Research Article

Dimensions in Tertiary EFL Learners' Syntactical Acquisition: An Error Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT: *Fortified by socio-cognitive competencies, linguistic performance is very crucial in writing in English as a foreign language (EFL). In particular, syntactical content is the foundational epistemic means to instantiate primary communication in writing. Given the centrality of syntax in structural, coherent written discourse, exploring syntactic complexity and EFL students' patterns of acquisition of this linguistic aspect needs scholarly attention. However, research in this area is a notable paucity. In response to this void, the present study aims to investigate the dimensions of tertiary EFL students' acquisition of written English syntaxes. Accordingly, qualitative research was designed. A corpus of 70 narrative essays sourced from 70 tertiary English and non- English major students of Bangladeshi private and public universities served as the qualitative content data. The data were analyzed by applying Hsieh and Shannon's summative content analysis (CA) method. The findings reveal that tertiary EFL students exhibit mastery in paratactic constructions of English sentences like comma splices, while they display a protracted struggle with hypotactic constructions like sentence fragments and run- ons. Overall, their syntactic mastery across diverse sentential subtypes or aspects is not only non-linear but also asymmetrical. The study calls for some greater pedagogical sensitivity toward the explored dimensions. The study also invites further studies toward exploring the indicated dimensions from socio-cognitive and pedagogical perspectives.*

KEYWORDS: *EFL Writing, Error Analysis, Syntactic Errors, Tertiary EFL Education.*

INTRODUCTION

English has been a common communication tool for people with different mother tongues across the globe. For its historical relationship with this subcontinent, English has also been an important language in Bangladesh, and English language teaching (ELT) has been adopted as an important program in all levels of education here. However, despite the theoretical importance, ELT has had a rollercoaster journey in Bangladesh since its inception. It has been used as a foreign language in Bangladesh, despite its expectation of being the country's second language (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). This digression has affected all the levels of ELT education in Bangladesh and consequently led to a loss of English proficiency within the learner community (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014).

During the British rule in this subcontinent, English was used as an official language in all formal sectors, and later during Pakistani administration, English was recognized as a state language and a second language. After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the 1972 constitution recognized Bangla as the compulsory official language, promoting it to a higher level, and restricted the use of English in different spheres of the state, including education. The state policy of post-independence Bangladesh prioritized the promotion of Bangla over English, believing that Bangla would be degraded if English was promoted. However, this has resulted in a severe lack of proficiency in English among the students and general users (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014). In addition, inconsistent language policies and planning have contributed to the lack of quality English language teaching in various segments of education and social inequity (Islam & Hashim, 2019; Rahman & Pandian, 2018a, 2018b). For some added advantages, only a portion of Bangladeshi urban students who studied in English medium schools and colleges are found to be more proficient in English than the vast majority of general students who studied in common Bangla medium schools and colleges spread all around the country (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Hamid, 2016; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017; Rahman & Pandian, 2018a, 2018b).

Out of all English language skills, mastering writing skills is crucial in today's globalized world (Nordquist, 2020). This necessity has made learning English skills, especially writing skills, an essential ELT program in all tertiary institutions in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi tertiary students are required to study English as a compulsory course at their universities, use all essential English skills to communicate, seek knowledge, and further their education (Sultana 2019; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023; Patwary & Reza, 2024). However, many Bangladeshi tertiary students struggle with writing English due to lack of practice, inadequate instruction, and poor guidance from teachers (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). This leads to poor English writing with faulty sentence structures and a lack of creativity (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). Traditionally, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is used in most educational institutions, but nationally, Bangladesh has adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the English language teaching method across all levels (Bipasha, 2025). Despite this, CLT faces resistance from teachers and stakeholders due to its lack of proper implementation and effectiveness in developing students' English proficiency levels (Quader, 2001; Ali et al., 2018). Misapplications of English syntactic rules sometimes cause EFL learners in Bangladesh to struggle while composing English sentences (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023).

