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The Use of Complex Noun Phrases in Essay Writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates first-year students at the University of Vavuniya and their ability to construct complex noun phrases in academic essay writing. Complex noun phrases, including pre- and post-modifiers, are essential for mature academic writing and effective communication of compact information. With simple random sampling using a mixed-method approach, the study finds that students primarily used simple noun phrases with minimal embedding, mainly relying on prepositional phrases as post-modifiers. Most noun phrases were endocentric, and students frequently made errors, such as misordering, plural-singular misuse, malformations, and inappropriate word choices, highlighting a critical need for enhanced grammatical instruction. The findings reveal that students struggle with forming complex noun phrases, typically using only one or two modifiers, indicating a basic level of proficiency. The study recommends targeted training in noun phrase construction, emphasising <quantifier + head> agreement pattern and specific writing strategies. Strengthening students' ability to use complex noun phrases improves their writing clarity, conciseness, and overall academic proficiency. Mastering noun phrase construction allows writers to convey detailed information efficiently, enhancing their ability to write well-structured and high-quality academic essays.

Keywords: Noun phrase complexity, Pre- and post-modifiers, ESL learners, Essay writing at the tertiary Level, Sri Lankan context

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Introduction

Writing is a more prominent skill among the four skills in English language learning as a second language in the text-oriented academic setting. Rather than a choice, it becomes mandatory in the educational and professional pathways with the advancement of globalised education and technology. According to (Canagarajah, 2005; Gooneratne, 1968, as cited in Herath, 2021), it is recommended that secondary and postsecondary education be conducted in English.

"Students must develop their written communication skills to succeed in the workplace of the twenty-first century" (Wagner, 2010, as cited in Jitpraneechai, 2019). Graefen (1996) highlights that students are expected to learn how to write particular kinds of technical documents relevant to their fields while attending university.

For students, using complex noun phrases in essay writing is indispensable. Complex noun phrases (NP) are frequently used in academic and academic-oriented writing. Learners can elaborate on nouns by forming a noun phrase using adjectives as premodification (i.e., a big lazy white cat) and prepositional phrases as post-modification (i.e., the girl in the classroom). Piršl et al. (2011) state that one of the most important prerequisites for success in a university study is having strong writing abilities. It enhances the quality of academic writing skills that are important for higher studies, especially university education. "Writing skill is often the factor which decides whether a student is successful at university or not" (Piršl et al., 2011. p.70).

According to Gardner et al.(2018), the development of writing skills is a crucial factor in students' success in higher educational settings like universities where specialised linguistic proficiency is required (Biber et al., 2011, as cited in Frempong et al., 2023) stated that nominal complexity is an indicator of academic writing maturity. Learners of second languages demonstrate their proficiency in writing as they acquire and use grammatical structures in their writing. The study signifies the importance of complex noun phrases in academic essay writing at the tertiary level.

Moreover, international examinations like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) standardised exams assess non-native speakers' proficiency in the English language to admit them to English-speaking universities. These tests include argumentative essays and other writing task genres as prominent parts. The complexity of nominal and multiple embedded phrases is essential to maintaining the writing standard in the academic setting.

The preliminary analysis reveals a significant gap in the employment of complex NPs by first-year students, indicating a potential hindrance in meeting the academic writing standards necessary for both university success and professional readiness. The students need more competence and performance in phrase structures to improve their essay writing as an academic assignment. Complex noun phrases support students in maintaining the standards

and requirements of academic writing when responding to examinations and assignments. Xu (2019) highlights that complex noun phrases are a distinctive feature of academic writing. The study provides insights into the extent to which first-year students use noun phrase modifiers to form complex noun phrases, and it helps teachers decide whether to implement personalised attention and instruction. The empirical gap is found as this study area is rarely researched in the Sri Lankan context at the tertiary level.

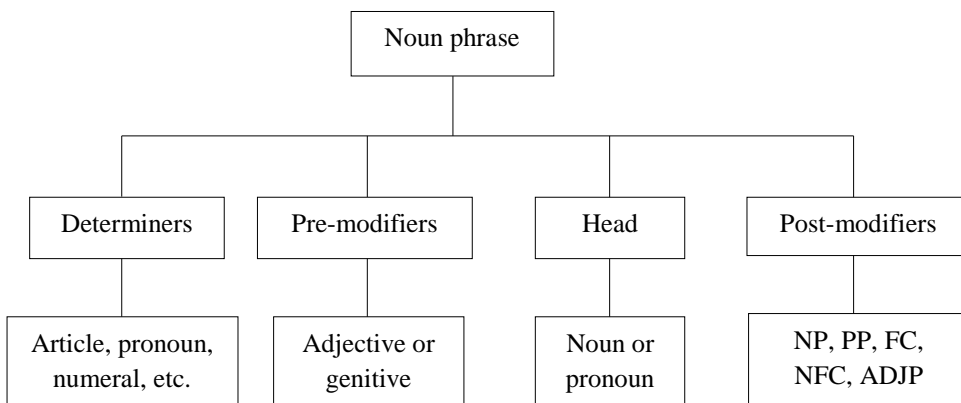
Significance of the Study

This study focuses on language development at the tertiary level in written language through one syntactical structure, the noun phrase. Analysing phrase structure enhances a better understanding of the internal structures and grammatical nuances, which facilitates improving students' essay writing. Current research on the emergence of noun phrase components is limited in the Sri Lankan context, which has an increasing need to show language maturity and linguistic competence in academic writing.

Peng et al. (2022) state that complexity has been deemed a reliable indicator for evaluating writing quality. Using complex noun phrases is crucial for developing academic-oriented writing for several reasons, such as it provides a concise way to include additional information in the writer's expression. Gaining control of NP complexity is essential to mastering school language because it is a defining characteristic of mature academic writing (Biber et al., 2011; Schleppegrell, 2004, as cited in Durrant & Brenchley, 2023). The following diagram illustrates the significance of the complexity of the noun phrase.

