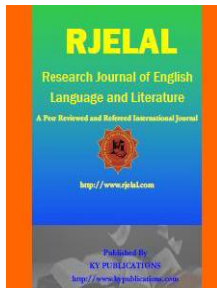**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

EXPLORING THE SENTENCE STRUCTURE AT A PARTICULAR GRADE LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study trying to establish a profile of student writing namely sentence structures in English of students at VI in terms of T-units. A written test of English, namely a short essay was set at the start of the school year. The essay was on an argumentative topic because argument is considered to give rise to the greatest variety in writing. The students were from average English-medium schools, and even from among these students, the most average were chosen on the basis of the previous year's marks in English.A study was also done of the performance of Std VI students at the end of the academic year, i.e. in February. It wasdifferent from the performance of these students at the beginning of the year. This is taken as the goal for the average student to reach. There could be parts of the syllabus which could take account of the brighter students, for these should not be neglected, as also for the students who had problems with English, so expectations could take account of both the higher and lower levels of the class, but which are realistically possible for Std VI students to achieve, though mainly concentrating on the average level.The study presented here shows that it is possible to state in terms of T-units the goals that are realistically possible for Std VI students.

KEY WORDS: Sentence Structure, Learning, Acquisition, T-Unit.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of introducing English as a second language in schools of Maharashtra is for students to gain proficiency in the language. Many language teachers believe that this can be achieved in stages as the child matures as its knowledge and exposure to the language increases over several years.Hence at different levels in school it would appear realistic to have limited objectives so as to attain one objective at a time. For example if the development of a structure of a sentence is taken into consideration, an awareness of the sentence structure acquired in each standard would enable curriculum designers to create a teaching pedagogy accordingly. Therefore when the child moves from one standard to the next he/she gains proficiency in the production of sentences in stages. The text books then could provide an adequate presentation of writing sentences correctly in a learnable order.

In the SSC curriculum, the dominant curriculum in the State of Maharashtra, English language text-books at every standard seem to focus on the teaching of grammatical patterns. At every standard the language text-book contains exercises on

aspects of grammar such as parts of speech, transformation of sentences, formation of words, figures of speech, change of voice, direct and reported speech and many others. Thus development of sentence structure is looked at and is studied in isolation and not as part of a communicative context. Thus it ends up being an exercise in "mental gymnastics" and a tool to achieve high grades.

Many linguists tried to establish a relationship between mental structures and the development of language. The linguistic interest in the relationship between the human brain and cognition arose when the view of language as a cognitive system replaced the philosophy of behaviorism which dominated American linguistics in the '50's and '60's. In 1965, Noam Chomsky, proposed the theory that all people have an innate, biological ability to acquire a language. He put forward the view that people possess a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a sort of neurological wiring in the mind that, regardless of the language to be acquired, allows a child to listen to a language, decipher the rules of that language, and begin creatively using the language at a very young age. With the LAD they are able to make or understand utterances that they have not previously heard. Their first language is acquired with no direct instruction, no practice, and no drills and with no apparent difficulty. As a consequence of Chomsky's path-breaking work, linguists, psychologists and language teachers got activated to carry his work forward and explore its possible ramifications. In the field of language teaching, it was found that, in fact instruction in teaching language prevented the stimulation of, and interfered with, the natural order sequence or the unfolding of the linguistic agenda imprinted in the mind of children. Instruction is basically grammar-oriented, and not attuned to communication which is the way a child learns its first language. If grammar is to be the basis of language teaching, its role would have to be completely recast to reflect the psychological processes of the acquisition of grammar in the child. A whole school of Applied linguists developed where it was held that there is a natural order sequence of morpheme acquisition. This therefore nullified the idea that students acquired the structure of a language in the order in which they were taught. This they concluded after they found that all attempts to correct errors at a certain stage invariably failed because students kept committing them.

