

## ENHANCING ESL WRITING USING SENTENCE VARIETY CHECKLIST

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### Abstract

One of the students' problems in writing is lack of variety in sentence structure. Students seem to learn one basic pattern of subject, verb, and object and stick to it. They may also lack knowledge and practice of the different structures, and connecting words, necessary to create sentence variety. Although this is a fundamental problem in student writing, little emphasis has been put on it in the ESL Writing class because oftentimes teachers and students think that as long as there are no grammatical errors in writing, it is "okay." Therefore, even if students do show some improvement, most of them have not really achieved more desired marks in their writing assessments. Hence, this classroom research intended to examine the respondents' writing performance before and after using a sentence variety checklist adapted from Langan (1993) and to analyze respondents' perceptions towards using the sentence variety checklist in their writing. A total of 20 university students in an intensive English language program participated in the study. Data for the study were collected based on students' essays and responses from a 20-item survey questionnaire. The results revealed slight increase in students' writing performance in generating complex as compared to simple and compound sentences. In addition, most students found the checklist made writing more interesting and urged them to become more aware of what they were writing. In conclusion, the usage of sentence variety checklist can be one of the tools for ESL students to 'add more colors' into their writing.

Keywords: ESL writing, sentence variety checklist, sentence structures, sentence combining

## 1 INTRODUCTION

"Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many" (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Regardless of disciplines, students of any higher education institution need to be highly competent at writing for an academic audience. Writing, as perceived by many is a lonely process that requires ones to explore, oppose, and make connections between propositions for themselves which eventually must be made clear to whoever the audience is. As a result, in writing, meanings must be explicit, ordered and well-organized. The process of organizing and ordering these thoughts must also be accompanied by a clear delivery which involves the 'vehicle' itself, that is the language used in writing, which in this case is the English Language for ESL students.

The development of ESL writing is very complicated (Congjun, 2005). Apart from the other aspects stressed upon to improve ESL writing, one of them is by putting more emphasis on how to vary sentences in writing. Having different sentence patterns in one's writing will make

the writing more appealing to the readers in which it is claimed to be able to 'sweeten up' their writing (Edmondschool.net, n.y). In addition, according to Scott and Nelson (2009), generating sentences is a necessary part of writing, and use of more varied and complex sentence structures can be both assessed and supported with activities such as sentence combining.

Nevertheless, despite being exposed to other types of sentences, complacency in writing using the only sentence patterns they know makes students stick to them. In fact, a big number of them may prefer to 'play safe' by using simple sentences in their writing which may be due to the fact that they had been trained to write as such, as one way to avoid making a lot of errors. As a result, they may not be keen on writing various different sentences with different structures.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

Krashen's (1970) theory of second language acquisition which consists of five main hypotheses: Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, Monitor hypothesis, Natural Order hypothesis, Input hypothesis and Affective Filter hypothesis language acquisition is relevant to this study in which the first two hypotheses are used by the researcher in looking at ESL students' performance in writing, since it presented some important aspects of second language acquisition and how learners acquire a second language with regards to learning second language writing.

The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis emphasized the term 'language acquisition' and 'language learning' and language acquisition is defined as a subconscious process which is claimed to have similarities with the process of acquiring first language among children. While this hypothesis focuses on language acquisition that is on meaningful interaction in the target language as well as natural communication with the concentration on the communicative act and not on forms, Language learning is the product of formal instruction and encompasses a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge about the language. And some examples are the knowledge of organizing ideas and thoughts, following grammar rules, choosing the right words, and producing varieties of sentences. This hypothesis suggests that ESL students have to be made aware of the ways to write better using all the learned forms. Moreover, in that way they will be more conscious about how to improve their writing.

This is crucial for Dankoski, et al. (2012) quoted from who stated that for some reasons, writing has developed a negative connotation for many school students because students do not know how to tackle the writing assignments with a sense of confidence. Despite having had the opportunity to write many essays by the time they reach the tertiary level, ESL students generally have not reached a required level of confidence in writing.

Monitoring own writing is crucial to ensure students are applying what they are learning. Krashen's Monitor hypothesis seeks to explain how the acquisition affects learning. In the case of initiating communication, second language learners should monitor their utterances for instance, utilizing their understanding of learned grammar to edit and plan. This however, according to Krashen, can only occur when speakers have sufficient time to process the form and structure of their sentences in their subconscious minds. So, in relation to this study, the researcher hopes that the sentence variety would help students time to think carefully of their sentences as part of their writing process.