Figure 1

Formation of Noun phrase Complexity



Understanding and mastering the complexity of noun phrases are integral to academic success and linguistic maturity. This research contributes to the form of knowledge by mapping the usage patterns of complex NPs among university students in Sri Lanka and emphasising the need for targeted instructional strategies to enhance students' academic writing skills.

Ravid and Berman (2010) and Staples et al. (2016) mention that students in adolescence and during their university years (that is, ages 18-22) construct complex noun phrases. However, observations and preliminary analyses reveal that first-year students at the University of Vavuniya face significant challenges in employing complex noun phrases effectively within their academic essay writing. This discrepancy raises questions about the linguistic and educational foundations provided to these students, suggesting a gap in their preparedness for university-level academic writing.

Objective

This study aims to comprehensively assess first-year University of Vavuniya students' use of complex noun phrase (NP) structures in their academic essay writing. The essay deals with sentence structure, style, and logical flow (Rizvi & Menger, 2013). Specifically, it seeks to quantify the extent of their proficiency in employing noun phrase modifiers for constructing complex NPs. This objective is grounded in the broader goal of identifying potential gaps in students' linguistic competencies and the educational practices designed to develop these critical academic writing skills.

Research Question

To what extent can first-year University of Vavuniya students construct and employ complex noun phrases in essay writing?

Literature Review

This section covers the literature reviewed and the past research findings related to the study.

Writing at the University Level

Frempong et al.(2023) state that writing skills are essential for students who want to participate in the scholarly language community. Writing as ESL/ EFL is regarded as one of the most challenging dominant skills because of its trend of broad prospects and involvement of macro elements and nuances. Ortega (2003) asserts that creative and precise writers are better complex language users. However, the learners have the basic knowledge they learned for many years. Writing in English is complex, and writing for academic purposes or professional settings is even more challenging (Jitpraneechai, 2019). Jitpraneechai (2019) continues by pointing out that writing in English is one of the most complicated abilities. Syntactic complexity is one of the factors used to assess language development, and writing quality is one indicator that distinguishes students of different proficiency (Wang & Stater, 2016).

Wagner (2010), as cited in Jitpraneechai (2019), states that effective written communication is one of the skills students need to advance in their careers in the 21st century job market, where managerial systems are to be handled smartly in the computer era. Kuh and Schneider (2008) survey points out that writing skills are most frequently addressed in college

and university studies. Academic writing skill enhancement is important at university as students should be able to express their ideas in grammatically complex discourse (Staples et al., 2016).

In summary, the literature reviewed establishes a foundation for understanding the critical nature of writing skills in higher education and the professional world. It highlights the need for detailed investigation into the specific area of noun phrase complexity, identifying it as a crucial element of academic writing that necessitates focused study and pedagogical intervention.

Noun Phrase¹

“Noun phrase is an extension of a noun in which one or more adjectives or modifiers are used with the noun” (Prematilake, 2023, p.1). Ba'dulu (2008), cited in Junaid (2018), states that a noun phrase is a word group with a noun as its head. “A noun phrase may consist of a determiner, an article, a possessive pronoun, a numeral, or a demonstrative, and a head slot filled by a noun”(Junaid, 2018, p.318), establishing the structural integrity of the noun phrase. According to Jackson (1985), a pre-modifier, a head, and a post-modifier potentially construct the English noun phrase (NP)². Therefore, the noun phrase is a prime indicator of a maturing academic style (Durrant & Brenchley, 2023).

The phrase² structure of a sentence is created using rules of phrase structure. Rules of transformation use phrase structures to produce longer, more complex sentences. According to Chomsky (1967), Transformational Generative Grammar theory explains the phenomena of the process of grammatical knowledge in the human brain. Further, Chomsky (1967) elaborates that the human brain has the tendency and capability to form any length of a sentence using building blocks such as phrases and clauses for syntactic complexity. For instance, a simple sentence has a very complex noun phrase as a subject (Green et al., 2008).

E.g.,

- The girl is Mary Smith.
- The girl is pretty.
- The girl is standing in the corner.
- ***The pretty girl standing in the corner*** is Mary Smith (Green Baum & Quirk, 2008).

¹ A noun phrase can have one headword and two or more modifiers from the same or different word classes.

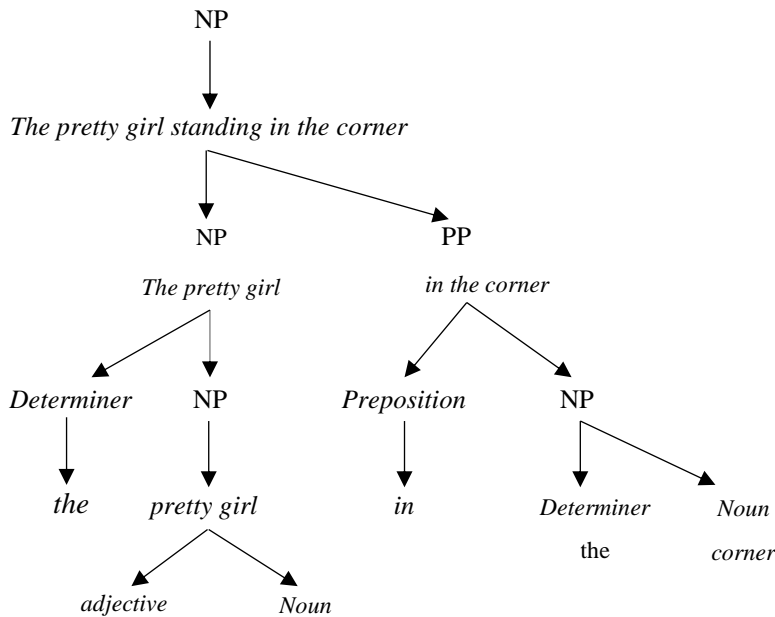
² There are two types of phrases (1) A phrase that is exocentric, meaning that its main constituent or constituents do not work together as a whole. For instance, the prepositional phrase *in the hotel* is exocentric since the constituent in the hotel performs differently from the prepositional phrase. (2) If one of its parts serves the same linguistic purpose as the other, it is endocentric. For instance, *John* is a noun in the phrase ‘*good old John*’ Exocentricity (vs endocentric) is a concept first introduced by Bloomfield (1933), who applied it from both a syntactic and semantic standpoint: 1) a compound with no (semantic) head; or 2) a compound with a head that ‘falls outside’ of the construction, hence the term “exocentric” (where the prefix *exo-*, which comes from Greek, means ‘outside’).

