

ความรู้ทางด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษช่วยพัฒนานักศึกษาระดับมหาวิทยาลัยได้อย่างไร

RUNNING HEAD: HOW SYNTAX HELPS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

How Knowledge of English Syntax Helps University Students

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการเชิงคุณภาพชิ้นนี้สำรวจถึงความรู้ทางด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษว่ามีประโยชน์ต่อนักศึกษาที่ศึกษาในหลักสูตรนานาชาติที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสื่อกลางในการสอนได้อย่างไร นอกจากนี้ผู้ศึกษาได้ศึกษาถึงประโยชน์ของความรู้ด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษานอกเวลาที่ประกอบอาชีพเป็นครูที่กำลังศึกษาในหลักสูตรนี้ด้วย ผู้ศึกษาได้ทบทวนวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับวิวัฒนาการของการศึกษาด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษจากยุคสมัยเริ่มแรกที่มีการศึกษาด้านนี้ ยุคถดถอยของการศึกษาด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษในด้านการศึกษา และยุคปัจจุบันของการศึกษาด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ในด้านการศึกษา บทความวิชาการชิ้นนี้ทำขึ้นเพื่อเปรียบเทียบกลุ่มตัวอย่างสองกลุ่มคือกลุ่มที่หนึ่งนักศึกษาต่างชาติที่มีพื้นฐานการศึกษาทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษ และกลุ่มที่สองนักศึกษาต่างชาติที่ไม่มีพื้นฐานการศึกษาด้านภาษาอังกฤษ ท้ายที่สุดแล้วบทความชิ้นนี้ยังได้มีการอภิปรายถึงความรู้ทางด้านวากยสัมพันธ์ภาษาอังกฤษว่ามีประโยชน์ต่อนักศึกษาทั้งสองกลุ่มอย่างไร

คำสำคัญ : ไวยากรณ์ ไวยากรณ์หมวดศัพท์ หมวดประโยค EFL ภาษาแรก

ABSTRACT

This qualitative paper explores how having knowledge of English syntax can be beneficial to students studying in international university programs, where English is used as a medium of instruction. In addition, the benefits of English syntax knowledge for students who are part-time teachers studying in the same programs will be looked at. The evolution of syntax studies in education from its early historical significance, its later perceived insignificance in education, and its present status in education will be reviewed. The paper will then compare two groups: international students from English language education backgrounds and international students from non-English language education backgrounds. Finally the paper will discuss how knowing syntax can benefit both groups. Key terms: syntax, grammar, lexical category,

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sentence constituent, EFL, first language; Abbreviations: n. = noun, pron. = pronoun, v. = verb, det. = determiner, prep. = preposition, NP = noun phrase, VP: Pred. = verb phrase predicate, DO = direct object, OP = object of a preposition, PP = prepositional phrase, adj. = adjective, subj. = subject, adv. = adverb.

Key words : EFL, First language, grammar, Lexical category, Sentencent, Syntax

Introduction

Syntax, from its Greek meaning *arrangement together*, is a branch of language study that deals with the analysis of how grammatically correct sentences are formed. Syntax is often thought to be the only branch of language study that exists outside the areas of sound production (phonetics) and meaning (morphology and semantics); however, as Hall points out, "...this isn't entirely true, since intonation patterns, for example, are sound structures which are directly sensitive to the patterning of sentences" (2005). For the sake of simplicity and focus, however, this examination of syntax will remain with the idea that syntax is predominantly about sentence structures. Syntax should not be confused with the term *grammar*. Grammar is a much broader term that covers all areas of how rules govern language. For example, morphology is a branch of grammar that deals with how words are formed. The term grammar, however, is used along with the term syntax in the paper only to show the public perception that the two are synonymous.