Another theory related to ESL writing is by Silva (1990) in which it roughly divided ESL writing instruction into four stages marked by the four most influential approaches: the controlled approach; the current-traditional-rhetoric approach; the process approach and the social approach. The first approach which is the controlled approach is nevertheless the most relevant to this current study for writing is dominated by the controlled or guided approach

which is influenced by structural analysis and behaviorist psychology. This approach sees learning to write as an exercise in habit formation in which students are trained to practice sentence patterns and vocabulary by means of writing.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Lack of sentence variety is certainly not an ESL problem alone, but to add to this predicament, ESL students also lack a native speaker's intuition about what "sounds right" and may just be unaware of the monotonous nature of their writing. Despite being the fundamental problem in their writing, students seem to be reluctant to learn more about it, and teachers are reluctant to teach, because it is so "boring," and most of the time both groups think that as long as there are no grammatical errors in writing, it is "okay." This needs to be highlighted. Saddler (2007) even stated:

Writing is increasingly being evaluated by state and national tests as well as by the college entrance examinations administered by the College Board, and the scores reveal deficits at all grade levels. As a result, writing instruction is getting more attention, in general, but still without enough given to the critical skills of generating better sentences.

Saddler further elaborated that sentences are the basic elements of written language, unfortunately, teaching students how to construct good or varied sentences is given too little attention in most classrooms which brings to the fact that very little emphasis has been put on the significance of sentence variety in ESL writing classrooms. This brings to the implication that even if students did show some improvement in writing, a big number of them may still have not achieved more desired marks in their writing assessments.

## **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to provide ESL students doing the intensive English language program a sentence variety checklist as an intervention for them to use in writing. The researcher developed the sentence variety checklist (Appendix 1), based on the content of Langan's book, 'College Writing Skills' (1993). This study, therefore, is based on the two specific objectives to investigate whether the sentence variety checklist makes a difference in students' writing performance, as well as to examine students' perceptions towards using the sentence variety checklist provided.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

In fulfilling the objectives, the research questions are as such:

1. Is there any difference in students' writing performance before and after using the sentence variety checklist?
2. What are students' perceptions towards using the sentence variety checklist in writing?

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study may give insight to the fact that there is a ground to emphasize sentence varieties in students' writing to avoid sentences with the same structure and length which can grow monotonous for readers. As a matter of fact, varying sentence styles and structures can also

reduce repetition and add emphasis. Long sentences work well for incorporating a lot of information, and short sentences can often maximize crucial points (Purdue OWL, Sentence Variety, 2013).

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Participants**

A total of 20 students in the intensive English language program in the International Islamic University Malaysia were chosen to participate in this classroom research. They were from one class of upper intermediate level of English proficiency who had undergone 7 out of 14 weeks of intensive English classes. The rationale for choosing this group of students from that level was mainly because these students did not have a lot of difficulties in writing when it comes to grammar, word choice and sentence structures but the tendency to “play safe” by writing common structures was always there. Hence, it was easier for the researcher to identify whether the students could be more conscious in their writing with the presence of the sentence variety checklist.

### **2.2 Research Instruments**

The instruments employed in this study were the sentence variety checklist compiled from the content of Langan’s book of College Writing Skills (1993), essay marking rubric adapted from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Writing Band Descriptor (Appendix 2), with the emphasis of the last two columns, and a 20-item survey questionnaire (Appendix 3). The 20-item questionnaire was in a form of Likert Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 (1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Don’t know, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree). The items in the questionnaire were based on the 6 areas identified by the researcher to match with the students’ perceptions on the usage of the sentence variety checklist: increasing their awareness of what they write, making their writing more interesting, improving their lexical resources and grammatical accuracy, producing writing with impact, promoting critical thinking in them and finally whether the checklist added limitations in the process of writing.