Though the above sentence is simple, it has a complex noun phrase as the subject with a detailed compact of meaning.

For example, *The pretty girl standing in the corner* is Mary Smith.

Figure 2

Tree diagram



Noun Phrase Complexity (NPC)

Durrant and Brenchley (2023) elaborate that NPC is defined as the extent to which to elaborate on nouns through premodification (e.g. *the beautiful girl*) and post-modification (e.g. *the man at the bus stop*). Peng and Azmi (2022) state that complexity has been recognized as a trustworthy criterion for assessing the calibre of writing. Further, the authors claim that as writers gain more writing proficiency, they modify nouns more sophisticatedly. According to Berlage (2014), formal complexity is most frequently described in the number of constituent units present. Staples et al. (2016) state that the development of phrasal complexity becomes most apparent during university years. Though the studies of Ravid and Berman (2010) and Staples et al. (2016) mention that students primarily develop during late adolescence and in their university years (that is, 18-22), show complex noun phrases, the students at the University of Vavuniya are unable to show their competence and performance in this regard successfully.

Biber et al. (2016) explain that a simple noun phrase is a phrase with a determiner and head noun, and additions to this simple structure make them more grammatically complex. In

the Sri Lankan context, the students seem weak in exhibiting complex noun phrases in their academic essay writing; however, they are expected to construct complex forms of the noun phrase with layers of embeddedness to elevate the standard of their writing. Complexity has been recognised as a trustworthy criterion for assessing writing quality. Biber et al. (2011), as well as Biber et al. (2020), underscore that when elaborating on sentences in academic texts, writers progress from using finite, dependent clauses as clause components to phrases that serve as noun phrase modifiers. According to the current study, students rarely showed such variations using finite dependent clauses as clause components to phrases in forming noun-phrase modifiers. At the tertiary level, the low extent of writing performance shows the declining standard of English medium students.

Noun phrases are expected of advanced students' academic writing, even for native English writers. Biber and Gray (2010) note that greater reliance on phrasal expressions results from the need for denser textual information that helps texts be economical and facilitates faster reading. The study of Biber and Gray (2010), in line with Halliday's (1993) claim that using nominal expressions instead of clausal structures results in a more compressed text (Biber et al., 2011).

As Greenbaum and Quirk (2007) argue, an NP may contain three fundamental elements: the head noun, premodification, and post-modification. Premodification comprises all the items placed before the head, notably determiners, adjectives, and nouns (Greenbaum & Quirk, 2007).

Such complexity in noun phrases is not merely an academic exercise but a fundamental component of effective writing, reflecting the writer's ability to learn and utilise the intricacies of language. The development and use of complex noun phrases thus represent a crucial skill in academic writing, enabling students and scholars to articulate their thoughts with precision and depth. This exploration into the nature and utility of noun phrases forms a pivotal part of understanding linguistic competence in academic contexts.

Past Study Findings

Junaid's (2018) study examines the student's English noun phrase construction proficiency and the reasons for errors in English noun phrase construction. Forty students from the University Of Muhammadiyah Makassar Indonesia made up the study's sample population in the fifth semester of the English Department. The test was conducted to gather the data for this study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The findings showed that students used 32 noun phrases, forming patterns that covered accuracy and inaccuracy construction. These Noun Phrase patterns included identifiers, adjectives, noun modifiers, quantifiers, preposition phrases, participle clauses, conjunctions, and indefinite clauses, all with a noun as their head.

Jitpraneechai (2019) focused on the complexity of noun phrases in argumentative English essays of Thai and native English-speaking university students. It used Biber et al. (2011) hypothesised developmental stages to investigate academic writing. Manual identification and

coding were used to identify and classify prenominal and postnominal modifiers. It was discovered that both writing groups heavily rely on adverbs of description, nouns as pre-modifiers, and prepositional phrases as post-modifiers. Prenominal modifier use was mainly similar in both writing groups. This research could lead to a better understanding of the types of complex noun phrases undergraduates use.

Peng and Azmi (2022) investigated the differences in noun modification among three international postgraduates from China and three local Malaysian postgraduates at a prestigious university in Malaysia. They coded, categorised, counted, and compared the noun modifiers in their research proposals. The results showed that the EFLs used pre-modifiers more often than the other group, particularly for attributive adjectives and nouns as pre-modifiers. In contrast, the ESLs used advanced post-modifiers more frequently, such as prepositions other than 'of', as post-modifiers to express both concrete/locative meanings and abstract meanings and multiple prepositional phrases with levels of embedding.

Durrant and Brenchley's (2022) analysis of 240 texts written by children in England between the ages of 6 and 16 showed that overall complexity constantly increases after primary school. Post-modification, particularly relative clauses and prepositional phrases is the leading cause of increasing noun phrase complexity. Additionally, there are observable patterns of overuse and underuse of specific NP components. The same practice is observed in the current study as well.

