

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SENTENCE PATTERNS IN ENHANCING ESSAY WRITING FOR ESL UNDERGRADUATES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Subajana J^{1*} & CD Senaratne²

*Department of English Language Teaching, University of Vavuniya,
Sri Lanka/subi_08@vau.ac.lk*

*Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya/
Sri Lanka/ dilki@kln.ac.lk*

ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive review of literature examining how diverse sentence patterns can enhance the quality of English essay writing among undergraduates learning English as a Second Language (ESL). The incorporation of varied sentence patterns in tertiary-level writing allows students to develop linguistic maturity, boost confidence, and foster independent learning. Academic essay writing, which demands creativity, analytical reasoning, spontaneous idea generation, and structured argumentation, relies on coherence and cohesion between sentences to ensure clarity and depth. This paper explores the role of sentence patterns in strengthening undergraduate essay writing skills. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the literature search, with primary sources drawn from Scopus and Google Scholar, supplemented by targeted Google searches. Using a systematic review methodology, the study analyses nineteen peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2002 and 2024, along with foundational theoretical works, including Bloom (1956) and Chomsky (1957), to provide conceptual grounding. Key search terms included ESL, essay writing, syntactic complexity, sentence pattern variety, and tertiary education in Sri Lanka. The findings emphasise that regular practice with diverse sentence patterns, under guided instruction, improves clarity, fluency, and the overall quality of student writing. Prior research confirms that syntactic diversity enables learners to express abstract and complex ideas effectively, enhancing their writing maturity and academic confidence. Furthermore, the review supports the use of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar as a pedagogical framework for teaching sentence variety. Mastery of sentence structures not only contributes to grammatical accuracy but also supports higher-order thinking, ultimately helping students become more competent and expressive academic writers in English.

. **Keywords:** *ESL, Essay writing, Syntactic complexity, sentence patterns mastery, Tertiary education in Sri Lanka*

1. INTRODUCTION

Different writing genres are introduced and practised in higher education. In Sri Lankan universities, English has gained significant importance as a medium of instruction, along with regular writing activities, assignments, and handwritten examinations, for students of English as a Second Language (ESL). Under the influence of linguists such as Bloomfield, structuralism emerged as a school of thought in linguistics, emphasising that sentence structure is a prerequisite for good grammar (Betti, 1996, P. 25).

According to structuralism, sentences are constructed in regular patterns to achieve semantic coherence. Sadeq (2024) states that structuralism has offered various accounts of English sentence patterns throughout history. The “pattern practice” approach in language education directly results from structuralists’ understanding of language structures. However, this approach is often insufficient, especially in text-oriented courses where written examinations predominantly assess performance.

This study addresses a critical gap in ESL education by exploring how the variety of sentence patterns can enhance the quality of students’ essays, fostering both syntactic complexity and linguistic maturity. The objective of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review that focuses on previous research exploring the relationship between sentence patterns and essay writing proficiency in ESL contexts. By synthesising findings from multiple studies, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of current research in this area and identify gaps for future investigation.

In Sri Lankan universities, where English is frequently the medium of instruction, students often struggle with writing structurally sound due to limited exposure to varied sentence structures. Despite this, teachers tend to overlook covert teaching and emphasise sentence patterns. Jimenez (2020) notes, “Sentence variety, however, has often been overlooked.” Similarly, Canagarajah (2006) emphasises that college teachers should continually reflect on and refine their writing instruction practices, aligning them with the latest scholarship and theoretical developments. Wijesinghe et al. (2023) note that many countries are engaged in competitive educational systems, underscoring the global relevance of these findings.

The lack of knowledge and syntactical awareness restricts students’ ability to use phrases or clauses for structural complexity, which could significantly enhance their writing quality. Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) theory posits that infinite meaningful sentences can be created using grammar rules and syntactic structures. Both Putrayasa (2008) and Krishna (2017) highlight the challenges students face in identifying functional components within sentences and the need to incorporate a variety of sentence patterns to avoid monotony and engage readers effectively.

English as a Second Language educators must introduce diverse sentence patterns, as this practice can help students and teachers maintain high standards in essay writing. Chokwe (2013) points out that specific writing deficits lead to a lack of “creativity” in classroom practices (Bloom, 1957). In the students’ pre-tertiary learning, teachers encourage students to memorise essays and write for exams, so they lack structural ability in their later learning in higher studies.