### **2.3 Procedure**

Quantitative methods were employed in collecting the data to meet the research objectives. Students were given a topic to write a 200 to 250-word opinion-based essay in week 5 of the 14-week intensive English program before going through the sentence variety checklist. The essays were collected for marking. In week 6, the teacher-researcher distributed the checklists to the students and went through each of the items emphasizing ways to write varieties of sentences. Follow-up practices on the items were also done after that for more understanding, and in week 7 the teacher-researcher instructed the students to write another essay of the same nature as the previous one on the same topic, but that one was guided by the sentence variety checklist to enhance varieties. The essays were then collected for marking, and results were then ready to be compared to the results of the first set of essays.

Immediately after handing in the second essays, the students were given the questionnaires on their perceptions of the usage of the sentence variety checklist as compared to the first time writing without the checklist. Fifteen minutes were allocated for them to respond to the questionnaires. Data to answer to the first research question were obtained from the bands

given to the essays, while the responses to the questionnaires were to accommodate the second research question.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Data obtained were then analyzed using SPSS and frequency count due to few number of respondents involved. As for the SPSS, a paired-samples t-test (repeated measures) was conducted to compare the students' writing bands before and after using the sentence variety checklist. According to Pallant (2007), this technique is used when we have a group of respondents and collect data from them from two different occasions or two different conditions.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: *Is there any difference in students' writing performance before and after using the Sentence Variety checklist?*

**Paired Samples Statistics**

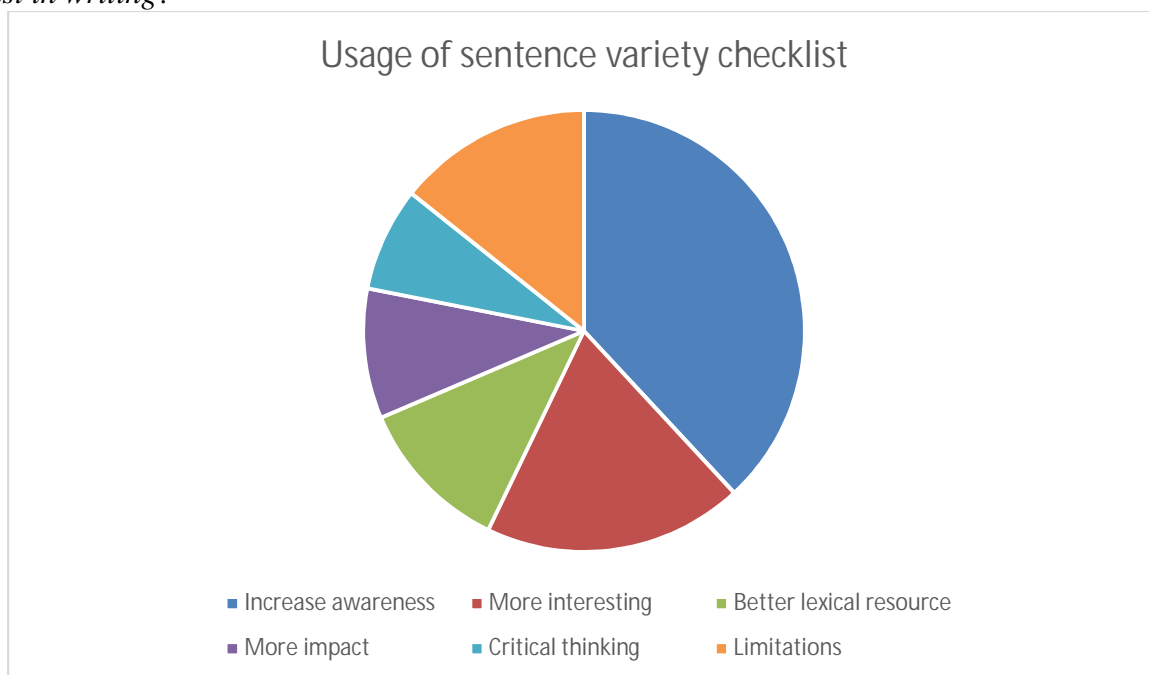
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 NOCL	3.9000	20	.78807	.17622
CL	4.4500	20	.88704	.19835

**Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	NOCL - CL	-.55000	.51042	.11413	-.78888	-.31112	-4.819	19	.000

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' writing performance by comparing the bands given before and after the intervention. There was a statistically significant increase in the students' writing performance from the first writing (M=3.9, SD=.79) to the second writing (M=4.45, SD=.89),  $t(19) = -4.819$ , with  $p < .00005$ . These results suggest that the checklist does have an effect on students' writing performance.