The studies on noun phrase construction are mostly conducted in some South Asian countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and so on; however, many of them are comparative studies. One such study was conducted in Sri Lanka, 'A Comparative Study of Hindi-English Noun Phrases in the Translation Field' (Prematilake, 2023). As a result, scarcely past research findings could be found in the Sri Lankan context to support the current study.

Methodology

Sample and Sampling Technique

As the study aims to comprehensively assess the extent of noun phrase complexity used by the students to create the sample, the researcher targeted a small group of eight students who are 10% of the total population in a batch from the Faculty of Business Studies, University of Vavuniya. The researcher recognized noun phrases based on the syntactic rule instructing two or more words headed by a noun with modifiers. All modifiers, including the determiners, were identified and coded for each noun phrase in the students' essay writing. This study examines, from the corpus-driven approach, the linguistic realisation of phrasal complexity in essays written by undergraduate L2 writers of the Business Management stream. The study used a descriptive research design to describe the information regarding the syntactic analysis of the student's essay writing to assess the capacity to construct complex noun phrases. The study sample consisted of eight scripts of 1655 words written by the

students using random sampling from the first-year second-semester students who follow the course in English medium.

Data Collection

The data were gathered through a summative assignment of the semester examination and manually coded in the Excel spreadsheet. Essay writing is a compulsory question for the students. Micro Soft Excel application was used to analyse the data to calculate mean, median scores and standard deviation. A mixed-method research design was applied, but the data was analysed predominantly quantitatively.

This systematic data collection and analysis process underpins the contribution of the study to the field, offering evidence-based observations on the linguistic capabilities of university students in the context of English-medium academic writing.

Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion

The bar charts indicate the students' use of noun phrases with pre-modifiers and the level of complexity. The S3³ used only nouns as modifiers (noun+head), and S8⁴ used articles for 50% and nouns for 50% as the pre-modifiers, respectively. S3 and S8 formed simple noun phrases and did not show a level of complexity, which is considered a weak form of expressing concrete ideas in the academic context of advanced learners. Modifiers provide additional specific information about the head. With an increased number of pre-post-modifiers embedded with various clauses and phrases, the complexity also increases, which expresses more details about the head to become denser and enhance the meaning of a sentence. Further, modifiers offer detail to make a sentence more engaging, explicit, or specific. S4, S5, S6, and S7 show comparatively significant noun complexity; however, they display a better complexity level than S3 and S8, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

³ Student number three (S3)

⁴ Student number four (S4)

