudinal are recommended to shed more light on the possibility of a causal influence.

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