Writing acquisition is a challenging task (Husna, 2017; Klimova, 2014), especially for English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) students, as numerous difficulties are associated with writing acquisition (Negari, 2011; Patwary et al., 2023). Therefore, the learning and teaching of writing in EFL/ESL have been the subject of extensive research (e.g., Raimes, 1983; Warschauer, 2007; Randolph, 2009; Teng et al., 2022; Kitamura, 2023). Identifying grammatical and syntactic errors is crucial in EFL/ESL research, as the findings help identify students' writing challenges and develop effective pedagogies in various contexts. By identifying and categorizing errors, researchers and teachers can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of writing pedagogy and curriculum (Corder, 1967; Brown, 2014; Alam & Adelina, 2023). Therefore, a great deal of research attention has been directed towards error analysis in EFL/ESL students' writing (Myles, 2002; Khansir, 2013; Wu & Garza, 2014; Abied et al., 2022). It is also noticeable that in the domain of EFL/ESL writing, L2 writing researchers have focused their attention on errors and feedback largely related to higher-order concerns such as organization and content, while lower-order concerns like mechanics, grammar, syntax

and clausal constructions have been relatively neglected (Liu, 2018; Thi & Nikolov, 2022; Patwary et al., 2023). However, the analysis of errors in syntax is crucial because syntax has a greater impact on raters' judgments than content, and lacking it may undermine academic credibility (Ortega, 2015; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023).

Research shows that common errors in English syntax and grammar include run-on sentences, comma splices, and sentence fragments (Munro, 2010). However, the previous studies have not considered the difficulty levels of different syntactic errors made by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners. While some studies have been conducted on the errors in syntax in EFL writing in non-native English-speaking contexts, such as Thailand, Pakistan, India, and Taiwan (e.g. Sermsook, Liamnimitr & Pochakorn 2017; Pornthanachotanan, 2020; Sultan, 2015; Benzigar, 2013; Shirban & Lai, 2021), there is a dearth of research findings regarding this area in the tertiary EFL education context of Bangladesh. Further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the syntactic errors made by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners in their writing. In addition, addressing this issue is thus crucial for remedial action, as Bangladeshi students' written English proficiency is below par (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023).

The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the differences in difficulty levels across syntactic errors such as run-on sentences, comma splices, and sentence fragments among tertiary-level EFL students in Bangladesh. This study explores the syntactic complexity of Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students' academic writing, specifically examining their narrative essays. By providing a more comprehensive understanding of the errors made in syntax by EFL students, this study is expected to illuminate stakeholders with a clear understanding of students' problems and help educators tailor their teaching approaches and resources to better meet the diverse needs of their students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

By examining the theoretical framework and research gaps, this study seeks to have a nuanced understanding of the syntactic errors made by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students in writing, focusing on the most prevalent types. The aim is to identify patterns and provide instructional strategies for improved grammatical accuracy. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research question to address this objective:

What are the differences in difficulty levels among syntax categories such as run-ons, fragments, and comma splices in the writing of tertiary EFL students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Error Analysis and Common Errors Committed by ESL/EFL Students

Three main theories explain second language errors: behavioristic theory, contrastive analysis (CA) theory, and Chomsky's nativist theory. Abied, Ali, & Ashfello (2023) argue that learners' first language rules interrupt and cause errors in the second language. Second, Contrastive Analysis (CA) theory, developed by Lado in 1957, helps understand learners' errors by comparing language rules. Further, Chomsky's (1995) nativist theory revolutionized language learning by focusing on universal grammar and rule learning.

In ELT, understanding the error sources is beneficial for both teachers and learners. Harmer (2004) suggests that students learn more about their target language when they understand the source of their errors. Brown, Glasswell, and Harland (2004) argue that learners initially draw

inter-lingual errors from the L1 linguistic system before acquiring the target language system. Studies show that ESL or EFL students initially translate native language words, phrases, and organization into English, using native language patterns and stylistic conventions (Connor, 2003). Richards (1970) suggests that developmental errors, which do not reflect the L1, can be noticed during L2 acquisition. These errors indicate the learner's overwhelming knowledge at specific points and situations in language acquisition characteristics.

Understanding and analyzing errors is crucial for effective language learning. By identifying and categorizing errors, researchers and teachers can gain insights into learners' progress and the effectiveness of their teaching strategies. The identification stage involves counting errors and demonstrating innate instincts and grouping them into categories like selection, addition, omission, or misordering (Corder, 1973). Ellis (1997) suggests that classifying errors helps diagnose learners' language learning problems and track changes over time. Brown, Glasswell, and Harland (2004) and Erdogan (2005) contend that global and local errors can hinder communication, while the interlanguage (IL) hypothesis suggests a learner's linguistic system is based on their attempt to produce a second language norm. Brown (1994) suggests intra-lingual errors can occur due to inadequate learning, difficulties inherited during language learning, inappropriate teaching methods, or confused thinking. Understanding and analyzing errors is thus crucial for effective language learning too.