Figure 3

Pre-modifiers used by the student

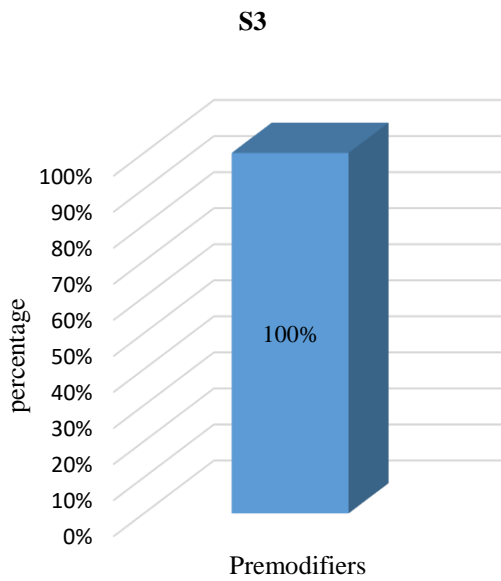


Figure 4

Pre-modifiers used by the student

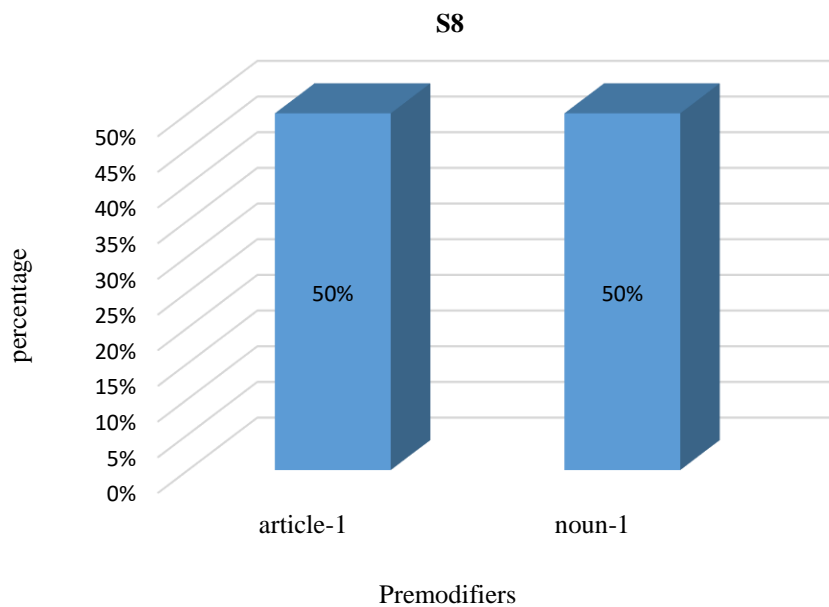


Figure 5

Pre-modifiers used by the student

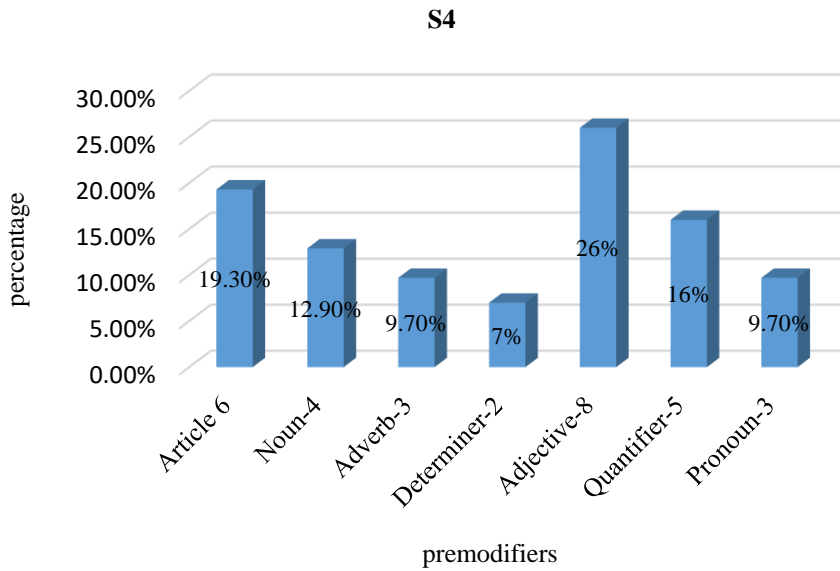


Figure 6

Pre-modifiers used by the student

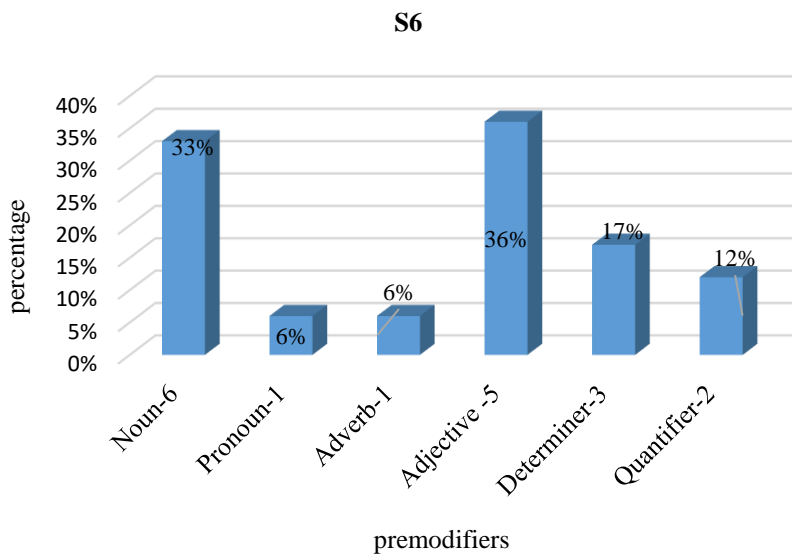


Table 1*Distribution of statistics values*

SN	Article	Noun	Pronoun	Adjective	Adverb	Quantifier	Determiner	Numerical number
S1	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
S2	25%	0%	25%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%
S3	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
S4	19.30%	12.90%	9.70%	26%	9.70%	16%	7%	0%
S5	29%	21%	7.10%	14.20%	0%	14.20%	7.10%	7.10%
S6	0%	33%	6%	36%	6%	17%	17%	0%
S7	6%	28%	22%	17%	0%	17%	11%	0%
S8	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Mean	19%	31%	9%	18%	2%	8%	5%	1%
Median	22%	25%	7%	16%	0%	8%	4%	0%
Mode	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Star. D	17.2%	33.6%	9.9%	18.5%	3.8%	8.6%	6.4%	2.5%

Table 1 shows the students' use of modifiers to form complex noun phrases. The results show that the mean score for the noun itself as a modifier for the noun phrase is 31%, the article as a modifier 19%, and the third adjective as a modifier 18%. In contrast, pronouns, adverbs, quantifiers, determiners, and numerical numbers exhibit considerably lower usage rates, highlighting areas where students may lack confidence or knowledge in enhancing noun phrase complexity. The lowest and highest performance of mean scores are 1% and 31%. The standard deviation value of 17.2% indicates that the deviation value is higher than the mean value. Therefore, the deviating value of the mean is high. The result shows that the students have yet to use complex noun phrases, and they form simple noun phrases. Noun phrase complexity is a distinctive feature of academic writing (Xu, 2019).

Figure 7

Students' performance in using pre-modifiers

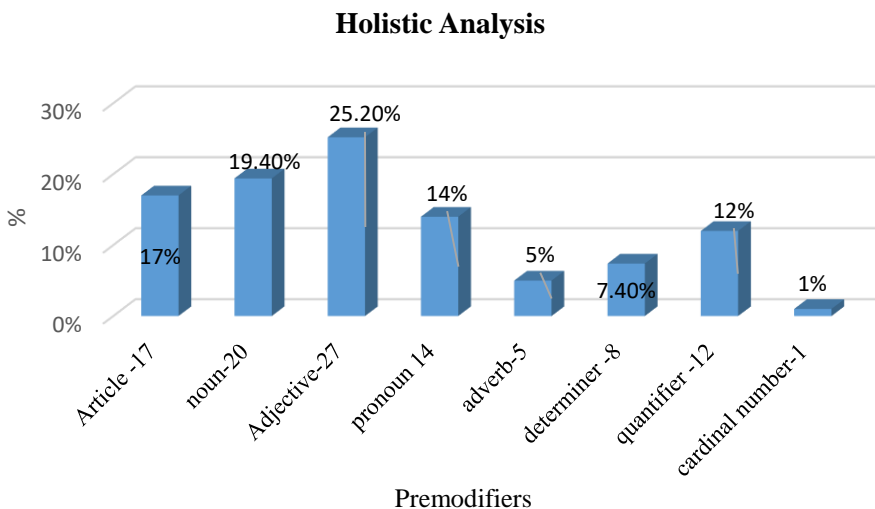


Figure 7 indicates the students' performance using the pre-modifiers in the noun phrase construction. Considering the overall performance of the students in forming the noun phrase, predominantly adjectives were used (25.2%), the second in rank in the line was noun modifier (19.4%), and the third was article (17%). The least employed modifiers were adverbs and cardinal numbers, representing only 5% and 1%, respectively. Though the holistic analysis shows the variation of the different noun modifiers, in the individual performance, only a few students show the variation in forming the complex noun phrase.