Research Question 2: *What are students' perceptions towards using the sentence variety checklist in writing?*



Perceptions of the students with regards to using the sentence variety checklist were based on the 20 items in the questionnaire that were then put into ranks from the highest to the lowest. The highest rank was dominated by the fact that the checklist increased the students' awareness of what they put on paper and followed by 'making writing more interesting'. Despite the two positive points that students agreed upon, they also felt that the sentence variety checklist somehow controlled their writing process in which it was mainly time and energy consuming which is labelled under 'limitations' in the bar graph. Apart from the aspects ranked as the highest three by the students, they somehow felt that the checklist did help them in writing sentences with better lexical resources namely in terms word choice and transition signals. The lowest aspects in rank were 'more impact' and 'critical thinking'.

Despite the slight difference in the essay scores, the sentence variety checklist has proven that it does promote students' writing performance. This may due to the fact that students need to be prompted with the essential elements in writing and be able to apply them in writing. Content and organization are important but ability to apply them well in writing is imperative. This justifies Krashen's theory of language acquisition on the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis which states that Language learning is the product of formal instruction and incorporates a conscious process which leads to students to be more aware of knowledge about the language. These results also support the studies done by Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton, Freeman, Lock, Low, Robinson and Zhu (2006) which revealed that sentence combining technique does make a difference of degree in the extent to which it helps to improve writing development. Writing more and more essays continuously may not be able to help students in improving their writing if they are not well-guided on how to add more 'colors' in their writing. So, the intervention of the sentence

variety checklist in the process of writing among ESL students should be taken objectively in order to further enhance their writing.

With the higher bands obtained for their second essays, students indeed welcome the sentence variety checklist as a tool to assist them in writing. They strongly feel that the checklist managed to create awareness of what they have learned to be used in writing. This shows that they may have not been so aware of the importance in applying their knowledge of sentence patterns and a lot more prior to this. Apart from promoting awareness while writing, students also find that the checklist is able to make their writing more interesting for they were also guided to begin their sentences using other parts of speech, among other items suggested. This validates Krashen's Monitoring Hypothesis in second language acquisition because according to him, second language learners should monitor their utterances for instance, utilizing their understanding of learned grammar to edit and plan. Besides, it is also worth comparing these findings to one of the approaches from the theory of ESL writing by Silva (1990) which is the controlled approach. This approach states that writing is dominated by the controlled or guided approach which is influenced by structural analysis and behaviorist psychology. As it sees learning to write as an exercise in habit formation in which students are trained to practice sentence patterns and vocabulary by means of writing, it is imperative to make these students aware of what they should use and do based on what they have learned.

In addition, the results of this study also reveal that limitations is one of the factors these students were experiencing while doing the writing. This could be due to the fact that the ESL students, in higher or lower levels of English proficiency classes were not used to doing this before, so they found that using the checklist may have slowed down their process of writing.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

To conclude, this study which has examined whether sentence variety checklist developed based on the content of Langan's book, *College Writing Skills* (1993) could be an added instrument in enhancing ESL students' writing, and studied the perceptions of a group of students from an intensive English language program on the sentence variety checklist, has revealed that there is a difference in students' writing performance after using the sentence variety checklist with mixed perceptions from the students.

These findings, therefore imply that there is a need to carefully scrutinize students' writing performance for particular kinds of problems associated with sentence variety and also to extend or modify assessment and intervention practices to better understand the specific barriers to a student's writing performance. The emphasis of this scrutiny should fall on sentence structures that pose the greatest challenges to the development of writing. As stressed by Saddler (2007), the ability to create a variety of sentences that clearly express intended meaning and this ability can only be learned with direct instruction.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that sentence variety be used across the curriculum to support ESL students' writing proficiency. In promoting sentence variety, educators should focus on creating better and more meaningful sentences, rather than spending so much time editing the work spelling mistakes or other technical problems.

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### Appendix 1

#### Sentence Variety Guideline/Checklist

Use this guideline in writing your essay.