Sentence Structures of English

Types of English Sentence and their Association with Clauses:

Sentences are the highest unit of analysis in grammar, composed of clauses, phrases, words, and morphemes. According to Berry (2012), a sentence is a string of words that follows the rules of forming clauses and combinations of clauses. He also identifies five types of sentences: simple sentence, complex sentence, compound sentence, fragment, and non-sentence, according to grammar at the sentence level. Hacker and Sommers (2015) further identifies another type of sentence called compound-complex sentence. These types are defined below:

(i) Simple Sentence: A simple sentence is a single clause, such as "Ailing Sarah is in hospital." (Berry, 2012) or "The soup does not taste very good" (Murphy, 2019).

(ii) Compound Sentence: A compound sentence is a series of two or more clauses of equal importance, usually accompanied by a coordinating conjunction, such as "She works hard, has an inquisitive mind, and is popular with her students." (Berry, 2012).

(iii) Complex Sentence: A complex sentence is a sentence where a subordinate clause, of lesser importance, is added to a main clause, such as "I like him because he is very amiable." (Berry, 2012), and "We went out although it was raining heavily." (Murphy, 2019). The general structure of a complex sentence is that the main clause comes first and then follows the subordinate clause. However, the reversed order is also possible, and in this case, a comma should be used after the subordinate clause, as in "Although it rained a lot, they had a good time." (Murphy, 2019). Here, the subordinate clause "I like him" is added to the main clause "he is very amiable" due to his amiability. Berry (2012) adds that subordinate clauses are part of a main clause element or a clause element, as seen in the example "Where did you put the pen I lent you?"

(iv) Complex-Compound Sentence: According to Hacker and Sommers, (2015), a compound-complex sentence is a type of sentence that consists of at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause, as illustrated in the given sentence below.

Tell the doctor how you feel, and she will decide whether you can go home.

(v) Sentence Fragments: Sentence fragments are incomplete or minor sentences with some grammar, often used in responses like "in the afternoon" or "next week" (Berry, 2012). Langan (2008) explains that a word group that lacks a subject or a verb and does not express a complete thought is a fragment. The most common types of fragments include (a) dependent-word fragments, (b) –ing and to fragments, (c) added-detail fragments, and (d) missing-subject fragments.

vi) Non Sentence: Non-sentences are signs and headlines with no sentence, such as "No smoking" or "Silence please." (Berry, 2012). They may have some grammar at the phrase level, but they may have different equivalent major sentences (Berry, 2012).

Paratactic and Hypotactic Sentence Constructions:

English grammar covers two additional types of sentence constructions: paratactic constructions and hypotactic constructions. Paratactic constructions involve clauses placed side-by-side with equal weight, often without subordinating conjunctions. Hypotactic constructions, on the other hand, use conjunctions like "although," "because," or "when" to establish hierarchical relationships between ideas. Aidinlou and Pandian (2011) suggest that paratactic conjunctions create interdependency relationships between equal-status clauses. For instance, in the sentence "Ten years have worn on since her son's death, but she hasn't come to terms with the fact yet," the two equal clauses are joined paratactically, and the events are arranged sequentially, affecting the chronological occurrence of the events.

Hypotactic conjunctions create dependency relationships between unequal clauses, such as a dependent clause (β) resting on a dominant clause (α). These clauses can appear as 'α plus β' or 'β plus α', with the former being unmarked in English and the latter used only when there is an acceptable reason (Asadi & Pandian, 2011). They can also be viewed from a semantic perspective, where the secondary clause in every clause complex has an elaborating, extending, or enhancing relation to the primary clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The following examples can elaborate the theme further:

"Alice decided to resign because she was tired of office work." (α plus β) and

"Before I go, I'd like to visit the museum." (β plus α) (Asadi et al., 2012)

Asadi et al. (2012) argue that paratactic elaborating clauses are preceded by restating expressions and exemplified, while hypotactic elaborating clauses are non-defining relative clauses in traditional grammar. They provide extra information about a part of the primary clause or the whole part, appearing within commas or dashes. In paratactic extending clauses, the second clause extends the primary one using coordinators like (both…) and, not only…but also, etc. Hypotactic extending clauses can be expressed using while, whereas, except, that, if not… then, a non-finite clause, or a non-finite clause with the meaning of addition (Asadi et al., 2012). Paratactic enhancing clauses add a circumstantial flavor to the dominant clause by coordinating clauses like now, then, so and for, thus, otherwise, and though.