Historical Background of Syntax

The earliest known studies of syntax are dated to ancient India in the 4th century BC. The ancient Indian grammarian, Panini is largely credited with much of this early literary and linguistic work (Sashital, 2015). From the onset of the twentieth century there was a significant reduction, and in some cases, a total disappearance

of the teaching of grammar in public schools in the United Kingdom (Hudson and Walmsley, 2005). From the 1960s through the 1980s in the United States there was a trend in education to discourage and eventually dismantle programs and courses focusing on English grammar. School directors were more interested in what they felt was a more holistic education. From the 1990s to the present there has been a change of direction and a resurgence of grammar becoming a part of school curriculums (Hartwell, 1985). Along with this increase of the inclusion of grammar in public school curriculums has been an increase in the levels of anxiety for educators. Caijker and Hislam conducted a study of 503 primary school trainees from 1997-2001 in the United Kingdom that showed teachers had higher levels of knowledge in English grammar, but they still had relatively high levels of anxiety when pressed to talk about grammar or exhibit their knowledge of English grammar in the classroom (2002). Regardless of this anxiety, this increase in the 'teaching of teachers' in grammar has been pushed by leaders of educational boards who have come to realize that when teachers have greater competency in English grammar, they can transfer that knowledge to their students. The students then produce writing of a higher standard. The following quote from a paper by Fillmore and Snow summarizes what should be expected from an adequately trained teacher:

We are certainly not proposing that all educators need to understand Universal Grammar, Government and Binding Theory, Minimalist Phonology, or other topics of interest to the professional linguist. Rather, we are identifying issues of language use in daily life, issues that require only a basic understanding of the descriptive work that linguists engage in and the concepts that they use. (2000, p. 13)

The ideas shown above are basic: Teachers do not need to be highly trained in the very technical fields of linguistics, but they do need to have fundamental training in linguistic areas that will enable them to better understand the difficulties that their students experience in writing and other areas of study. If teachers possess this knowledge and use it in the classroom, their students will benefit more. A study conducted in the United Kingdom concluded that international university students who received higher than average levels of grammar and vocabulary instruction had significantly higher test scores and higher final degree course grades (Cloate, 2016).

One particular point that this author would like to emphasize strongly is that the study of syntax, or grammar, in analyzing only sentence structures should never be a substitute on its own for the purpose of improving students' writing. The practice of writing essays, compositions, and short stories should be the primary means for students to develop their writing. In an opinion piece, Tabbert cites the NCTE Commission on Composition:

The study of the structure and history of language, including English grammar, is a valuable asset to a liberal education and an important part of the English program. It should, however, be taught for its own sake, not as a substitute for

composition, and not with the pretense that it is taught only to improve writing. (1974, no. 12)

Arguments for Studying Syntax

It is imperative that teachers give students an ample amount of writing practice, but more importantly teachers should take the time to read their students' writing, mark errors, give feedback, and provide them an opportunity to re-write. The knowledge of syntax must be considered a supplement for the students to improve and a tool for the teacher to guide and advise. This point above is the basis for the persuasive argument this author has that syntax studies incorporated into university programs give students the backing they need to become better writers.

An old saying goes as follows: "*One can't see the forest for the trees.*" It more or less means that a person is so involved in the fine details of a situation that they are unable to discern the overall situation. As an instructor at an international university in Bangkok, this author has taught students with varying levels of English language competency who come from various cultural backgrounds. Several of the courses this author teaches are linguistics courses, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax. In one English syntax course the old saying from above came to mind once again, but with a slight twist. Here is another variation:

Some students can see the forest but can't see the trees. Some students can see the trees but can't see the forest.

How Syntax Applies to the Students

You might be wondering what the saying shown above means. If we apply this metaphor to the study of syntax in this international academic context, it makes some sense. In this particular

syntax course, and much like the other courses this author teaches, there is a mixture of international students from Europe, North America, South America, Asia, and Africa. The remaining students are Thai nationals. This author will try to avoid stereotyping as much as possible, but two opposing patterns among the students have become apparent. Most of the western educated students, or students educated in the English language, have a poor understanding of the mechanics of the English language, or grammar. They would be hard-pressed to explain what a preposition is and how it functions. Most can, however, converse in English fluently and write decent enough essays. Many of the Asian students or non-native speakers of English, on the other hand, struggle to express themselves using English. If we look at their written work, there are, in many cases, a fair number of grammatical and structural errors. On the other hand, most of them know what a preposition is and how it functions. They can break down a sentence and tell you what each lexical category (part of speech) is and how it functions.

Here is where the above mentioned metaphor becomes apparent. The study of syntax involves the formation of 'trees' or intricate sentence diagrams to show the phrase and clause structures of a sentence. A great number of the western students in this syntax course *can't see the trees but can see the forest*. In other words, they initially struggle greatly to identify the lexical categories and to grasp the concepts used in syntax to show the tree structures. They are, however, able to produce fairly well written essays and speak fluently. Many of the Asian students, in contrast, know the lexical categories already, pick

up the concepts of noun phrase, verb phrase, and predicate almost immediately, and continue on with a flourish. Outside the course, their writing skills often suffer. *They see the trees, but can't see the forest*.

