

The Variations of the English Noun Postmodifiers in The Undergraduate Students' Compositions

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Abstract

This study investigated the acquisition of English noun post-modifiers in the compositions written by Writing III students of the English Department of Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. It sought to discover the variations of English noun postmodification constructions, their complexity level, their accuracy, and their efficiency found in the end-of-term compositions of the students of Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. The types of noun postmodifications, their complexity level, their accuracy, and efficiency of use may reflect the students' level acquisition of the structures of the English noun postmodifications. The result showed eight of the nine types of postmodifiers were present, while one type was absent. The preposition phrase was the most dominant type postmodifier with 65.235% of occurrences. The embedding of the postmodified nouns was dominated by the zero embedding, while the rate of the single postmodification was also significantly high. Such dominances of preposition phrase, the zero embedding, and single postmodification, and the presence of such cases of lengthy and ambiguous structures noun postmodification indicate the students' level of complexity of the structure of English noun postmodification, accuracy, and efficiency of the English noun postmodifications.

***Keywords:* postmodifiers, embedding, writing**

Introduction

The study is aimed at investigating the acquisition of the structure of postmodification in the compositions of English department students, which may be reflected on the variability of the types of postmodifiers of English nouns, the complexity level of the structure of English noun postmodification (abbreviated NP), the accuracy level of the structure of English noun postmodification, and the efficiency level of the structure of English noun

postmodification in the Writing III class end-of-term test compositions.

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), postmodifiers can be of phrasal postmodifiers and clausal postmodifiers. The phrasal postmodifiers include such phrases of preposition, adjective, adverb, and noun. Preposition phrases enable writers to pack textual information in such a dense manner (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999). Quirk et al. (1985) stated that an

adverb phrase in a postmodification position represents time or place. Adverb phrases and adjective phrases as well can be used to provide more concise structure of finite clauses. This conciseness of structure resembles that of preposition phrases.

On the other hand, the clausal postmodifiers include nonfinite and finite postmodifying clauses. The use of nonfinite clauses is for economy; they use fewer words to deliver significantly the same meaning as finite clauses do (Quirk et al., 1985; Neman, 1989; Biber et al., 1999). The nonfinite is further subdivided into such postmodifying clauses of present participle, past participle and to-infinitive. Quirk et al. (1985) state that present participle clauses correspond with active voice, while past participle clauses are firmly linked with passive voice, and to-infinitive clauses may take active or passive voice to describe tense such as future tenses, or modality.

The finite postmodifying clauses are subdivided into restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. The finite clauses or relative clauses may help minimize or even remove ambiguity that could result from the use of a preposition phrase (Bwritingiber et al., 1999). Restrictive clause is a clause which gives additional information about a noun or noun phrase in a sentence and restricts or defines the meaning of the noun. Such clause is not separated with a comma and usually begins with *who*, *whose*, *that*, *which*, *why*, *when*, or *where* (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992). Nonrestrictive clause is a clause which gives additional information about a noun or noun phrase in a sentence but does not restrict or define the noun or noun phrase. Such a clause is separated with a comma and usually begins with *who*, *whose*, *that*, *which*, *why*, *when*, or *where*.

Sånglöp (2014) in his research on the use of pre- and post-modification in NPs in

bilingual learners of English in Sweden found that prepositional phrases are mostly used in the NP constructions, followed by finite clauses, and nonfinite clauses.

Sharndama (2015) emphasized the importance of the noun phrase as it appears in such functions as subject, object, subject complement, or complement of a preposition. In his qualitative study, Sharndama analyzed the structure of noun phrases in professional legal texts. The texts revealed dominant complex postmodifying elements functioning as attributes of the noun head. In legal contexts, postmodifiers are useful to avoid ambiguity in interpretation to achieve effectiveness in meaning delivery. On the other hand, such effort to avoid ambiguity in interpretation may result in lengthy noun phrases. In his study, Sharndama found that lengthy postmodified noun phrases contain predominantly finite clauses as postmodifiers. Further, the premodifiers, which were mostly adjective phrases, served as the given information, while the postmodifiers, which were preposition phrases, served as the new information.

Hutter (2015) found that noun modifications occur differently in patterns in such parts of scientific articles as introduction, method, result, and discussion in the forms of attributive adjectives, premodifying nouns, and prepositional phrases. However, relative clauses, -ing clause postmodifiers, or -ed clause postmodifiers showed insignificant differences in use.

Undergraduate English Department students have a lot of chances to write; however, what types of postmodifiers and how they use them are still unknown as far as the writers have learned. Therefore, the writers would like to investigate to what extent the undergraduate students are able to

use postmodifiers in their sentential constructions.

Thus, the current study strives to discover and reveal the types of postmodifiers along with their variability of

occurrences, complexity of structures, accuracy, and efficiency the English department undergraduate students' use in their end-of-term compositions

Methods

The subjects of the study were 36 students out of 54 joining Writing III class of the English department of Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. Furthermore, Writing III students were chosen due to their completion of Structure I, Structure II, and Structure III, which mainly covered tenses, phrases, clauses and sentences.