Figure 8

Noun Phrase Complexity Level

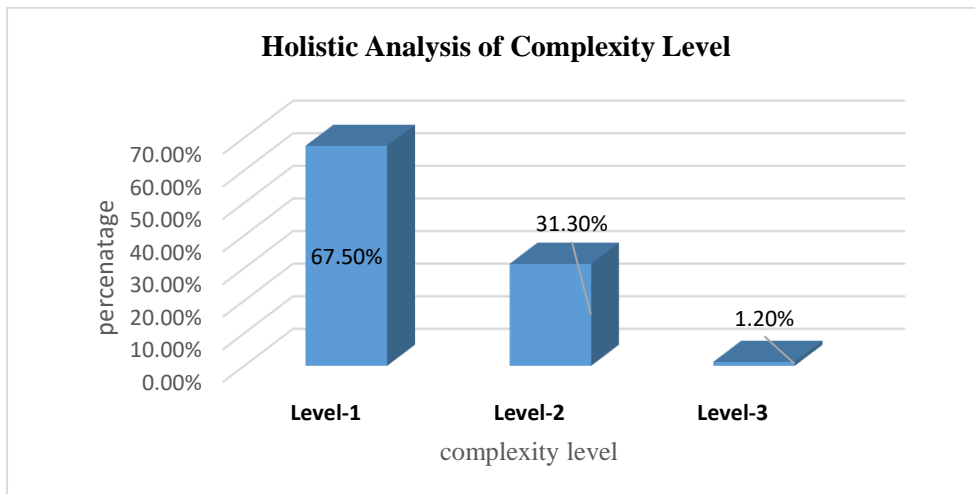


Figure 8 explicitly displays the holistic analysis of students' complexity levels in forming noun phrases; 67.5% formed Level 1 (L1) noun phrases containing head + one modifier, considered a simplified construction. The percentage of 31.3% formed Level 2 (L2) noun phrases containing head+ two modifiers. The rate of 1.2% formed Level 3 (L3) noun phrases containing head + three modifiers. Post-modification comprises all the items placed after the head, notably prepositional phrases, non-finite clauses, and relative clauses (Greenbaum, 1973); however, these features are rarely found in the students' essay writing.

However, out of eight students, only one (S3) used a few non-finite and restrictive relative clauses as post-modifiers of noun phrases. Comparatively, the student has used more prepositional phrases as post-modifiers than the other students. For instance:

- They pretend to be studying and do improper things **that affect their education.**
- In conclusion, the Internet has both positive and negative impacts **on life.**
- Students should manage their school work with internet facilities **to get a higher benefit from it.**

The rest of the students mostly used a limited number of prepositional phrases as the post-modifiers of the noun phrases. The examples from the students' texts are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Prepositional phrases as the post-modifiers

Students	Prepositional phrases as the post-modifiers
S1	Positive effects are bringing food and clothes to our house <i>during the covid-19 time period.</i>
S2	Overall, the widespread use of the Internet has a mostly positive effect <i>on life in today's world.</i>
S3	People can watch online news <i>for the sake of the Internet.</i>
S4	The internet is a really important thing <i>to day-to-day life needs.</i>

Moreover, noun phrases can be modified using relative pronouns, forming restrictive and non-restrictive modifications, which the students hardly tried, excluding one student, S3, who has used unrestrictive relative clause as a post-modifier where the head is viewed as a member of a class, which can be linguistically identified through the modification that has been applied. The students who used restrictive clauses frequently used pronouns like *that* and *who*.

Appositive post-modification is relatively common using infinitive clauses; however, the students did not use it.

Primary Data - Sentences

Therefore people probably who are work from home via online, can't survive without Internet.

In addition to that, people who have poor internet connection due to signal issues cannot manage their work properly.

The grammar is slightly revised without affecting the data for the study.

Therefore, people [who work from home online] cannot survive without the internet.

In addition to that, people [who have poor internet connection due to signal issues] cannot manage their work properly.

Table 3

Premodification sequence

SN	Level 1- Noun Phrase Constructions	SN	Level 2- Noun Phrase Constructions	SN	Level 3-Noun Phrase
1.	article+ head	1.	article +noun+head	1.	article+noun+noun+head
2.	adjective + head	2.	noun+noun+head	-	-
3.	pronoun +head	3.	adverb+ adjective+head	-	-
4.	noun +head	-	-	-	-
5.	determiner+head	-	-	-	-
6.	quantifier+head	-	-	-	-
7.	cardinal number+head	-	-	-	-
8.	adverb+head	-	-	-	-

Table 3 displays the premodification sequence. The complexity of the concatenated modifier is grouped into different levels: Level 1 is when the head is modified by one modifier; Level 2 is when two modifiers modify the same head noun; Level 3 occurs when three modifiers modify the same head noun, and Level 4 occurs when four or more modifiers modify the head noun. Concatenated modifiers are two or more modifiers in an NP that modify the same head noun (Jucker, 1992; Quirk et al., 1985, as cited in Frempong et al., 2023).

Further, Table 3 shows that the students formed twelve patterns in noun phrase formation. This indicates that students tried to form simple noun phrases and hardly proved their competence and performance in using noun-phrase complexity in their writing. More than one pre-modifier is related to a single head, with no grammatical limit on the number. This concept sometimes misleads by giving the impression that the multiple modifiers constitute an unordered and coordinated string, but the fact is that it follows a recursive process. Liu (2004)

shows significant underdevelopment of NP post-modification complexity in students writing. Grammatically, a noun phrase in a sentence can be the subject, object, subject complement, or object complement. Some students have used noun phrases in their sentences as given below:

For example,

The noun phrase functions as a subject

Around all, people and children use the internet for their day-to-day work. (S4)

The noun phrase functions as a subject complement.