There are several ideas about how this could be the case. One is that the disregard for grammar applies to the way most languages are taught as the first language. Chomsky's Universal Grammar, or UG (1986), is often cited as the fundamental construct that first language is innate. As Meisel points out, "The gift for language that manifests itself in the effortless acquisition of language by toddlers can safely be qualified as a species specific endowment of humans" (2011). One could equate this by saying that as first language speakers there may be a perception that the first language is not learned but acquired, which has been shown to be a very strong argument, so the formal teaching of grammar in first language teaching is often viewed as unnecessary. Meisel cites Pinker (1994) to say that "...it is the mental grammar that is specific to the human language 'instinct'" (2011). If there is indeed an instinct for language, this might be why native speakers of English can often be heard saying the following after being questioned on a grammatical point: *'Well, it just sounds right.'* This is even a common statement heard from language teachers of English when confronted by an inquisitive non-native learner of English. There does not seem to be an easy way for teachers to explain the grammar, or maybe they feel it is unnecessary to provide an explanation (Cajkler and Hislam, 2001). It is as if there is a sense of ethnocentric pride that one's native language is innate, so why bother with grammar. This brings us

to the next question. What is the point of making a conscious effort to learn the syntax of a language, especially in one's first language?

Methods

The research methodology for this study is of a qualitative nature. The data was collected, organized, and reviewed to determine if there is a correlation between having a grounding in sentence structure syntax and improved writing ability among undergraduate university students.

The majority of the research consisted of direct observation of undergraduate Thai students and students of various nationalities enrolled in major and minor English language writing courses and a minor course in English syntax (ENL3103 English syntax) at the Institute of International Studies Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok, Thailand. This observation included syntax tree diagram exercises for the students, recording of conversational exchanges, evaluation of the students' course work, and discussion of this author's feedback on the students' work. The instructor/student discussions often focused on the students' perceptions of syntax and its value in facilitating writing.

In addition, a review of journal articles and sections of books in the academic areas of writing and syntax was conducted. This author's anecdotal accounts were derived from conversational exchanges with the same undergraduate students mentioned above.

Writing, Ambiguity, and Tree Structures

Writing is arguably an area of language learning where a student can benefit the most from an academic perspective. Writing is a quite broad area of language, so this author has decided to

focus on ambiguity in sentence structure. Even the most expertly constructed sentence can be at odds with itself in meaning. This is the curse of ambiguity. To most people with a firm command of the English language, the following sentence seems fine both grammatically and semantically: *She hit the man with an umbrella*. This author showed this sentence to a class of undergraduate students (a mix of native and non-native speakers of English) at the start of a syntax course and asked the students if it was grammatically correct. For the first few minutes, there was agreement that the sentence was grammatically correct. Then the students were asked to comment on the meaning of the sentence. Once again, there was agreement that the meaning was fine. Then the students caught on and realized the point of the exercise. The point was that such a simple sentence had to be up there on the screen for a reason. After ten to fifteen minutes of argument, the students agreed that the sentence had two possible meanings. All that is required is to ask one simple question: Who possessed the umbrella, the woman or the man? The students then discussed the possible meanings amongst themselves.

Student comments were along the lines of, 'Well, maybe she had the umbrella and hit the man with it, or she didn't have it and hit him with her hand. This means that he is the one who had the umbrella then.' Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the syntactic breakdown of the sentence into two meanings. The exercise involved the students in breaking down the sentence into two possible interpretations without changing the word order.

First, lexical categories are determined and then major sentence constituents are shown. Once the sentence constituents are shown, a choice

needs to be made. Is the noun phrase *'the man'* a direct object on its own, or is it part of the prepositional phrase *'with an umbrella'* as a larger noun phrase direct object? After the students see this in the syntax tree diagrams, they are able to visualize the ambiguity in addition to the discussion that goes along with it. This construction and visualization is important as it allows the students to find an alternative to just saying, 'Well, it just seems right that way.' Feedback from students indicated they also felt that it was an objective, or even a scientific, way of defining the structure rather than a subjective, gray area explanation. Both native English speaking students and non-

native English speaking students felt that overall this was a better alternative than reading explanations in a grammar book. Knowing the lexical categories (parts of speech) is important, but knowing *how* the constituent parts, or blocks of words, fit together becomes much more important to understand sentence structures. The understanding of the different possible sentence structures then makes comprehending different possible meanings (ambiguity) possible for the students. This is an important tool in language learning because it enables the students to avoid confusion in their writing.