Acquisition Studies gave evidence of an order in which learners acquire language structure. It was Roger Brown's longitudinal study of the acquisition of English as first language that inspired L2 researchers to pursue the fact that there exists an acquisition order for certain English structures characteristic to L2 learners. Brown studied three unacquainted children, Adam, Eve and Sara. He analysed their speech collected at weekly intervals over a four-year period which revealed that the children learned fourteen English grammatical morphemes in a similar order

The first published study that investigated acquisition order for L2 learners was by Dulay and Burt in 1973 which was a pilot study of eight English grammatical morphemes acquired in the speech of six-to – eight year old Spanish speaking children. The strikingly similar acquisition sequences and the results suggested the possibility of a universal or natural order in which L2 learners acquire certain syntactic and morphological structures.

Dulay and Burt 1974 investigated deeper in this area by comparing the acquisition sequences of Chinese – speaking children for eleven grammatical morphemes. Both the studies gave the impression that the grammatical morphemes were acquired in a clear and linear order.

That children acquired certain grammatical morphemes in a predictable order was replicated in two other studies of Fathman (1975) and Kessler and Ida (1979); the results of which showed the learning order similar to Dulay and Burt (1974). Thus it was concluded that it was highly probable that children of different learning backgrounds learning English in a variety of environments acquire grammatical morphemes in a similar order.

With evidence of syntax acquisition in sequences as seen in various studies it therefore is apparent that at a particular age/grade a child will have acquired syntactic structures. What Chomsky characterized as the kernel sentence is similar to Kellogg Hunt's T-unit (Minimal Terminal Unit of Syntax) in his

research *Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels* and on which this study is a replication of.

In his study Hunt reported his findings on freely produced language of pupils in grades four, eight, and twelve. Hunt tried to find a dependable and consistent way of segmenting student compositions; and he finally adopted the technique of dividing bodies of writing into what he identified as "minimal terminal syntactic unity" (T-units in abbreviated form).

He defined this unit of measurement as follows:

"They /T-units/ are terminable in the sense that it is grammatically acceptable to terminate each one with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end. They are 'minimal' in the sense that they are the shortest units into which a piece of discourse can be cut without leaving any sentence fragments as residue...each is exactly one main clause plus whatever subordinate clauses are attached to that main clause".

Hunt concluded that the average length of the T-unit correlated closely with the maturity of the writer: the average T-unit got longer as the writer matured in age. Hunt's method of analysis now seemed to hold promise for studies in second language learning.

Following from the studies of language acquisition particularly the acquisition of grammatical structures , it was felt that in order to improve the teaching of English in standard sixth, information on what grammatical structures a child is capable of producing at this standard would be crucial. Kellogg Hunt's study provided a basis to explore this area which had not been previously studied in the Indian context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section explains the research design of the study and discusses the methods used to collect data in order to investigate the grammatical sentence structure acquired by a child studying English at the sixth standard.

HYPOTHESES

There would be a profile of written grammatical structures acquired by students of standard six during the academic year considered.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In the study only written grammatical constructs were taken into consideration. Sentences would be analysed in terms of the T-unit, following Kellogg Hunt.

For this purpose:

a. A study was conducted of the essays written by students studying in standard VI in English-medium schools at two intervals during the academic year. Patterns in the development of grammatical structures were observed in order to determine whether all students followed similar patterns.

SUBJECTS

The students were regular students studying in standard VI from three English-medium schools of Mumbai, affiliated to the Maharashtra State Board of Education. They were average middle-class students and all shared a strong Marathi background, and mainly used Marathi and Hindi outside school.

For the study of Std VI, 60 students were chosen. They consisted of both boys and girls. They were "average" IQ students as decided by their class teacher based on their past year academic scores in English at the SSC examination. They were randomly chosen.

EXPERIMENTERS

The regular English subject teachers were assigned the task of making the students write the essays, so it would not be apparent to the students that they were part of an experiment.

MATERIAL AND PROCEDURES

Regular classroom periods were used to obtain the data and students were not informed that their work would be used for a research study, in order to get unbiased, 'normal' data.

Two written assignments at standard VI were assigned to the students as part of the regular classroom teaching at the beginning of the school academic year and towards the end of the school academic year. In July /August the essay '*Should Games be made compulsory in School*?' and in January/February the essay '*Is the Television Important to You*?' were assigned.