Syntactical Errors Committed by the EFL/ESL Learners

Syntactical problems in essays often result from imperfect sentence development and incomplete syntax mastery. Oshima and Houge (1991) identified four types of errors EFL learners commit related to sentence constructions during essay writing assignments: sentence fragments, choppy sentences, run- on sentences or comma splices, and stringy sentences.

Numerous error analysis studies have identified common types of errors in ESL learners' interlanguage, including subject-verb agreement errors, faulty constructions of noun and verb phrases (Tse, 2014; Sawalmeh, 2013), word order errors, sentence structure errors, sentence fragments, run-ons, comma splices, and coordination errors (Bennui, 2008; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Urdaneta, 2011). A study by Pornthanachotanan (2020) found common sentence errors include comma splices, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. Sultan (2015) found that EFL students make mistakes with sentence structure like comma splices, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. Three major types of syntactic errors—run-ons, comma splices, and sentence fragments—are elucidated below:

i. Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is a sentence with two or more clauses not connected by correct conjunction or punctuation, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online (2021) and Oxford Learner's Dictionary Online (2021). It occurs when independent clauses run together without proper punctuation. According to McGraw and Tondy (2015), a run-on sentence can be corrected by separating two independent clauses into two sentences as follows:

*Today we had planned to go on a picnic it rained all afternoon.

Today we had planned to go on a picnic. It rained all afternoon.

The first sentence with an asterisk is ungrammatical as it doesn't split into two separate sentences. In the next sentence, a full stop is placed after a picnic and all afternoon, resulting in grammaticality. Run- on sentences can be corrected by adding a semicolon (;) between two independent clauses or by adding a coordinating conjunction and a comma, as shown in the following three sentences (Heffernan & Lincoln, 1994).

*The nuclear plant malfunctioned radiation levels were high.

The nuclear plant malfunctioned; radiation levels were high.

The nuclear plant malfunctioned, and radiation levels were high. (Heffernan and Lincoln, 1994)

ii. Comma Splices

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online (2021) defines a "comma splice" as "the use of a comma between coordinate main clauses not connected by a conjunction (as in "nobody goes there anymore, it's boring")". A comma splice is also defined as "two or more independent clauses joined with a comma but without a coordinating conjunction" (Hacker & Sommers, 2015, p. 218). Hacker and Sommers (2015, p. 218-219), further maintain a comma splice can be divided into two types; the comma appears alone and the comma is followed by any other kind of conjunction which is not a coordinating conjunction. Sample sentences are shown in the following two sentences respectively.

(a) *Air pollution poses risks to all humans, it can be deadly for asthma sufferers.

(b) *Air pollution poses risks to all humans, however, it can be deadly for asthma sufferers.

The above mentioned sentences are grammatically incorrect due to the fact that a comma cannot appear alone to join two independent clauses in (i); and however, known as a

transitional expression, is not a coordinating conjunction, so a comma cannot be used to combine the two sentences in (ii).

iii. Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete or minor sentences with some grammar, often used in responses like "in the afternoon" or "next week" (Berry, 2012). Langan (2008) explains that a word group that lacks a subject or a verb and does not express a complete thought is a fragment. Following are the most common types of fragments:

a. Dependent-word fragments as in 'After I cashed my paycheck. I treated myself to dinner.' (Langan, 2008, p.417)

b. –ing and to fragments as in 'Allen walked all over the neighbourhood yesterday. Trying to find her dog Bo. Several people claimed they had seen him only hours before.' (Langan, 2008, p.420).

c. Added-detail fragments as in 'Before a race, I eat starchy foods. Such as bread and spaghetti. The carbohydrates provide quick energy.' (Langan, 2008, p.423).

d. Missing-subject fragments as in 'Alicia loved getting wedding presents. But hated thank-you notes.' (Langan, 2008, p.425).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Indian context, Benzigar's (2013) study examined the errors made by Indian tertiary EFL learners in English. The researchers collected 165 English writings from six colleges in the Madurai district. They used free essay writing as a tool and were given the topic 'A Memorable Day' to write on. The students were given sufficient time to write, and the errors were analyzed in grammatical terms. The study found that Indian EFL learners committed a number of serious grammatical and syntactic mistakes, such as poor coordination, flawed sentence structures, incorrect word order, fragments, and run-ons/comma splices.

Sultan's (2015) study examined syntactic errors in Pakistani undergraduate students' written English at a renowned private university. The study involved 88 students from different academic writing courses. The students took a writing test and the corpus was analyzed using a content analysis approach. Major syntactic errors identified were erroneous verb phrases, run-on sentences, and ill-formed clauses. Verb phrases were the most challenging grammatical structure for learners, particularly in subject-verb agreement rules. Run-on sentences were the second-biggest category of syntactic errors.