Four steps of documents analysis were conducted to reveal the students' acquisition of noun postmodification of the simplicity or complexity level. The four steps were frequency analysis, complexity analysis, accuracy analysis, and efficiency analysis.

The writers did the frequency analysis to check on the variability of occurrences of the types of noun postmodifiers. Noun phrases containing postmodifiers were analyzed to attain the number of the occurrences of the types of noun postmodifiers. The analysis would reveal

the presence or absence of noun postmodifiers.

The complexity analysis was used to reveal the kinds of postmodifiers that cooccurred and post-modified a noun head, which would suggest the complexity level of a noun phrase. This complexity analysis analyzed the embedded phrases and the single or multiple postmodification structures.

The accuracy analysis was done by counting the postmodified nouns having no ambiguity and those having ambiguity. The efficiency analysis was done by counting the postmodified nouns having no proper conciseness and those having proper conciseness.

In this study, a lecturer who has been teaching English for about 10 years became the triangulator to recheck the accuracy of the noun phrase constructions made by the students under this study.

Findings

Out of nine possibilities of postmodified NPs, eight were found in the

students' compositions as in the following Table 1:

Table 1
The Frequency and Percentage of the Variability of Postmodified Nouns

No	Patterns of Postmodified Nouns	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Head Noun + Preposition phrase	319	65.235
2	Noun + Restrictive clause	103	21.064
3	Noun + To-infinitive clause	33	6.748
4	Noun + Noun phrase	14	2.863
5	Noun + Nonrestrictive clause	8	1.636
6	Noun + Past participle clause	6	1.227
7	Noun + Adverb phrase	4	0.818
8	Noun + Present participle clause	2	0.409
9	Noun + Adjective phrase	0	0.000
Total		489	100

Such imbalance of the distribution between preposition phrase and the other types of postmodifiers may suggest a low variety of the patterns of noun phrases with postmodifiers. This might indicate the students' insufficient acquisition of noun postmodifiers.

The next analysis process was done through the complexity analysis involving the discovery of the embedding of noun phrases and the cooccurrence of postmodification. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2
The Frequency and Percentage of the Complexity of Postmodified Noun Structures (1):
Embedding Patterns of Postmodified Nouns

No	The Embedding Patterns of Postmodified Nouns	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Postmodified Noun + 0 embedded noun phrase	434	88.753
2	Postmodified Noun + 1 embedded noun phrase	53	10.838
3	Postmodified Noun + 2 embedded noun phrases	2	0.409
Total		489	100

The above data suggests the very high percentage of non-embedding noun phrases. In other words, the complexity level of the post-modified noun is low, which confirmed a more obvious degree of simplicity of the structure of noun postmodification.

The next complexity analysis was focused on the single or multiple postmodification structure cooccurrence in a noun phrase. The result of the analysis is shown in the following Table 3 below:

Table 3
Cooccurring Noun Postmodifiers

No	The Cooccurring noun postmodifiers	Frequency	Percentage
1	Noun + 1 postmodifier	488	99.998
2	Postmodified Noun + 2 postmodifiers	1	0.002
Total		489	100

This analysis result shows another extreme dominance of one against another, between single and multiple noun postmodification. The noun with one postmodifier outnumbers the nouns with two postmodifiers with 488 occurrences (99.998%) against one (0.002%). Such short length of noun phrases and noun postmodifiers of low level complexity in

combinations may be interpreted that the students might be incompetent of using complex postmodifiers.

Another analysis is the accuracy analysis. The analysis was done by classifying the ambiguous and unambiguous noun phrases and counting them and presenting them into Table 4 below.

Table 4
The Noun Postmodification Structures Accuracy

No	Noun Postmodification Structures	Frequency	Percentage
1	Postmodified Nouns without ambiguity	486	99.387
2	Postmodified Nouns with ambiguity	3	0.613
Total		489	100

Table 4 shows the high dominance of postmodified nouns having no ambiguity with 486 (99.387%) occurrences against the three (0.613%) occurrences of postmodified nouns having ambiguity. This may suggest a positive level of accuracy of the structures of noun postmodification since there were more unambiguous noun phrases than the

ambiguous ones.

To get the final confirmation on the acquisition level of the structure of noun postmodifications, one more process of analysis was employed, focusing on the efficiency of the postmodification structure found in the analyzed compositions. This analysis was provided in Table 5 below:

Table 5
The Frequency and Percentage of the Efficiency of Noun Postmodification Structures

No.	The Frequency and Percentage of the Efficiency of Noun Postmodification Structures	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Postmodified Noun without proper conciseness	9	1.840
2	Postmodified Noun with proper conciseness	480	98.160
Total		489	100

Table 5 above shows a significant dominance of postmodified nouns having proper conciseness with 480 (98.160%) occurrences against the nine (1.840%) occurrences of postmodified nouns having no proper conciseness. Such dominance is another positive indication of a good level of acquisition of noun postmodification in terms of efficiency.