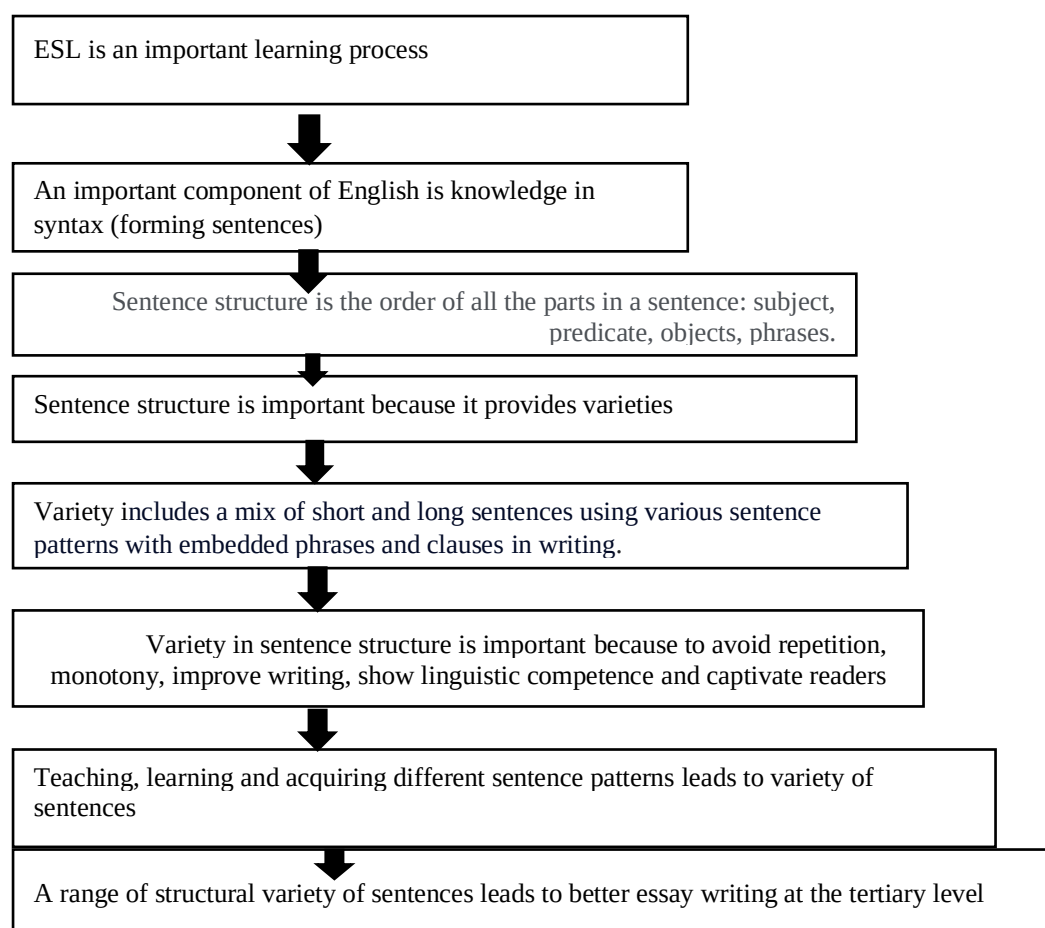
Despite learning ESL in Sri Lanka from primary to all the other levels of education, students often encounter problems in higher education with inadequate preparation in academic writing. A critical oversight in ESL teaching is the insufficient or lack of conscious attention to the variety of sentence patterns in writing, despite emphasising other grammatical components. The reviewed literature suggests that, although first-year university students produce a large number of sentences in academic essay writing tasks, their sentence structures often exhibit limited variation (e.g., Fernando, 2011; Hettiarachchi, 2009). According to past studies, students frequently rely on a limited

range of sentence patterns, such as <Subject + Verb + Object> and <Subject + Verb + Complement>, as classified by Quirk and Greenbaum (1972). Langan (2010) emphasises that writing effective paragraphs and essays, developing essential sentence skills, and cultivating critical reading abilities are crucial for preparing students to handle various genres of writing in their future educational and professional endeavours in the digital world.

In brief, the gap is to be filled between students' learning levels and their ability to interpret and engage in essay writing. The significance of the article lies in its relevance for ESL researchers, teachers, and curriculum designers, who can address the gaps in students' writing that hinder their mastery of diverse sentence patterns and syntactic structures. Further, as shown in Figure 1, sentence patterns evolve into more complex forms through embeddedness or recursion, resulting in more sophisticated sentences.

Figure 1

Concept of Sentence Patterns



(Source: Author)

Understanding syntax is a fundamental component of mastering the English language, as it involves knowing how to form sentences and how words and phrases are arranged to create meaningful communication. Without syntax, words remain isolated and lack structure. Sentence structure refers to the order and arrangement of parts within a sentence, including the subject, predicate, objects, and phrases or clauses that add detail and depth; this structure acts as the skeleton that determines clarity and meaning. Strong control over sentence structure enables writers to employ a variety of sentence patterns,

rather than relying on simple, repetitive structures. Such variety includes mixing short and long sentences, using different sentence types—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex—and embedding phrases and clauses through techniques like recursion.

Embedded phrase within a phrase

An embedded phrase within a phrase means that a phrase is inside another phrase. For instance, The *student with the red backpack* walked in. Inside the noun phrase “The student with the red backpack,” there’s a prepositional phrase (PP): “*with the red backpack*” modifies the noun “*student*.” This type of embedding makes writing more descriptive and demonstrates syntactic maturity, which is essential for advanced ESL learners.

Embedded clause within a clause

An embedded clause is a clause that sits inside another clause, typically a relative or noun clause. For example, I know *that Mala believes that Raja lied*.

Embedded clause inside a phrase

Clauses can be part of noun phrases (like relative clauses). Example: The book *that you gave me* is interesting. The clause “*that you gave me*” is a *relative clause* embedded *within the noun phrase* “the book that you gave me.”

This variation helps avoid repetition and monotony, making writing more dynamic, engaging, and sophisticated while demonstrating linguistic competence. Since sentence variety does not always come naturally to students, it must be explicitly taught, learned, and practised through examples, guided activities, and feedback. Developing this skill enables students to construct more complex ideas, communicate with nuance, and adapt their writing for different rhetorical purposes such as persuading, comparing, or analysing. Ultimately, a strong command of structural variety in sentences directly contributes to better essay writing at the tertiary level, equipping students to meet higher academic standards with clarity, precision, and style.

2.0. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section describes the foundation of the literature on the importance of sentence patterns in essay writing. The framework contributes to the study by offering a comprehensive analytical tool for examining the role of sentence patterns in ESL writing. It also provides a basis for the systematic review analysis conducted in the methodology section, linking theoretical concepts to practical teaching strategies. It also incorporates insights from Transformational Generative Grammar theory (hereafter TGG), which suggests that a comprehensive understanding of syntactic rules enables the construction of a wide range of sentence patterns and enhances the quality of essay writing.

2.1. Writing English as a Second Language (ESL)

Writing in English as a Second Language (ESL) goes beyond just stringing words together; it is about expressing ideas clearly, persuasively, and with confidence. In academic contexts, especially where English is the medium of instruction, writing is not just another skill but a necessity. Hendrawaty and Saraswati (2016) note that writing enables students to communicate their thoughts effectively, while Chokwe (2013) emphasises that for many, the pressure of writing in English for exams and coursework becomes so overwhelming that it leads some students to drop out.