In the Thai context, a study by Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn (2017) examined language errors in writing of English major students in Thailand, focusing on sentence construction. The study found that the most common errors were writing mechanics errors, subject-verb agreement errors, and fragments. In the Thai context, another study by Pornthanachotanan (2020) investigated three types of writing errors made by two groups of twelfth-grade students at a public college in Bangkok. Data was collected from 80 pieces of students' writings using Corder's error analysis paradigm (1974). The study found that comma splices were the most common error type in the science- math group, accounting for 44.44% of errors. In the intensive science-math group, run-on sentences were the most common error type, accounting for 47.24%. Sentence fragments were the second most common error type in both groups.

Another study in the Indonesian tertiary EFL context was conducted by Solikhah (2017). The study on seventh-semester students at IAIN Surakarta University, Indonesia, analyzed 10 English essay texts, focusing on sentence presentation and linguistic issues. The study found that syntactic errors, particularly the sentence-level problems, included fragments, choppy sentences, run-ons, and stringy sentences. The syntactic errors of highest frequency were choppy sentences, while the second highest frequency was sentence fragments. The sentence fragments included missing subject fragments and missing predicate fragments. The study underscores the importance of addressing syntactic errors in English language pedagogy.

In the Taiwanese context, Shirban and Lai, (2021) conducted a study to explore tertiary EFL students' grammatical and syntactic errors of their writing. The study, involving 430 students from a private university in central Taiwan, analyzed 5703 essays in 15 English writing classes. The study classified 63460 errors into four main groups, with the most problematic areas being i) wrong word order (51.55%); ii) omission of words and morphemes (21.30%); iii) errors in writing mechanics (15.13%), and iv) addition of unnecessary articles, words and conjunctions (12.01%).

In the Bangladesh EFL context, Hossain and Ashikullah's (2023) study analyzed linguistic errors in written texts of English department students at a Bangladeshi private university. They used Corder's error analysis model and collected 120 paragraphs from 60 students. The study found that the most frequently occurring grammar errors were in subject-verb agreement, fragments, word order, punctuation, prepositions, tenses, and articles. In the Bangladeshi tertiary EFL context, another study was conducted by Hossain (2024). The study focused on first-year English department students for essay writing tasks. Samples are chosen from three semi-urban universities in Bangladesh. Teachers were interviewed, and student essays were analyzed for errors. The study, in particular, focused on common errors made by the students. The findings revealed that the EFL learners' major writing errors included errors in writing mechanics, prepositions, tenses, subject-verb agreement, parallelism, and modifiers. The main reasons for these errors include poor background knowledge of English writing skills, excessive use of informal English, and lack of practice in improving writing skills.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study aimed to analyze the difficulties faced by tertiary EFL students in sentence constructions in their essay writing. The researchers used a qualitative research design to address the research issues, as written products are qualitative data. Qualitative data were collected from students' essays so that their errors could be described, classified, and explained. The researchers counted errors made by students using error tables and the MS Excel program. They compared these errors across different subcategories using summative content analysis (SCA), suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Schaaf et al. (2022), which involved analyzing written texts and counting targeted contents, or errors, and comparing them. The research aimed to determine students' writing errors in various major syntactic categories and subcategories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kemassi & Boulifa, 2019).

Research Participants

The study involved 70 tertiary EFL students, consisting of 50 females and 20 males, who were enrolled in Bachelor's programs related to linguistics, English, Mechatronics, Business, Law, and Computer Studies majors at seven universities located in Bangladesh. These universities

were spread across three different regions in the country: three public and four private universities. As the population was large, the present study used simple random sampling for recruiting student respondents from these universities (Morris, 1996; Bickman & Rog, 2008). All these students underwent a compulsory 13- year EFL learning experience in Bangla medium during primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels, gaining basic understanding of English and writing strategies. The study was conducted during the first or second academic year of the students. The researchers selected students with varying levels of writing proficiency, aided by their English language instructors, for the writing tests. The respondents received at least one English language course that taught them writing different genres, and at this level it was expected that the participants were able to write different types of English essays; consequently, their use of sentence structures and clauses could be examined easily.