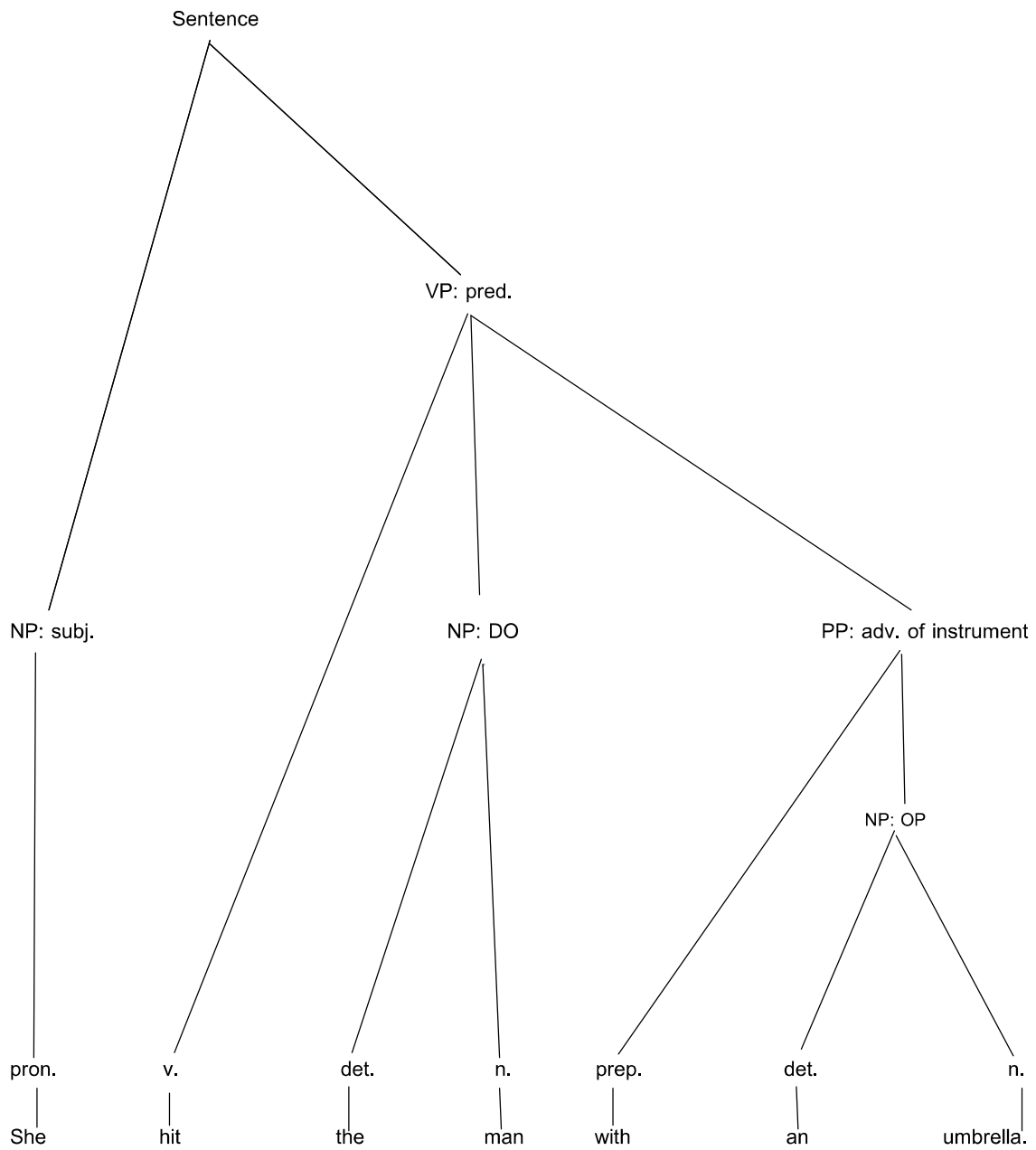


Figure 1 (Meaning: She used an umbrella to hit the man.)