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The writing was done in class in their regular classroom periods and was not altered by anyone other than the writer. The analysis was done by the investigator.

The time given for the students was the regular English class timing of 45 minutes. The writing tasks were discursive in nature, which provided scope for the students to use a variety of grammatical and rhetorical patterns.

DATA ANALYSIS

The writing was segmented into units based on the T-unit as used by Kellogg Hunt. The average length of Single-clause T-units (those with only a main clause, like a simple sentence) was separated from the average length of a Multi-clause T-unit (a main clause plus one or more dependent clauses, like a complex sentence).

Only T-units that were correctly produced were considered.

The following is an example of the analysis of the essay produced by a student

S1 Games should be made compulsory in school. 7 S2 With the games our body gets exercise.7 S3 After playing games we become active.6 S4 Everyday we should play games for one hour.8 S5 If we will not play then cannot play.

In the above essay only S1, S2, S3 and S4 are taken into consideration. S5 is not considered because it is grammatically incomplete and incorrect.

The analysis was further tabulated as:

	No. of T-units	Length of T-units in words	Simple	Complex	Compound	Comp/Comp
S1	01	07	07	-	-	-
S2	01	07	07	-	-	-
S3	01	06	-	06	-	-
S4	01	08	08	-	-	-

The analysis for the essay would thus be:

1. The length of the essay is 28 words
2. The number of T-units correctly produced is 4
3. The number of single clause T-units is 3
4. The number of multi clause T-units is 1
5. The length of all T-units is 28 words
6. The length of all single clause T-units is 22 words
7. The length of the multi clause T-units is 6 words
8. The number of two clause T-units is 01
9. The number of three clause T-units is zero
10. There are no T-unit connectors.
11. There are no co-ordinators

In such a manner the essays of all students were analysed and the following were statistically arrived at:

1. The mean length of the essay
2. The mean number of T-units
3. The mean number of single clause T-units.
4. The mean number of multi clause T-units
5. The mean length of all T-units
6. The mean length of single clause T-units
7. The mean length of multi clause T-units
8. The mean number of two clause T-units
9. The mean number of three clause T-units
12. List of T-unit connectors
13. List of coordinators

The data was analysed for both the essays assigned to standard sixth. The statistical *t*-test was then administered in order to find out if there was a difference in nos. 1 to 11 between the essay produced in July and the essay produced in February. If there was a difference it would therefore be assumed that there is learning taking place in standard sixth.

On the basis of this analysis, a list of patterns (grammatical/rhetorical) was drawn up which were considered to characterize the writing of Std VI studentsfrom English-medium schools, coming from a strong Marathi background.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Due to time constraints the study was limited only to students of Std VI. Analysis of each T-unit produced by each student was very time consuming and hence limited only to one class.

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RESULTS

The analysis of the data of grammatical structures in terms of T-units acquired at Std VI during the course of the year is done.The growth in writing ability is analysed in July-August and towards the end of the year in February. The mean values for the parameters in the essay written in July-August and in February are calculated and analysed. The essays of 60 students are considered in the analysis. Table 1 reflects the analysis of the writing of Std VI students in July-August and in February. The parameters reflect the growth in terms of the length of the essay, the number of T-units produced, the number of single-clause T-units produced and the number of multi-clause T-units produced. This performance at the end of the academic year, i.e. in February, therefore, is different from their performance at the beginning of the year.

TABLE 1: Student performance in the selected parameters at Std VI at the beginning and end of the year (July-August and February)

S.NO	PARAMETERS	July-Aug	February
1	Mean length of the essay in words	74	106
2	Mean number of T-units correctly produced	8	11
3	Mean number of single-clause T-units correctly produced	6	8
4	Mean number of multi-clause T-units correctly produced	2	3
5	Mean length of each T-unit in words	9	10
6	Mean length of single-clause T-units in words	8	8
7	Mean length of multi-clause T-units in words	10	12
8	The mean number of 2-clause T-units produced	2	3
9	The mean number of 3-clause T-units produced	0.1	0.4