A common struggle among ESL learners is the repetitive use of sentence structures, which not only flattens their writing but also restricts their ability to present complex ideas. Strong writing requires sentence variety, which keeps the reader engaged and helps the writer sound more fluent and sophisticated. This idea is supported by Oshima and Hogue (2006), who advocate for the use of complex sentences to build syntactic maturity. Similarly, Solikhah (2017) and Sulistyani (2019) emphasise that sentence variation plays a crucial role in maintaining flow and preventing monotony. When students rely only on basic sentence forms, their writing lacks depth, even if their ideas are strong.

At the university level, this becomes even more important. Academic essays require students to reason, argue, and present nuanced views and doing this effectively means knowing how to work with a wide range of sentence patterns. Jagaiah (2017) links syntactic complexity directly to writing quality, while Sparta (2024) and Jimenez (2020) show that sentence variety is often what distinguishes strong academic writing from weak. Without it, even well-informed content can appear underdeveloped.

There is also the confidence factor. ESL students often approach writing with anxiety, worried about making grammatical mistakes or being judged for their language use. Cole and Feng (2015) and Wulandari (2018) explain that this fear can hold students back from experimenting with more advanced sentence structures. Ángel and García (2017) add that many students lack exposure to academic writing styles and argument-based genres, making the task even more daunting. Meanwhile, Hendrawaty (2018) and Zulfiah (2020) demonstrate that errors in sentence construction persist, especially when students are left to figure things out on their own.

This is where good teaching makes a difference. Fitri (2017) and Fornkwa (2021) argue that structured instruction in sentence patterns not only improves writing but also boosts comprehension. Unfortunately, as Chokwe (2013) observes, many teachers have not been trained to teach syntactic diversity effectively. This disconnect between teaching and learner needs often leads to frustration on both sides.

The demand for higher-order thinking in university writing—analysis, evaluation, interpretation—requires learners to move beyond basic sentence forms. Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) reminds us that real learning happens when students can synthesise and articulate complex ideas, and this process is closely tied to how they structure their writing. Sentence variety is not just about grammar; it is also about meaning, tone, clarity, and academic identity.

Teachers and curriculum designers need to take this seriously. Subajana and Senaratne (2023) highlight how specific syntactic features impact writing performance, and Wijesinghe (2023) calls for a reevaluation of ESL curricula to support students' academic writing. Teaching sentence patterns in a meaningful way not only helps students write better essays, but it also helps them feel more confident, less anxious, and more capable of expressing their thoughts at a university level.

2.2. Essay¹ Writing as an Academic Genre

Essay writing is more than just a classroom exercise; it is a foundational academic skill that brings together various components of language learning. Putrayasa (2018) and Naki et al. (2018) describe essay writing as an integrative task, requiring control over sentence structure, coherence, cohesion, grammar, and spelling to communicate meaning clearly and precisely. Similarly, Oktavianti et al. (2021) define essays as concise, structured compositions that tackle specific topics through a clear thesis and supporting paragraphs, making them accessible and logical to readers.

In academic settings, the importance of essay writing cannot be overstated. In undergraduate coursework, essays serve as a primary tool for organising and communicating ideas. In Sri Lanka, the national curriculum incorporates essay writing into key examinations, such as the GCE Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L), where students are required to produce short essays of approximately 250 words. This practice of assessment writing has a long history, as seen in early studies by Hartog and Rhodes (1936), Wiseman (1949), and Gosling (1966), cited in Philips (1979), which analysed students' compositions to understand patterns in writing development.

Academic genres encompass not only essays but also reports, case studies, research proposals, book reviews, and journal publications. As Gaillet and Guglielmo (2014) explain, academic discourse also encompasses evolving forms, such as conference proceedings and scholarly weblogs. However, among these genres, the essay remains a starting point for students learning to write critically and coherently. Mastery of essay writing provides students with the structural confidence and rhetorical foundation necessary for tackling more complex academic tasks later on (Febriani, 2022).

Sri Lankan universities have retained essay writing in their curricula because of its effectiveness in teaching students how to describe, argue, and reflect on issues within a structured format. Having prior knowledge of a topic or schema knowledge supports students in generating ideas; however, their success ultimately depends on how well they utilise grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structures. The Ghana Education Service (2010) underscores this point, noting that students must be taught to use complex and compound-complex sentences effectively to present their arguments and ideas. Essays, after all, are intended not just to inform but also to persuade, and

¹ Writing an essay is an art that attracts readers with content. In addition to the writer's ideas and substance, the essential components of a well-written essay are the sentence patterns and grammar that bring the essay together and enhance the reader's experience. An essay's quality is determined not only by the substance it contains but also by how it is delivered to the reader.

achieving this purpose depends on well-chosen words and carefully constructed sentences.

This focus on structure extends to the use of clauses and embedded phrases, which enhance both the depth and clarity of writing. Quirk et al. (1999) and Dadzie and Grant (2008) offer detailed guidance on sentence construction, emphasising that varied sentence forms improve expression and reduce repetition. When students rely on limited syntactic patterns, they risk producing essays that sound mechanical or underdeveloped. In contrast, strategic variation in sentence type enhances rhythm, clarity, and engagement, essential elements of academic writing.

Despite this, many students struggle to maintain coherence and cohesion in their essays. Chin (2005) suggests that strengthening students' grasp of verbal grammar can lead to significant improvements in how they structure and link ideas. Unfortunately, limited exposure to academic writing styles at the school level remains a persistent issue. Abeysena (2019) notes that Sri Lankan junior secondary students often struggle with composition tasks, a trend that frequently persists into higher education. This learning gap presents a significant barrier to achieving academic fluency in English writing.

In universities, writing well-structured essays is not only important, but it is also expected. Al Khazraji and Ceylan (2019) affirm that strong writing skills are crucial for academic success, while Okpe and Onjewu (2017) emphasise their importance in professional communication and development. Yet, as Bulqiyah et al. (2021) argue, students worldwide continue to face similar obstacles: structural weaknesses, grammatical errors, mechanical writing, and limited vocabulary. These issues hinder their ability to convey ideas fluently and impact the overall quality of their work.