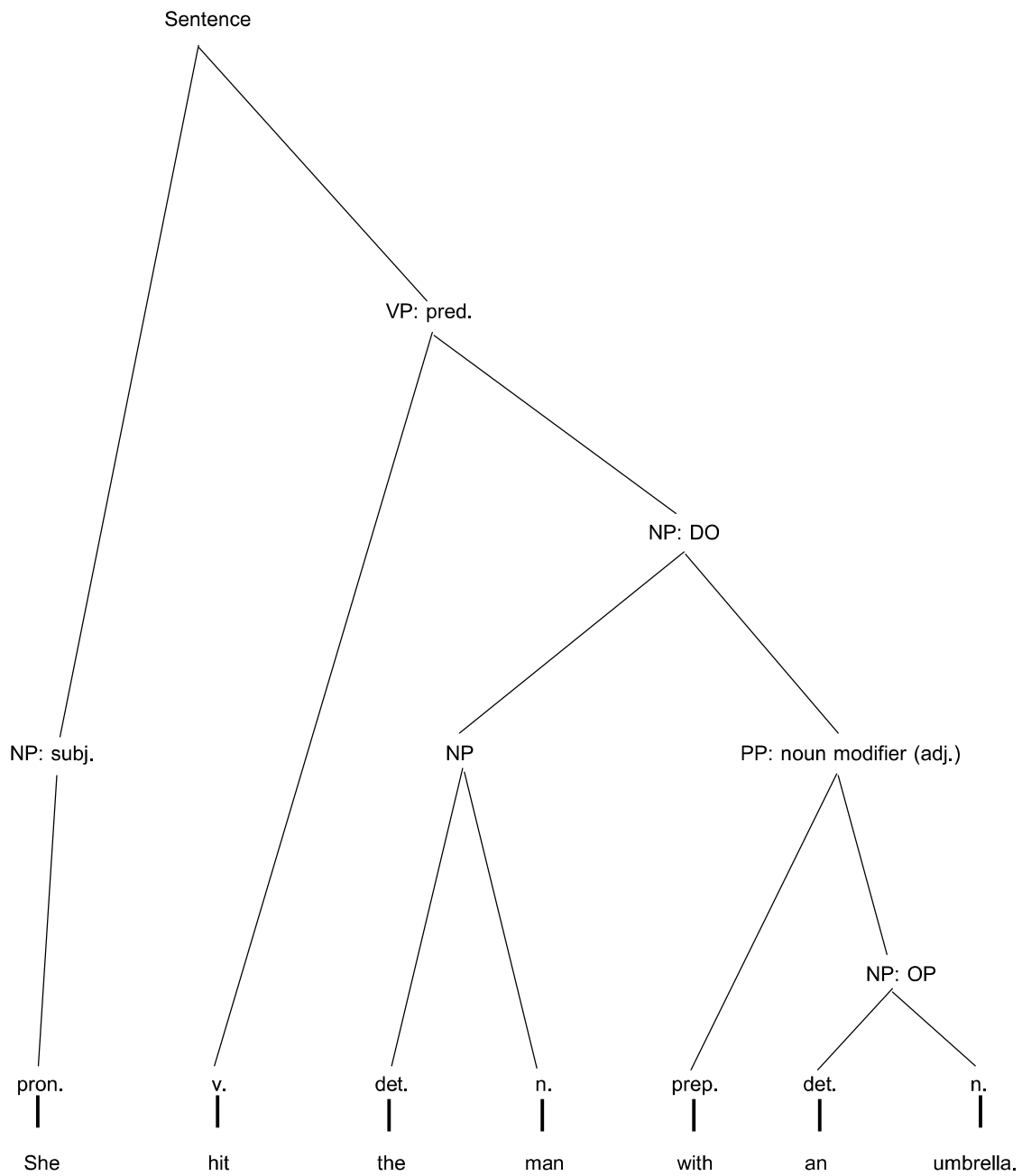


Figure 2 (Meaning: She hit the man who possessed an umbrella.)

In another example of sentence ambiguity from Nigel Fabb, the method of replacement can be used to prove ambiguity. The following sentence shows two possible outcomes:

(1) *I was reading the letter to John.* This sentence might mean:

(a) that there was a letter addressed to John which I was reading (perhaps to myself)

(b) that there was a letter (to me, perhaps) which I was reading aloud to John.