Data Collection Instrument and Data Collection Method

The study utilized 70 handwritten narrative essays as qualitative content data. The essays were collected for a PhD project of the principal researcher examining writing problems among tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh. The narrative essays were written by 70 EFL tertiary students in Bangladesh between June 2022 and June 2023. The essays were part of the principal author's PhD project on writing problems among tertiary EFL students. The essays were written on the topic "A Memorable Day of Your University Life." The test was chosen for its focus on writing, as it allowed students to express themselves. Writing for oneself is a key source of data for writing studies, according to Hyland (2009). The principal researcher contacted EFL faculties of seven universities and obtained the required permission from all universities, the concerned faculty members, and students. The principal researcher, along with the faculty members and his co-researchers, arranged the test in every university where students were given one hour to handwrite their essays. The principal author as well as the faculty members invigilated the writing sessions and provided clarifications. The test was conducted in a regular class setting, allowing students to complete the task in their own comfortable environment, resulting in a sample that largely reflects spontaneous language use. After completion, students handed over their essays to the faculty members, who then handed over the test papers to the principal researcher.

Data Analysis Process

After collecting the test papers, the researchers obtained a corpus of 70 narrative essays. The researchers used Hsieh and Shannon's summative content analysis (2005) to analyze data from narrative essays. They identified errors through a three-round coding process and then quantified and categorized the errors into subcategories based on students' errors in sentence constructions. During the identification and classification of errors, the researchers also consulted the theories of Corder (1967), Halliday and Hassan (1976), and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). The data tables display coded errors as numbers and percentages. To compare difficulty levels of errors, the researchers recalculated the tabulated errors in some subcategories, presenting varying difficulty levels as percentages and numerical values. The frequencies of occurrence for the errors' types and sources were calculated as percentages, with $P = (F / N) \times 100$ representing the total number of cases. The results were displayed in charts using Microsoft Excel, providing answers to the research questions about the errors in sentence and clause constructions made by EFL students. Finally, the errors were evaluated from a pedagogical perspective to provide necessary recommendations to the relevant stakeholders.

Validity and Reliability of the Content Analysis Process

The researchers employed various methods to ensure the reliability and validity of their content analysis procedure. They first used manual text analysis to improve the validity of the analysis. Second, double reviewer coding was applied to improve reproducibility, reducing the effects of single-author coding bias. High consistency in coding was achieved through the intense involvement of the principal researcher and two experienced university EFL teachers as reviewers. Third, the qualitative study was conducted with rigor, focusing on gathering the best-written essays directly from the source. The principal researcher, along with his research assistants, visited seven universities and created a conducive writing environment for students to generate natural texts. A rigorous data analysis procedure was conducted over six months, ensuring the study's validity and reliability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Street & Ward, 2012).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Answer to the Research Question: What are the differences in difficulty levels among syntax categories such as run-ons, fragments, and comma splices in the writing of tertiary EFL students?

A total of 70 narrative essays were analyzed to find students' syntactic or sentence structure errors. The entire corpus was found to contain approximately 1400 sentences. Out of these 1400 sentences, 200 sentences had syntactic errors. Table 1 details major syntactic errors, their types and sub-types, frequency of occurrence, and percentage of each error category.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of error classification and the frequency distribution with percentage.

Sl.	Error Type	Frequency Count (*f*)	Percentage %	Rank
1.	**Run-ons**	79	39.5	2nd
2.	**Comma Splices**	31	15.5	3rd
3.	**Sentence Fragments:** i. errors in dependent-word fragments: 31 ii. errors in –ing and to fragments: 2 iii. errors in added-detail fragments: 51 iv. errors in Missing-Subject fragments: 6	90	45	1st
	Total	**200**	100%	
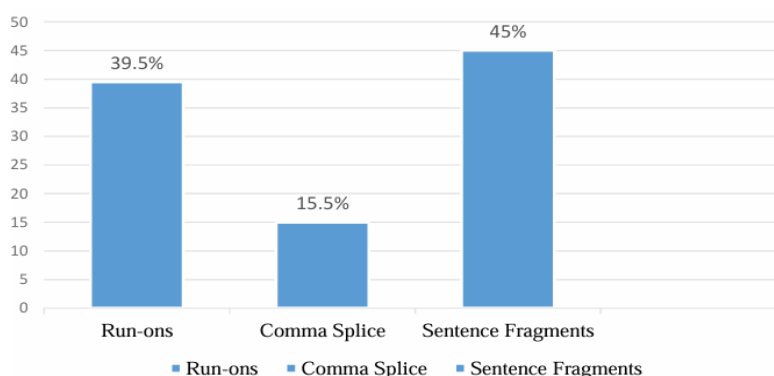
Figure 1: Represents varying levels of syntactic errors

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the most frequent type of error was sentence fragment involving 90 tokens, accounting for 45% of all types of errors followed by run-on involving 79 tokens and accounting for 39.5%. The least frequent syntactic error type was comma splice, involving 31 tokens and accounting for 15.5%.