Maloney (2003) goes further, noting that such students are often unfairly perceived as unprepared for the rigours of higher education. This perception reinforces the need for focused, systematic instruction in essay writing that builds competence from the ground up. Beyond simply teaching students to write, instructors must help them understand how different sentence structures function within an essay to shape meaning and maintain the reader's attention.

To write strong, coherent essays, students need more than grammar rules; they need practice in applying sentence patterns purposefully. The pragmatics of using a variety of sentence types is essential, not just to avoid monotony, but to express ideas with precision and effect. Fitzgerald (1994) sums it up well: mastering essay writing not only enhances students' expression and understanding but also supports critical thinking and provides teachers with insight into students' learning. In this sense, essay writing remains a powerful space where linguistic skill and cognitive development engage the reader meaningfully and maintain their attention.

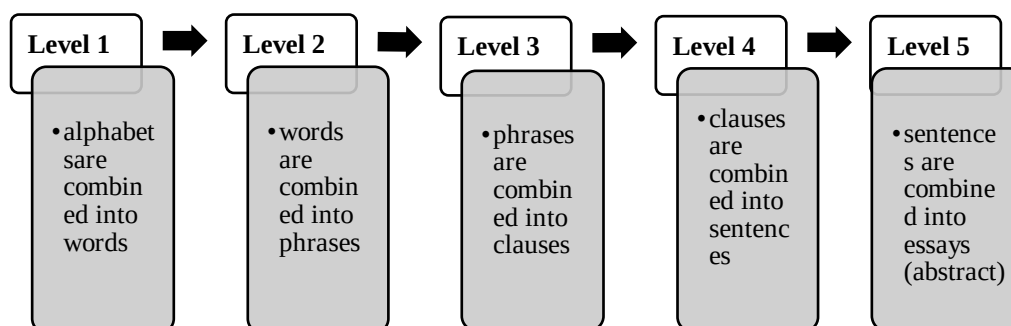
2.3. The Role of Sentences in Writing

A sentence is the basic building block of writing, a chain of words that expresses a complete thought. But more than that, a well-constructed sentence shapes how readers engage with an idea. As Reynolds (2016) and Collins and Stabler (2016) explain, a sentence should be coherent and purposeful, forming a logical unit that guides the

reader rather than confuses or bores them. Sentences evolve from minimal units of letters forming words, words forming phrases, and phrases forming the sentence itself. This layered structure is crucial for conveying meaning, particularly in academic writing.

Figure 2

The Steps from Orthography to Syntax (Alphabet to sentence)



(Source: Author)

For ESL learners, understanding how sentences work is foundational. Febriani (2022) notes that understanding the rules of sentence structure enables students to utilise clauses and phrases, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, more effectively. This knowledge becomes essential when writing essays, where every sentence contributes to the development of an argument or narrative, from the introduction to the conclusion. The ability to construct a sentence that is both clear and stylistically mature is not only a grammatical skill but also a cognitive one.

At the university level, the expectations are higher. Writing tasks often involve research reports, dissertations, or critical essays, genres that require a sophisticated command of the English language. Students are expected to use a variety of sentence types, including compound-complex forms, relative clauses, infinitives, and embedded phrases. According to Winch et al. (2006), as students gain intellectual maturity, their language use, especially the structure and variety of their sentences, should evolve accordingly. In contrast, reliance on only basic sentence types can make writing seem underdeveloped or flat, regardless of the quality of ideas.

Putrayasa (2018) notes that many students still struggle to express their thoughts in writing due to a limited grasp of sentence structures. Even at the tertiary level, students often require assistance with constructing sentences that convey complex ideas. This limitation reflects a gap in early instruction. Putrayasa et al. (2018) found that students frequently score low when identifying the core components of a sentence, such as subjects, predicates, and modifiers, which suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of how sentences work. Without this foundation, students are less likely to experiment with sentence variety, which limits their written expression.

The issue is not just technical; it affects the entire tone and clarity of academic writing. Robert-Burton (1997) reminds us that every sentence element must function in harmony

to produce a coherent message. When students are not taught how sentence parts work together, their writing tends to be repetitive, fragmented, or challenging to follow. Teachers play a key role and not just by correcting grammar, but by helping students understand sentence structure from the start, enabling them to craft more nuanced and effective writing as they progress.

Ignoring sentence structure in writing instruction also means missing an opportunity to build students' confidence and linguistic competence. As Putrayasa (2018) argues, both oral and written communication depend on a firm grasp of sentence construction. When students are given the tools to manipulate sentence types for different purposes, such as emphasis, clarity, and flow, they become more in control of their tone in writing.

To address these gaps, educators need to make sentence instruction more intentional and deliberate. Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) offers a valuable framework, helping teachers design lessons that move beyond memorisation toward higher-order thinking. Sentence-level instruction should not be isolated but rather integrated into broader writing tasks, so that students learn not only how to write correctly but also how to write thoughtfully and effectively.

2.4. Sentence Structural Variation

One of the simplest yet most powerful ways to improve writing is through sentence variety. Incorporating a mix of short and long sentences with diverse structures not only enhances the rhythm and flow of a text but also prevents monotony. When students overuse a single sentence type—whether simple, compound, or complex—the writing can begin to feel mechanical; however, structural variety adds movement and voice to the prose, allowing writers to guide the reader's attention and maintain engagement. As Mering and O'Hare (1980) and Solikhah (2017) explain, good writers must have complete control over the shape and structure of their sentences to communicate ideas effectively in the reader's absence.

Although grammar is often central to ESL instruction, sentence variety tends to receive less focused attention. This oversight limits students' ability to produce writing that feels dynamic and intellectually engaging. Sentence structures built on standard patterns, such as subject-verb-object, can be expanded, inverted, or embedded to create more textured and sophisticated writing. Liusti (2016) notes that even the most complex variations are rooted in a few core patterns.