No.	My essay consists of sentences that:	Examples:	Tick if you have
1	are different in length		
2	are different in types: simple  Compound  Complex	My brother's car broke down yesterday.  My brother had been working on the engine for 2 hours, but the car still wouldn't start.  Because the car wouldn't start, he had to call a mechanic to come to our house.	
3	begin with special words: -ed word  -ing word  -ly words  to word group  prepositional phrase	<u>Excited</u> by the good news, Khadijah called her mother immediately.  <u>Walking</u> anxiously, Aminah kept looking for her missing cat.  <u>Reluctantly</u> , Ali left for Japan to further his study.  <u>To</u> pass the exam, you have to do a lot of assignments apart from your exams.  <u>During</u> the exam, drops of water fell from the ceiling.	
4	have adjectives and verbs placed in a series adjectives  verbs	Ahmad is a <u>loving</u> husband, <u>caring</u> father, <u>loyal</u> friend and <u>efficient</u> worker.  The baby <u>crawled</u> on a carpet, <u>picked</u> up a button and <u>put</u> it in his mouth.	

5	are to replace nouns with pronouns	Aminah is a very dedicated, committed and hardworking employee. <u>She</u> has been working for IIUM for almost 20 years and has been holding a lot of posts apart from teaching...	
6	use synonyms to replace some words	Aminah is a very dedicated, committed and hardworking <u>employee/staff/worker</u> . She has been working for IIUM for almost 20 years and has been holding a lot of posts apart from teaching..	
7	Use different transition signals	<u>The first reason</u> is of traffic problem is..... <u>In addition to</u> .....,.....can be a cause of traffic problem. <u>In contrast, on the other hand, nevertheless, nontheless</u> <u>So, as a result, as a consequence, consequently</u> etc	
8	Omit some words or phrases to avoid wordiness/ellipsis	Some people enjoy interacting with other people who they do not know while others may <u>do so</u> for the sake of businesses or education. Those houses are my houses or those houses are <u>mine</u> .	

Adapted from College Writing Skills With Reading (John Langan, 1993)

## Appendix 2

### PART OF WRITING BAND DESCRIPTOR THAT REQUIRES SENTENCE

#### VARIETY

(Adapted from IELTS)

Band	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range & Accuracy
9	-uses <u>a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features</u> ; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'	-uses <u>a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy</u> ; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'
8	-uses <u>a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings</u> -skillfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation -produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation	-uses <u>a wide range of structures</u> -the majority of sentences are error-free Makes only very occasional or inappropriacies
7	-uses <u>a range of cohesive devices appropriately</u> although there may be some under-/over-use -presents a clear central topic within each paragraph -uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision -may produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation	-uses <u>a variety of complex structure</u> -produces frequent error-free sentences -has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors
6	Shows all the positive features of Band 6 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 7	Shows all the positive features of Band 6 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 7
5	Uses an <u>adequate range of vocabulary</u> for the task -Attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy -makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication	Uses <u>a mix of simple and complex sentence forms</u> -makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication

### Appendix 3

## Questionnaire on Writing Using Sentence Variety Checklist

### Student Attitude Questionnaire

Gender : Male / Female      Level : \_\_\_\_\_      Programme: \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire is being given to you as part of a research study to examine whether the use of Sentence Variety Checklist would enhance students' writing performance. I am grateful if you could answer the questions that follow.

The questions have a five-point answering scale. Please circle the number you have chosen for each statement. The numbers mean:

strongly agree 1	agree 2	don't know 3	disagree 4	strongly disagree 5
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The Sentence Variety checklist:

		1	2	3	4	5
1	helps me write more different types of sentences					
2	helps me write sentences of different lengths					
3	helps me write sentences which give more impact in terms of meaning					
4	helps me write what I really wanted to express					
5	makes me think more critically in writing up my sentences					
6	makes me think carefully before writing up my sentences					
7	makes my sentences more lively					

8	makes me use the English words I know in different ways					
9	leads to more usage of transition signals like but, so, therefore etc.					
10	leads to more usage of higher- order grammar items					
11	leads to more usage of more higher-order vocabulary					
12	leads to production of an interesting essay					
13	allows me to identify problems in my writing and see what should be improved					
14	allows me to adjust something I've written to fit the needs of particular readers					
15	allows me to revise my sentences so they are clear to readers on a first reading					
16	allows me to use appropriate strategies to fix problems with my writing					
17	consumes more time for writing					
18	consumes a lot of energy and thoughts for writing					
19	limits effective writing under time constraints					
20	limits my freedom to brainstorm ideas before writing					