*N.B.:*Essay: *Should Games be made compulsory in school?* **(July-August)**

Essay: *Is television important for you?* **(February)**
No. of students: 60

In order to arrive at what a Std VI student is capable of producing; it is possible to consider what the Std VI student produces in terms of T-units at the end of the year i.e. the final stage of achievement in Std VI. But it is also possible to look at student performance over the whole year to get an idea of what his/her level is. So, student performance at Std VI can also be considered in terms of the average of the two mean scores of July-August and February. In terms of syllabus planning, we should aim at the student reaching the level of performance reached by the current students at the February test. In terms of realistic expectations through the year, the average of the two tests would constitute a standard. The following is a summary of the average scores of Std VI, considering both beginning and end of year performance.

1. The mean length of the essay produced is 74 words in July-August and 90 words in February, an average of 82 words.
2. The mean length of each T-unit produced in the essay is 9 words in July-August, and 10 words in February, an average of 9.5 words

3. The mean length of single–clause T-units is 8 words in July-August and 8 words in February, an average of 8 words.
4. The mean length of multi-clause T-units is 10 words in July-August and 12 words in February, an average of 11 words.
5. The mean number of T-units produced is 8 in July-August and 11 in February, an average of 9.5 T-units.
6. The mean number of single-clause T-units is 6 in July-August and 8 in February, an average of 7 T-units.
7. The mean number of multi-clause T-units is 2 in July-August and 3 in February, an average of 2.5 T-units.
8. The mean number of two-clause T-units produced is 2 in July-August and 3 in February, an average of 2.5 T-units.
9. The mean number of three-clause T-units is 1.

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the writing of Std VI students in July-August and at the end of the year in February, it was found that the performance at the end of the year was different from the performance of these students at the beginning of the year. The study

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presented here shows that it is possible to state in terms of T-units the goals that are realistically possible for Std VI students.

It can be concluded that on an average, students at Std VI can be expected to produce in connected writing:

a. An essay of 74 words at the beginning of the year and 106 words at the end of the year, an average of 82 words.

b. At least 8 T-units at the beginning of the year and 11 at the end of the year, an average of 9.5 T-units.

c. At least 6 single-clause T-units at the beginning of the year and 8 at the end of the year, an average of 7 single-clause T-units.

d. At least 2 multi-clause T-units at the beginning of the year and 3 at the end of the year, an average of 2.5 multi-clause T-units.

e. At least 2 two-clause T-units at the beginning of the year and 3 at the end of the year, an average of 2.5 two-clause T-units.

f. At least 1 three-clause T-unit at the beginning and at the end of the year.

g. At least T-units of 9 words at the beginning of the year and 10 words at the end of the year, an average of 9.5 words

h. Single-clause T-units of at least 8 words at the beginning as well as at the end of the year, an average of 8 words.

i. Multi-clause T-units of at least 10 words at the beginning of the year and 12 words at the end of the year, an average of 11 words.

j. At least 4 T-units with less than 09 words at the beginning of the year and 5 at the end of the year, an average of 4.5 T-units of less than 9 words.

k. At least 1 T-unit with more than 20 words at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year.

CONCLUSION

The curriculum therefore can be designed according to the above expectations. Since at Std VI the student is attempting to handle the three-clause T-unit, teaching could be directed to that area.Some recommendations that can be put forth as an approach to teaching grammar in the context of writing are as follows.Studies like the one presented here need to be done with different groups of students and at different grade levels in order to come up with realistic expectations of levels it is possible to achieve.Further it is recommended that parts of the syllabus could be designed to also cater to brighter students as well as students having problems with English. The exercises thus would take into account of both higher and lower levels in the class though mainly concentrating on the average level students.

This is a pilot study of what can be achieved at the Std VI of English-medium schools of the SSC Board in the State of Maharashtra. The English language text-books, therefore, need to be re-visited in order to further understand the teaching-learning process and how it can be made effective.

Such a profile of student ability in English provides a realistic standard/ goal for the teaching of English at Std VI in other English-medium schools as well. Being based on actual data, realistic goals can be held out for students and not something that they cannot hope to achieve. Courses based on such data are likely to lead to much better learning.

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