Putrayasa (2018) highlights that variation in sentence form is not just a matter of grammar or mechanics; it is central to developing a writer's tone and maintaining authenticity in academic writing. Varied sentence structures enable the effective expression of complex ideas, making writing clearer for the reader and more satisfying for the writer. The intellectual challenge of crafting diverse sentences also leads to deeper engagement with the writing process itself.

Educational theorists such as Henry, Kindersley, Solikhah (2017), and Jimenez (2014) reinforce the importance of teaching sentence variation explicitly. They point out that changing sentence structure, length, and type helps students fulfil a range of rhetorical purposes from adding emphasis to signalling contrast or building logical progression.

This level of control empowers students to write with more confidence, creativity, and clarity.

Of course, not all ideas require complexity. Simple, direct thoughts are often best conveyed in short, straightforward sentences. For example, “The dog is sleeping” effectively captures a simple observation. As ideas grow more complex, the sentences that express them must also become more sophisticated. “Although the dog is sleeping, it groans occasionally, perhaps dreaming of chasing cats”, expresses nuance, time, and possibility in a single sentence. Malaca-Sistoza (2016) argues that advanced writing tends to include longer responses, lexical richness, and increased syntactic complexity features often developed through the practice of embedding clauses and phrases in flexible ways.

Ultimately, variation in sentence structure is a hallmark of mature writing. It bridges the gap between language proficiency and expression, helping students move beyond correctness toward formal tone, purpose, and style. Teaching sentence variety is not just about improving sentence-level grammar; it is about helping students become confident and thoughtful academic writers.

2.4.1 Common Sentence Pattern Frameworks in Past Studies

Several studies have identified and categorised core sentence patterns that support syntactic awareness in ESL learners. Quirk et al. (1972, as cited in Sun, 2013) introduced seven basic sentence structures based on grammatical function:

1. **S + V** – Subject + Verb
2. **S + V + A** – Subject + Verb + Adjunct
3. **S + V + C** – Subject + Verb + Complement
4. **S + V + O** – Subject + Verb + Object
5. **S + V + O + A** – Subject + Verb + Object + Adjunct
6. **S + V + O + C** – Subject + Verb + Object + Complement
7. **S + V + O + O** – Subject + Verb + Object + Object

These patterns serve as foundational grammatical structures for ESL instruction.

In a study analysing sentence types in ten BBC news articles, Andriani and Bram (2021) identified the following patterns:

1. **S + V**
2. **S + LV + SC** (Linking Verb + Subject Complement)
3. **S + V + O**
4. **S + V + DO + OC** (Direct Object + Object Complement)
5. **S + V + IO + DO** (Indirect + Direct Object)

Sundari (2018) conducted a case study with third-semester college students and found five recurring sentence patterns in their writing classes:

1. **S + V**
2. **S + V + O**

3. **S + V + C**
4. **S + V + IO + DO**
5. **S + V + O + C**

These align with the views of Yano (2012) and Demirezen (2012, as cited in Sundari, 2013), who argue that beginner writers benefit from mastering simple sentence structures before progressing to more complex ones.

Glatthorn (1980) proposed a similar set of core patterns, illustrating them with simple examples:

1. **N + V:** *Fire burns*
2. **N + V + N:** *We ate the popcorn*
3. **N + V + N + N:** *Gary sent his brother a car*
4. **N + LV + N:** *Ben becomes the president*
5. **N + LV + Adj:** *The cheese smelled rotten*
6. **N + Be + N:** *Stephen is a captain*
7. **N + Be + Adj:** *Mary is happy*
8. **N + Be + Adv:** *The students are in the classroom*

Kolln and Funk (2011, as cited in Jimenez, 2020) expanded this approach with ten sentence patterns that reflect both syntactic depth and real-world writing utility:

1. **NP1 + V-be + Adv/TP:** *The musicians are here.*
2. **NP1 + V-be + Adj:** *The players were happy.*
3. **NP1 + V-be + NP1:** *Alonso is a famous artist.*
4. **NP1 + LV + Adj:** *They seem nice.*
5. **NP1 + LV + NP1:** *The chairperson called off the meeting.*
6. **NP1 + V-int:** *The baby was sleeping.*
7. **NP1 + V-tr + NP2:** *The firefighters rescued the cat.*
8. **NP1 + V-tr + NP2 + NP3:** *He sends flowers to Laura.*
9. **NP1 + V-tr + NP2 + Adj:** *The jury found them guilty.*
10. **NP1 + V-tr + NP2 + NP2:** *They elected her president.*

These frameworks provide a progressive pathway for students to develop syntactic complexity, starting with simple structures and progressing to more complex academic sentences.