The Internet has become **the most essential thing to the whole world.** (S3)

Noun Phrase functions as an object.

The Internet gives **negative effects.** (S3)

Noun Phrase functions as an object complement.

The student can submit **their assignments via module or LMS and friends.** (S3)

Many students used noun phrases in the subject complement position, and their sentence patterns belong to < subject+ verb+ complement>. A few noun phrases are in the objective position in the students' sentences in the essay. Additionally, it shows how most students use syntactic and sentence structures.

Table 4

Frequent pre-modifying nouns in the student's essay writing

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Occurrences/Frequency</i>	<i>Functions</i>
Quantitative adjectives		
Some	15	Indicator of an unspecified number
All	09	plurality
many	08	plurality
Determiners		
our	15	possession
their	09	possession

Table 4 shows that almost all the students repeatedly used quantitative adjectives as pre-modifiers of the nouns. The frequency of quantitative adjectives and the determiners as pre-

modifiers are higher than the other modifiers. Attributive adjectives like *essential*, *strong*, and *pandemic* are used but not repeatedly. Students used more nouns that take the function of an adjective directly adjacent to the noun or pronoun it modifies.

Further, Table 4 illustrates students' widespread use of quantitative adjectives and determiners as pre-modifiers in their essays, reflecting a trend towards specifying quantity or possession. The adjectives "some," "all," and "many" were notably frequent, serving to denote an unspecified number or to emphasise plurality, while possessive determiners like "our" and "their" indicated ownership. This pattern suggests a reliance on a limited range of modifiers to introduce noun phrases, hinting at potential areas for expanding students' linguistic ability. Despite the occasional use of attributive adjectives such as "essential," "strong," and "pandemic," there appears to be a missed opportunity for students to diversify their adjective use further to enhance descriptive detail in their writing.

Table 5

Compound noun formations taken from the data of the current study

SN	Compound Noun Phrases
S2	According to me, using the Internet has {both positive and negative impacts} on society.
S3	Nowadays, {employees and students} are connecting with their classes and offices through online meeting platforms.
S4	{Around all the people and children} use the internet for their day-to-day work However {some children and some people} get the negative things about the Internet.
S5	{Sri Lanka and all countries} have corona.
S6	By the way, the Internet gives {a lot of good and positive effect} on our life.
S7	The Internet gives {advantages and disadvantages} to us.
S8	There are {many choices and varieties} people buy their right choice and enjoy life. It is easy {to buy products and save time}

Table 5 shows that some compound noun phrases are found within the student essays, showcasing how these phrases serve various grammatical roles such as the subject, object and complement of the sentences. Moreover, a modification applies to more than one head. For instance: The heads *children* and *people* are modified by the quantifier *some* (S4). The complex phrases are formed by a noun phrase, post-modifier, and prepositional phrases, as shown in the examples: *a lot of good and positive effects on our life*, *their classes and offices through online meeting platforms*.

The data reveals instances where students have effectively combined multiple nouns or phrases to convey complex ideas, as seen in examples like "using the Internet, has {both positive and negative impacts} on society" and "Nowadays, {employees and students} are connecting with their classes and offices through online meeting platforms." These compound

structures often encapsulate broader concepts or dualities within a single noun phrase, reflecting a degree of sophistication in the students' syntactic repertoire. However, the overall analysis indicates that while some students are proficient at employing compound noun phrases to enrich their sentences, there remains room for broader application and variation in their use of noun phrase complexity. By highlighting these findings, the study underscores the importance of encouraging students to explore and integrate more diverse and intricate noun phrase constructions into their academic writing, enhancing the depth and nuance of their textual expressions.

Figure 9

Compound and complex noun phrases used by the students

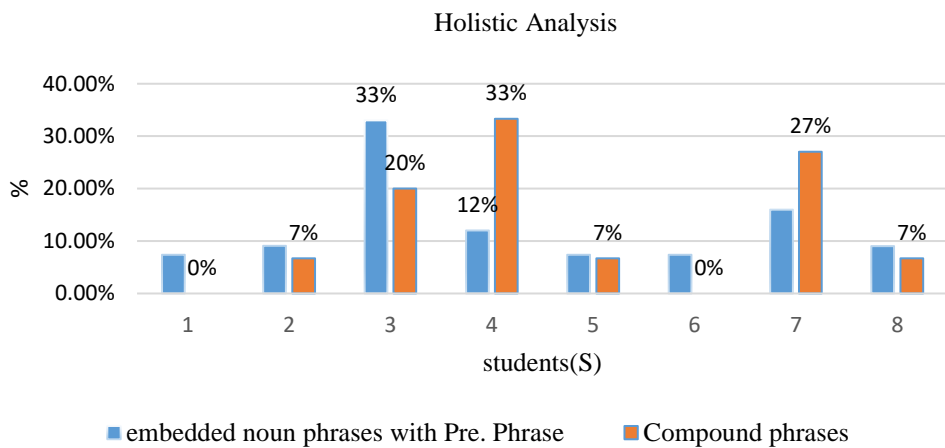


Figure 9 illustrates students' application of compound and complex noun phrases (CNP), revealing varied proficiency levels across the sample. In Figure 9, the data shows that S1 and S6 did not produce any compound noun phrases (CNP), indicating a potential gap in their ability to manipulate multiple noun phrases or to integrate diverse grammatical structures within a single phrase. Conversely, S2, S5, and S8 formed only one CNP. S3, S4, and S7 constructed three (20%), five (33.3%) and four CNPs (27%), respectively. That is, modification has been applied to more than one head. A complex noun phrase is combined with another component of part of speech. The findings indicate that fewer students formed a minimum number of compound-complex noun phrases; nevertheless, many did not use them and needed practice forming them.