Some representational examples of syntactic errors committed by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners are given below. At the end of the examples, the capital letters in brackets, U and S, denote university and student, respectively.

Run-ons:

i. "They struggled a lot they got brilliant results." (U6-S3)

ii. "I was afraid when I was entering in classroom in a few minutes I feel safe." (U6-S5)

iii. "Similarly I also have many memories the one which makes me happy is my first day in my university." (U6-S6)

iv. "In the very begening of my university life when I first enter from the main gate the authorities stoped me at that time I could not understand why they stoped me." (U6-S10)

Comma Splices

i. "I came to my university and at first I meet with my friends and we introduces all, we had a great time together." (U2-S2)

ii. "That day we enjoy a lot, teachers welcome us with there sweet speech." (U2-S5)

iii. "All sides of my campus made me more happy than before, there were a lot of buildings and a lot of nice places in my campus, it gave me a great pleasure." (U7-S5)

iv. "The buildings were furnished with colour, all the classrooms were well decorated." (U7-S5)

v. All the teachers are so good, they are too much humble. (U4-S1)

Sentence Fragments

i. "As, I couldn't attend our university programme on time. I feel very nervous and I could not find what should I do." (U2-S1)

ii. "The most memorable is, chatting in my beautiful canteen. Introducing with new friends." (U1-S2)

iii. "The first class of my university. It was my orientation class." (U7-S5)

iv. "I reached the university programme at 10:00am. So, couldn't attend the programme properly." (U2-S1)

Furthermore, the summative content analysis reveals that of all the four subcategories of sentence fragments, students made the highest errors in added-detail fragments (51), followed by errors in dependent-word fragments (31), errors in missing-subject fragments (6), and errors in –ing and to fragments (2) (see Table 2 and Figure 2 below):

Table 2: Sentence Fragments: Types, Frequency, Percentage and Rank

Sl.	Types of Sentence Fragments	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
i.	Errors in dependent-word fragments	31	34.4	2nd
ii.	Errors in –ing and to fragments	2	2.22	4th
iii.	Errors in added-detail fragments	51	56.6	1st
iv.	Errors in missing-subject fragments	6	6.66	3rd
	Total	90	100	

- ■ errors in dependent-word fragments
- ■ errors in –ing and to fragments
- ■ errors in added-detail fragments
- ■ errors in Missing-Subject fragments
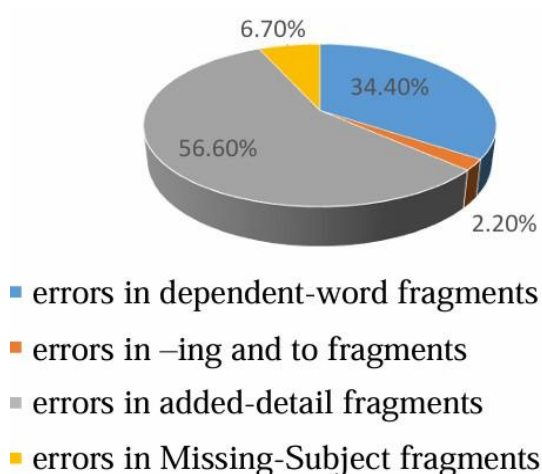
Figure 2: Shows varying levels of sentence fragment errors

Some representational examples of sentence fragments from various subcategories, committed by the students, are provided below:

Errors in dependent-word fragments

i. "Memories of our life are deeply attached with us. Because we live in hopes and memories." (U6-S4)

ii. "My first day of my university is a memorable day. Because, it is make me motivated and be strong." (U6-S4)

iii. "When I first enter my university I was very excited. As this time was very important for me." (U7-S7)

iv. "The library was also charming for us. Because in this library there were a lots of books." (U7-S1)

Errors in –ing and to fragments

i. "The most memorable is, chatting in the beautiful canteen. Introducing with new new friends." (U1-S2)

Errors in added-detail fragments

i.   "It was very boring. And damageful to my study." (U1-S7)

ii. "I attend the two classes. And I enjoyed the classes very much." (U4-S1)

iii. "I didn't know anyone in the class. But everyone was friendly." (U4-S6)