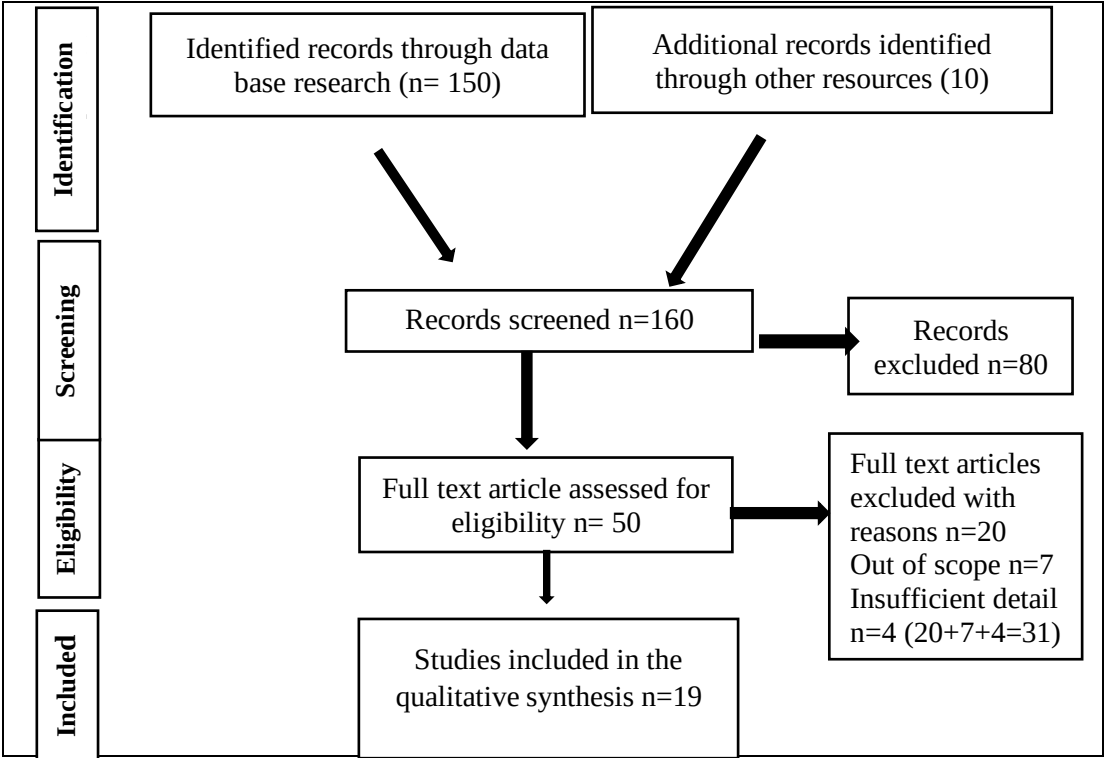
3.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review was conducted following the research procedure framework outlined to achieve the research objective. This framework guided the inclusion and exclusion of Chalkiadaki's (2018) criteria for selecting relevant academic articles, ensuring that the study remained focused and aligned with its aim. The sources for the review were chosen based on specific criteria detailed in Table 1. The article search was conducted primarily through two well-regarded academic databases, Google Scholar and Scopus, supplemented by Google Search. These resources were selected

due to their credibility and extensive collection of reliable and valid articles relevant to the research topic. Data from past studies have been analysed to gather information on the various sentence patterns used in essay writing. Overall, this research employed a systematic qualitative approach to study the impact of various sentence patterns in essay writing at the tertiary level. A systematic literature review methodically arranges and studies literature by identifying, analysing, and summarising text themes. The PRISMA² flow-chart shown below illustrates the steps of identifying, screening, and selecting the studies for the systematic literature review:

Figure 3
PRISMA Flow-Chart steps for identifying, screening, and selecting the data for the study

PRISMA Flow-Chart



Source: Adopted from Ahmed Khan (2019)

² PRISMA-Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses,

Table 1
Criteria of Inclusion and Exclusion of the Article Sources

Type of Criterion	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Academic Database	Google Scholar	✓	-
	Scopus	✓	-
	Google Search	✓	-
Keywords	ESL,	✓	-
	Essay writing, Syntactic complexity, variety of sentence patterns.	✓	-
	Tertiary education in Sri Lanka	✓	-
		✓	-
		✓	-
Publication types	Conference papers	✓	-
	Dissertation	✓	-
	Journal articles	✓	-
	Reports	-	✓
	Books	-	✓
Access	Online	✓	-
	Papers	✓	-
	books	✓	-
Period of publication	2002-2024	✓	-
Publication of place	Worldwide	✓	-
Type of Study	Empirical investigation Theoretical studies	✓	-
Research design	Qualitative	✓	-

Numerous related articles were collected and screened during the resource selection process. However, only 19 of them were chosen as research samples, as they provided relevant discussion on the theme of the current review. In addition, the articles analysed in this research are empirical, conceptual, and theoretical studies that revolve around the importance of sentence patterns in essay writing. This timeline for research papers has been selected for several reasons. Firstly, studies from the early 2000s are more up-to-date; secondly, they provide a better understanding of sentence patterns and the importance of improving essay writing quality. Besides, many studies in the South Asian context have also been conducted throughout the respective years on the topic of sentence patterns, such as Ángel and García (2017), Bulqiyah, Mahbub and Nugraheni (2021), and Solikhah (2017), Ai and Lu (2013) are some of the lists. Prior research in the area helps bridge the findings of past and present studies.

To support the thematic analysis in this literature review, nineteen key studies were selected based on their relevance to sentence structure, syntactic complexity, and academic essay writing in ESL contexts. These studies include theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical research from both global and South Asian perspectives. Table 2 summarises the selected literature, listing each study's title, author(s), and thematic focus in relation to the current research.

Table 2
The Selected Journal Articles for the Study

S/N	Title	Author(s)	Theme/Focus
1	<i>Three Models for the Description of Language</i>	Chomsky (1956)	Introduces transformational grammar for sentence analysis
2	<i>A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing</i>	Anderson & Krathwohl (2001), Conklin (2005)	Applies Bloom's taxonomy to essay writing skills
3	<i>Sentence Patterns in English</i>	Betti (2021)	Categorises sentence types for instructional use
4	<i>Writing Academic English</i>	Oshima & Hogue (2006)	Emphasises complex sentence use to develop syntactic maturity
5	<i>Writing Quality Indicators</i>	Wilson (1998)	Correlates sentence variety with writing quality
6	<i>Syntactic Difficulty and Struggle</i>	Jagaiah (2016)	Highlights the benefits and struggles with complex structures
7	<i>Analysis of Syntactic Complexity and Its Relationship to Writing Quality in ..</i>	Jagaiah (2017)	Links syntactic complexity to essay writing quality
8	<i>The Analysis of Syntactic Complexity and Grammatical Accuracy in UniS Bank ..</i>	Sulistyani (2019)	Promotes sentence variety to enhance engagement
9	<i>Corrections on Grammar, Sentence Variety and Developing Detail...</i>	Solikhah (2017)	Emphasises sentence variety and grammar instruction
10	<i>Quantifying Sentence Variety in English Learners</i>	Charpentier Jiménez (2020)	Measures sentence variety to assess writing complexity
11	<i>An Analysis on Students' Errors in Writing Sentence Patterns</i>	Hendrawati (2018)	Identifies common errors in sentence construction
12	<i>An Analysis of Syntax Errors in Descriptive Essays</i>	Zulfiah (2020)	Identifies common syntactic errors in ESL writing