As Fabb points out, if the sentence has its phrases grouped differently, two different meanings result.

(2) I was reading the letter to John.

(3) I was reading the letter to John.

Each sentence example (2 and 3) corresponds to (1). To show evidence for this, Fabb shows that by replacing the underlined phrase in (2) with the pronoun 'it' or the first underlined phrase in (3) with the pronoun 'it', the ambiguity is gone.

(4) I was reading it.

(5) I was reading it to John.

Now (4) has only the meaning of (a) and (5) has only the meaning for (b). Ambiguity can also be avoided by using the passive voice.

The letter was being read by me to John. (Fabb, 1994).

In an example presented by Christopher Hall, the following sentence poses a perplexing number of possibilities for the reader: '*Miranda hunted rabbits with guns from the sheriff's office.*' In his humorous fashion, Hall points out the absurd nature of the semantics of the sentence, but at the same time makes a valid argument that it is "...one of the marvels of human language design: syntax works independently of any reasonable context of

use, and even in the absence of interpretable meaning itself" (2005). There are at least four different interpretations for this one sentence. This author will refrain from going into great detail about the four or more different meanings. Hall's sentence is here to emphasize the reality that what someone says is not always what one means. If we want people to know what we mean (in writing), then we need to be knowledgeable, cautious, and thoughtful about what we intend to convey.

Similar exercises such as those from the Fabb (1994) and Hall (2005) examples were conducted with the students and again the positive feedback from students indicated that the awareness of ambiguity and the means to correct it are an important factor in creating more effective sentences.

Results

The findings from this qualitative study indicate that students view syntax favorably as a supplement used in improving their writing skills. Students realized how they could use syntax as a tool to avoid ambiguity or show how they could use it to write effectively to convey their *intended* meaning. Another positive outcome for the students was that once they became aware of the process, it enabled them to craft sentences into texts that made more sense or serve a greater purpose. This is especially significant for non-native users of English as they are generally the group with writing skills that need the most improvement. Their success in syntax serves another purpose. Many non-native English speaking undergraduates observed who were just entering the international program initially struggled with poor test scores and low grades. After achieving success in the syntax course, it gave them a greater

sense of confidence in themselves as students overall. They claimed that their raised confidence spilled over into their other subjects with better results.

In addition to knowledge of syntax being an effective tool for learners of English to write better, this constructive visualization and breaking down of sentence structures using syntax was just as important for many of the undergraduate native English speaking students in the syntax course. Many of them were teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or planned to do so. Many of the comments that this author received from these students long after the syntax courses finished showed that having an awareness of English syntax has given them much greater confidence in the classroom in dealing with grammar questions posed by learners. This added confidence in grammar has led to greater levels of confidence in other areas for them such as speaking to large classes, giving instructions, and providing feedback to students. Several of the student teachers related anecdotes to this author about past experiences of feeling inadequate around other teachers who had greater knowledge of grammar and structures. Once they had this higher level of knowledge, they felt more at ease in and out of the classroom regarding English grammar and structure. This transcended into their teacher/student relationships in their classrooms. When a teacher shows higher levels of confidence in the classroom, the students also feel a greater sense of confidence in the overall learning environment they are in. With higher levels of confidence in the teacher and in their learning environment, they in turn have greater confidence in their own academic abilities.

Discussion

Syntax is an indispensable tool for university students of all backgrounds at all academic levels inside and outside of the classroom. Although this author has attempted to show the importance of learning and understanding of syntax for university students, it should be considered only a supplemental tool to improve students' writing and a supplemental tool for teachers to guide and give feedback on students' writing. With more teaching of syntax in university course curriculums, the quality of graduating students and the quality of future teachers is sure to increase. After all, once students are able to 'see the trees *and* see the forest', then they will have reached a point in their academic studies where they can use the knowledge of syntax to produce expressive, logical, and meaningful writing.

It is not only the students who will benefit from syntax studies. There is an important by-product that appears. The knowledge of syntax also empowers new teachers to excel and become more well-rounded educators. In addition, teachers feel more confident in dealing with colleagues and superiors during discussions on grammar or dealing with job interviews for teaching positions.

This author's hope is that other academics who also have an interest in syntax and an interest in how it can be utilized to improve academic performance in university students will conduct more in-depth studies on a quantitative level to gain greater insight into how syntax is a benefit to university student writing.

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