Errors in missing-subject fragments

i.   "But in my university have a beautiful greeny garden." (U1-S2)

ii. "I reached the university programme at 10:00am. So, couldn't attend the programme properly." (U2-S1)

iii. "The most memorable is, chatting in my beautiful canteen. Introduced with many new friends." (U1-S2)

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore a crucial phenomenon in second-language acquisition which is EFL students' fallibility in English syntax. Applying an error analysis approach to the error patterns, the present study articulates the understanding derived from previous studies (e.g., Pongwatcharapakron, 2014; Sermsook et al., 2017; Solikhah's 2017) that sentence fragments are the most frequent syntactical errors that EFL students of global contexts including those of Bangladesh commit. This syntactic lapse suggests that EFL students undergo a prolonged grappling with the holistic internalization of sentential completeness. In addition, when compared, the dimensions of the EFL students' committed errors in fragment sub-types reveal an asymmetry. Learners exhibit a relatively moderated tendency for committing syntactical deviations in the forms of -ing fragments and missing-subject fragments while a heightened occurrence of "added-detail fragments and dependent-word fragments is reflected in their EFL writing. This kind of understanding derived from the present study about asymmetrical dimensions in syntactical lapses is also corroborated in previous studies as well (e.g., Pornthanachotanan, 2020; Solikhah, 2017). The non-linear trajectory of syntactical internalization among EFL students may be influenced by socio-cognitive factors, leading to differential syntactic acquisition.

Furthermore, the study provides a global perspective on the syntactic unpredictability experienced by EFL students globally (e.g., Sultan, 2015; Benzigar, 2013; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha 2012; Solikhah, 2017) including those from Bangladesh. It is manifested in the second-highest syntactic deviations with run-ons. This finding underscores that EFL students undergo a longitudinal cognitive challenge to demarcate independent clauses. Precisely, EFL students exhibit a persistent performance failure in syntactical accuracy especially manifested in fragments and run-ons in their writing.

Besides reporting the above-mentioned dimension of syntactical difficulty, the present study also unveils an understanding of the ease of syntactical acquisition among EFL learners. From the findings, comma splice emerges as the EFL learners' dominant acquisition of the syntactical sub-skill. Their mastery of comma splice reflected in their writing gestures that EFL students tend to have a cognitive affinity with paratactic constructions of sentences and they, therefore, acquire this sub-skill best.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to understand the dimensions of EFL students' syntactical acquisition. Based on the discussion in the above section, the paper concludes that syntactical acquisition is an asymmetrical and non-linear course of cognitive internalization. Besides, the study confirms the transnational phenomenology of global EFL learners' syntactic instability, as they struggle with sentence fragmentation deviations over a long period. The transnationality of syntactic weakness among EFL writers is further reinforced by their persistent performance failure in the demarcation of independent clauses in the hypotactic constructions of sentences, resulting in too many run-ons. In addition, another remarkable dimension of EFL students' syntactic acquisition is that they acquire paratactic constructions of sentences like comma splices much more easily. Precisely, the present study manifests the understanding that EFL students undergo a longitudinal challenge of syntactical acquisition, and the phenomenon, therefore, deserves more scholarly attention from socio-cognitive perspectives for nuanced understanding. Apart from this, given the focused complexities around EFL students' syntactical acquisition, the present study implicates the following critical pedagogical reconfiguration:

- The pedagogy of syntaxes should be restructured to emphasize the teaching of syntactic subordination, a feature of hypotactic constructions.
- Pedagogical scaffolding should be differently directed to the hierarchical complexities of fragment sub-types.
- Traditional pedagogical paradigms should be shifted toward more dynamic, effective, and metacognitively enriched practice.
- Pedagogy of syntaxes should be reinforced by socio-cognitive schema and mediation.

This study contributes to error analysis (EA) but has limitations. First, this study is limited to only three syntactical sub-types including run-on sentences, comma splices, and sentence fragments. Further research may be directed to other sub-types that EFL students grapple with. Second, it is limited to corpus of narrative genres. Further, studies may, therefore, be undertaken to explore whether EFL students' performance has any intersectionality with genre divergences. Third, it is limited to first and second-year students. Further studies with different samples comprising Master's level students may be carried out to explore whether the EFL students' syntactical acquisition protract over more advanced years. Further, it is limited to qualitative approach. A positivist philosophy is imperative to quantitatively explore the generalizable truth about the phenomenon of syntactical acquisition. Finally, this study is limited to the students with a background education in Bengali medium and local curricula. Further studies, thus, may be ventured into exploring whether students' educational culture such as English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and Indigenous and Western curricula co-relate students' syntactical acquisition.

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