S/N	Title	Author(s)	Theme/Focus
13	<i>Syntactic Analysis of Sentence Patterns in Students' Academic Writing at ..</i>	Sparta (2024)	Analyses sentence patterns used in student essays
14	<i>An Analysis of Types of Sentences Used by Students' Essay Writing</i>	Ernawati (2013)	Analyses sentence types in student writing
15	<i>The Analysis of Sentence Structure of Students' Compositions...</i>	Putrayasa & Ramendra (2018)	Analyses sentence skills in elementary EFL learners
16	<i>Improving Students' Understanding of English Sentences through understanding of sentence patterns</i>	Fitri (2017)	Highlights teaching strategies for sentence comprehension
17	<i>English Sentence Patterns in Cameroonian Book Blurbs</i>	Fornkwa (2021)	Explores sentence patterns in authentic discourse
18	<i>Syntactic Factors Impacting Essay Writing Skills of Learners of English ...</i>	Subajana & Senaratne (2023)	Investigates syntactic features affecting essay writing
19	<i>Perceived Effectiveness of ESL Curriculum in Higher Education ..</i>	Wijesinghe (2023)	Evaluates the ESL curriculum's impact on academic writing

4.0. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Sentence Patterns for Improving Essay Writing

This section addresses the core research objective: examining the role of sentence patterns in enhancing academic essay writing among ESL learners.

Sentence structure forms the foundation of grammatical competence in any language. It refers to the specific arrangement of sentence elements to create complete meaning. As defined by Collins Dictionary (2009), sentence structure is “the grammatical arrangement of words in sentences.” The way a sentence is constructed directly affects how clearly and effectively it communicates an idea.

Hendrawaty (2018) notes that each sentence pattern offers unique opportunities to combine ideas in a meaningful way. Quirk and Greenbaum (1972) identified 7–8 basic sentence patterns in English, while Hornby (1992) expanded this to over 50, highlighting the rich possibilities available to learners. Mastery of these structures not only strengthens syntactic awareness but also fosters higher-order thinking, as outlined in Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Anderson, 2001).

Sundari (2013) emphasises that developing control over basic sentence forms is essential before students can progress to more complex constructions. At the early stages of ESL learning, students typically produce sentences like “The baby cries” or “She likes oranges”—simple, declarative forms that help students gain fluency. As proficiency improves, the students are encouraged to use compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences to express nuanced ideas and build cohesive arguments.

Academic writing requires precision, coherence, and depth, all of which depend on sentence variety. Chokwe (2013) identifies academic writing as a core skill for university students, while Akhtar et al. (2019) stress the importance of regular practice in overcoming common writing challenges. Ruspitayanti et al. (2015) assert that well-structured writing depends heavily on sentence construction, and Greenland et al. (2008) point out that syntactic control is key to effective instruction at the university level. Yu (2021) adds that a broad command of sentence structures enables students to express complex ideas clearly and confidently.

Furey (2017) notes that overuse of short, simple sentences can result in flat, monotonous writing, a common issue in ESL contexts. Oshima and Hogue (2006) advocate for the use of complex sentences, especially those involving subordinating conjunctions, to link ideas cohesively and elevate the writing style. DeBoer (1973), as cited in Oshima and Hogue (2007), compares sentence patterns to grammatical formulas, reliable tools that support structured expression. Similarly, Ethel and Davison (1950), as cited in Saun (2014), argue that sentence patterns empower learners to communicate with fluency and confidence.

Saun (2014) observes that structured instruction in patterns reduces monotony and encourages expression. This is supported by Sulistyani (2019) and Hunt (1970, cited in Solikhah, 2017), who emphasise that syntactic variation sustains reader interest. Henry and Kindersley (2017) similarly advocate for variation in sentence length and structure as a strategy to maintain clarity and focus.

Christianto (2018) defines sentence patterns as essential building blocks for clear and coherent expression. Cumming (2001), Hosteen (2016), and Su (2001) all confirm that targeted instruction in sentence structures significantly improves ESL writing performance. Jagaiah (2016, 2017) highlights how complex sentence forms help students express ideas more dynamically, although many still struggle with basic construction. Abdullah (2014) and Lasmini (2021) note that weak control over sentence patterns often leads to writing that is repetitive and lacks sophistication.

Fornkwa (2021) explains that certain genres require specific sentence forms to achieve their communicative goals. Developing flexibility in sentence construction, therefore, supports both academic clarity and rhetorical adaptability. Ravid and Berman (2010) link phrasal complexity to writing quality, while Wilson (1998) argues that the use of varied sentence patterns influences how writing is judged, either as polished and academic or substandard and simplistic.

Subajana and Senaratne (2023) stress that diverse syntax not only improves clarity but also helps avoid clichéd or formulaic writing. Wong (1979) adds that familiarity with sentence patterns lays the groundwork for creative expression. Akmal (2020) states that sentence structures serve as maps that guide communication, and Fitri (2017) frames

them as grammatical formulas that support all four language domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Sulistyani (2019) concludes that sentence pattern proficiency is a crucial factor in academic achievement. This study draws specifically on the seven core patterns identified by Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) and Biber et al. (2002), which together offer a practical foundation for effective academic and professional writing. Henry and Kindersley (2017) categorise sentence types as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex, each with distinct communicative functions. Mastery of these forms equips learners with essential tools to write fluently and with purpose, thereby raising the overall standard and sophistication of their academic work.

4.2. Methods to Improve Sentence Patterns in Essay Writing

Improving sentence patterns in academic writing plays a vital role in enhancing clarity, engagement, and expression. The structure of a sentence is not merely a grammatical concern; it serves as a vehicle for meaning, tone, and logic. Recognising this, Waddell, Esch, and Walker (1993) proposed an instructional approach grounded in imitation. They encourage learners to model their writing on twenty established sentence patterns, asserting that writing, like any skill, improves through practising examples set by proficient users. Yet, despite the effectiveness of this method, sentence variety remains underrepresented in many ESL teaching materials.