A compound subject comprises two or more different noun phrases that work together to create a single, longer noun phrase. Grammatical agreement between the subject and other entities (verbs, pronouns) is frequently complicated to maintain with compound subjects. Accordingly, there is a tendency for students to make errors in this regard. In the compound phrase formed by S1, as shown in Table 2, both positive and negative impacts, the word 'both' is a pre-determiner used to emphasise two people or things regarded and identified together.

E.g., (Positive impacts, Negative impacts). The head noun 'impacts' has two different adjective pre-modifiers.

Table 6

Types of Inaccuracy of the English Phrases Constructions

Types of Inaccuracy	Erroneous Forms
Misuse of article	Some people are not a instrument only have a knowledge
Addition of article	There are many choices and varieties people buy their right choice and enjoy the life. Students should manage their school work with internet facility to get a higher benefits from it.
Misordering	Around the all people and children use the Internet for their day to day works.
Misuse of plural	Internet usage is the most popular in this days in the world. We can do our educations in the house. It is information given to us these Internet Moreover, some peoples doing criminals, murderers, thieves and some violence things. So, many people effect this problems. Our datas are stolen in this activity. Now a days internet is important for every people technology is very developing and many social field is very effectively. By the way, the Internet gives a lot of good and positive effect on our life.
Misuse of word choice	When the present time, most people use the Internet for they are work They do not have a many time to spend with there parents

Table 6 outlines common inaccuracies in the construction of English phrases by students, categorising them into specific types of errors, including the misuse of articles, unnecessary addition of articles, misordering of words, incorrect use of plural forms, and inappropriate word choice. Further, Table 6 shows some types of forming inaccurate noun phrases. Errors in pluralisation were frequent, as illustrated by phrases such as "Internet usage is the most popular in this days in the world" and "Our datas are stolen in this activity." These examples show incorrect plural form usage and a lack of understanding of irregular plural forms (e.g., "data"). These mistakes reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of English syntax and grammar, underscoring the need for enhanced grammatical instruction and practice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was found that the students used a limited number of pre-modifiers and post-modifiers to form noun phrases. However, the students used prepositional phrases as the post-modifiers. A notable reliance on prepositional phrases as post-modifiers was observed, mirroring Jitpraneechai's (2019) findings regarding Thai students. Such patterns indicate a foundational but narrow approach to noun phrase construction, suggesting areas that need instructional intervention.

The first-year students show limitations in generating complex noun phrases, as they have limited knowledge in the area, so they place one or two modifiers with the head noun and are in the level one formation. Therefore, it shows less embeddedness or layers and simplified basic-level noun phrases. Post-modifiers were used significantly less by the students and were mainly prepositional phrases. The students have yet to try participial and other dependent clause forms. According to Chomsky (1967), it is a system of explicit rules that may be applied repeatedly to generate indefinite sentences by adding phrases and clauses for as long as one wants. However, the student's capability of producing complex noun phrases needs improvement and special attention in this area. It was discovered that the complexity of NP post-modification in students' writing was significantly underdeveloped. Liu and Li (2016) instructed instructors to enhance student writers' NP complexity. The findings highlighted the need for explicit individualised instruction for students with different L1 backgrounds in the same classroom (Peng, 2022).

Furthermore, the students must improve the accuracy of noun phrase formation, such as misordering, misused plural and singular forms, malformation, wrong word choice, omission of relative pronouns, and misused adjectives. The lower accuracy was observed using the <quantifier + head> agreement pattern between the head and the modifier. Junaid (2018) found that the higher percentage of students' inaccuracy in constructing noun phrases was the pattern of quantifier+head. The respondents used a few compound noun phrases mainly combined with coordinating conjunctions like 'and' and 'but'. An endocentric construction is also known as a *headed* construction, where the head is contained 'inside' the construction. They are endocentric because one word in each case carries the bulk of the semantic content and determines the grammatical category to which the whole constituent will be assigned.

To promote the students' English writing skills, they must master complex noun phrases to provide details efficiently and effectively to express the compact meaning. Noun phrases allow writers to include much information without using too many words. Students must recognise and use them in their writing to make it efficient academic and 'reader-friendly' writing. Most scholarly texts use a high percentage of complex noun phrases, so practising constructing them will help learners read and write.

Complex noun phrases are an essential aspect of English grammar for students at the University. Elliot (2019) highlights that raising the students' awareness of these lexicogrammatical features in academic writing might be helpful. Effectively using complex noun phrases makes the students' writing more educational, precise and intellectual learners.

Articles written by native speakers generally contain many complex noun phrases, so learning and applying these phrases will also assist learners in improving their writing. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the proficiency of university students in constructing complex and accurate noun phrases:

- Introduce the basics of noun phrase construction, ensuring a solid foundation for building more complex skills.
- Guide students in identifying and differentiating between pre-modified, post-modified, simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex noun phrases in academic texts, enhancing their analytical skills and understanding of text structure.
- Instruct students to focus on complex noun phrase construction, personalised and contextual learning strategies, enhancement of grammatical accuracy, practice, and application.
- Design academic writing tasks that specifically require using various noun phrase constructions, offering a practical context for application and reinforcement of learning.
- Identify the causes and effects of the different phrases used contextually in writing.
- Retrain students in applying phrases they erred or avoided in their academic writing.
- Evaluate their natural writing skills using the phrase types in a formal assessment environment or an assigned academic writing task based on actual needs and context.

By successfully integrating complex noun phrases into students' writing, they will enhance their academic writing skills and gain the ability to convey information in a nuanced, effective, and efficient manner. Mastering English grammar is essential for students to thrive in their academic endeavours and beyond, underscoring the critical nature of complex noun phrase proficiency in higher education.

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