Research supports the pedagogical value of this approach. Jayakumar (2010) found that EFL learners who consciously applied sentence pattern methods were better able to express their thoughts coherently, suggesting that this practice strengthens the link between cognition and language. Likewise, Sullivan and Eggleston (2006, as cited in Jimenez, 2020) demonstrated that incorporating sentence variety into the curriculum not only improves writing skills but also sustains the reader's interest. Other researchers, including Coombe et al. (2014), Reid (2006), and Longknife (2002, cited in Jeya, 2017), similarly affirm that stylistic richness and expressiveness often result from sentence pattern flexibility.

A theoretical foundation for this development lies in Noam Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (1957), which offers a powerful tool for improving sentence control. Through syntactic transformations such as deletion, substitution, movement, and embedding, learners can develop a deeper understanding of grammar and greater flexibility. As Chomsky (1950) suggested, these transformations enable writers to manipulate a sentence's surface structure while preserving its underlying meaning, a crucial skill in academic writing.

Instructional frameworks proposed by linguists such as Quirk et al. (1986) and Waddell et al. (1993) identify between seven and twenty core sentence patterns that can be taught explicitly to learners—these act as scaffolds, enabling students to develop from simple to more complex constructions. Simplified models, like those proposed by Watanuki et al. (2010) and Sundari (2013), identify five foundational sentence structures that serve as entry points into more advanced usage. These frameworks enable progressive development, transitioning students from controlled production to expressive fluency.

In the Sri Lankan context, research reveals a persistent gap in syntactic accuracy and variety among university students. Fernando (2011) identified frequent grammatical errors, including misuse of tenses, sentence boundaries, and improper subordination, among undergraduates at the University of Colombo. Hettiarachchi (2009) also found that students often rely heavily on simple sentence types due to limited exposure to complex syntactic forms. Similarly, Senanayake (2013) reported that learners at the University of Kelaniya frequently produced fragmented or incomplete sentences, ultimately weakening the academic clarity of their writing. These findings underscore the pressing need for targeted instruction in sentence pattern variety.

Gunawardena (2006) notes that teaching syntactic variation is essential to meeting the academic writing needs of Sri Lankan university students, while Hornby (1992) points out that both learners and instructors often lack proficiency in using extended sentence forms. As Jimenez (2020) concludes, “Sentence variety is an important component of writing proficiency,” and must be prioritised in ESL instruction. When students learn to manipulate sentence patterns intentionally, they gain the tools to write not only with correctness but also with creativity, clarity, and persuasive power.

5.0.CONCLUSION

This paper systematically reviewed the literature on the role of diverse sentence patterns in enhancing ESL essay writing, with a particular focus on the tertiary education context in Sri Lanka. The findings reveal that varied sentence patterns not only improve writing clarity and coherence but also support students in articulating complex ideas and achieving greater linguistic maturity.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the classroom. In today’s globalised and information-driven world, strong writing skills are essential for both academic success and professional communication. Yet, inadequate attention to fundamental writing competencies such as sentence control, linguistic flexibility, creativity, and critical thinking continues to leave many students underprepared. Addressing these gaps through curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation is crucial to equipping learners with the skills necessary to become confident and competent writers (Yu, 2021).

The literature indicates that in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, critical and analytical thinking is often underdeveloped due to factors such as limited instructional time, large class sizes, and a persistent focus on examination-oriented subjects. Outdated, textbook-based lessons tend to promote memorisation over deep understanding. Similar challenges have been observed in other ESL contexts, such as in Saudi universities, where curricula often fail to promote meaningful engagement with language (Khan, 2011; Zughouli, 1987). Bean (2001, as cited in Wingate, 2010) emphasises the importance of fostering critical thinking if students are to become proficient academic writers.

In Sri Lanka, traditional methods continue to dominate in both rural and urban educational settings. Even in better-resourced schools, sentence structure is often overlooked as a tool for analysis, interpretation, and argument development. However, teaching sentence patterns strategically can activate prior knowledge and support the development of academic literacy for both learners and instructors.

This review offers practical insights for teachers and curriculum developers aiming to enhance writing instruction, particularly in settings where students encounter linguistic challenges. Although the primary focus is on Sri Lanka, the findings have broader implications for ESL education globally, underscoring the value of sentence variety as a tool for empowering learners to meet real-world academic and communicative demands.

This study underscores the importance of explicitly teaching and consistently practising sentence patterns as a foundation for effective academic writing. As Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) and Hornby (1992) show, syntactic control enables clarity, precision, and confidence in expression. More than just a matter of grammar, sentence-level competence fosters critical and analytical thinking, as outlined in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Anderson, 2001, as cited in Forehand, 2010).

In the Sri Lankan tertiary context, a continued reliance on memorisation constrains students' ability to write analytically or creatively. This review demands a pedagogical shift from rote instruction to syntactically rich, cognitively demanding writing tasks. Such a change is necessary not only to elevate academic writing standards but also to prepare students for meaningful participation in academic, professional, and global communities.

Author: Ms Subajana Jeyaseelan is attached to the University of Vavuniya, Department of English Language Teaching. She is pursuing an MPhil, which will lead to a PhD programme, at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo. She is interested in writing poems and has published two anthologies of poems titled "A Thousand Miles to Go" and 'The Sun Never Sets'.

Research interests: Morphology & Morphemes, Applied Linguistics, English Language Teaching and Learning, Syntax.

Contact: subi_08@vau.ac.lk

Co-Author: Senior Professor Chamindi Dilkushi Senaratne is attached to the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya. Her areas of teaching and research interest include language contact phenomena, Language policy and planning, Bilingual studies, and sociolinguistics.

Contact: dilki@kln.ac.lk

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