Thus, we can now confirm such levels of the variability, the complexity, the accuracy, and the efficiency. The types of noun postmodifiers were now confirmed

that there were eight of nine types discovered i.e. preposition phrase, adverb phrase, noun phrase, present participle clause, past participle clause, to-infinitive clause, restrictive clause, and non-restrictive clause. The complexity level showed low complexity due to the dominant embedded noun phrases with postmodifiers and single postmodification, while the accuracy level and the efficiency level indicated positive findings with only few data of ambiguous and inefficient noun phrases.

Discussion

Based on the findings in the analyzed compositions, the Writing III students' level of the acquisition of the English noun postmodification suggests decent variations in the structure of noun postmodification with the occurrences of eight types of noun postmodifiers as seen in Table 1. The results show the immense predominance of preposition phrase of all types of postmodifiers with up to 65.235% against the other types. Another sharp difference also showed the zero embedding of postmodified noun phrase with 88.753% against the 10.838% of single and 0.409% of double embeddings as seen in Table 2. The last barely comparable comparison is between the single noun postmodification with 99.998 % against 0.002% of multiple postmodifications as seen in Table 3.

The variability of noun postmodifiers

The high predominance of the preposition phrase may be caused by compactness of ideas or information or description that enables the students to express their ideas more concisely and effectively. Such simplicity of idea structuring seemed to be dominantly favoured, for example:

The [speed] <of the [connection] <of social media>>...

The combined numbers of frequency and percentages of restrictive and non-restrictive clauses make up 111 (23%) occurrences of finite clauses as seen in Table 1. Both non-finite and finite clauses matter in that they help prevent ambiguity in the noun being post-modified by a preposition phrase (Quirk et al., 1985: 1243). Finite and non-finite clauses may be

less efficient in terms of compactness of information or the number of words being used but are helpful in a more effective delivery of the message. For example:

...[advantages] <on people's social life>.

The head noun *advantages* may still be postmodified to provide a clearer meaning of what kind of advantages that social media bring on people's social life. The postmodifier *that set more open-mindedness to promote more tolerance* may set a more explicit meaning. Thus, the sentence now would read *So, in the end, social media really bring [advantages] <on people's social life> <that set more open-mindedness to promote more tolerance >.*

The least dominant postmodifiers include those achieving very low numbers of frequency and percentage (see Table 1). Postmodifying to-infinitive clauses are commonly used to express messages, among others, plans or future actions (Biber et al., 1999). Besides, to-infinitive clauses can be used to express passive or active voice (Quirk et al., 1985), for example:

... the [ones] <who will make Indonesian people become better through.>.

The square-bracketed head noun *ones* is postmodified by a non-finite clause *who will make Indonesian people become better through....* As the noun phrase expresses a future action or possibility, the rephrased postmodification would be *the [ones] <to make Indonesian people become better through ...>*

Post-modifying past participle clauses were of only six occurrences (1.227%) as seen in Table 1. One reason is that the passive voice requires a restructured clause, which is a complex order variation (Biber et al., 1999). Thus, a more complex phrase restructuring seemed to be avoided. Six post-modifying clauses could actually be

rephrased with the use of past participle phrases to create a denser post-modifying structure.

For example:

...a [language]<which can be used to talk to anyone>

The noun phrase may be rephrased with *a [language] <used to talk to anyone>.*

The present participle clause occurred only twice as seen in Table 1; however, some post-modifying finite clauses which were found could be rephrased with post-modifying non-finite clauses, in this case the present participle clause. For example:

[Applications] <which allow us to do it>...

By rephrasing the postmodifying finite clause with *allowing us to do it*, we now have *[Applications] <allowing us to do it>...*

The students tend to use the finite clauses to post-modify the head nouns since present participle clauses were possibly considered to be more difficult or unknown. This implies that they did not understand the principle of conciseness in writing.

Post-modifying noun phrases were present with 14 (2.863%) occurrences. The post-modifying noun phrases found were dominant to provide the background information about people as the head noun.

The complexity of noun postmodification structures. The complexity of the structures of noun postmodification found in the analyzed compositions were not satisfactory. The dominance of complex noun phrases with zero embedding and the dominance of single postmodification were a sign of low complexity.

The embedding of noun phrases. Zero embedding is a case where a noun phrase contains only a pair of a head noun and a postmodifier out of 434 zero embedded

noun phrases were found. The students used only a head noun with a preposition phrase being the postmodifier. Again, this seems to be the patterns mostly recognized by the students.

The cooccurrence of noun phrase postmodifiers. The single noun postmodification greatly outnumbered the multiple one with 488 (99.998%) occurrences against one (0.002%) occurrence respectively. The students might avoid using the multiple postmodification as it is more difficult to construct in order to express their ideas clearly. Quirk et al. (1985) stated that multiple modification can actually provide explicitness in meaning delivery, but at the same time, it may cause ambiguity if not properly structured.

The accuracy of noun postmodification structures. The accuracy was also confirmed that there were some instances of inaccuracy throughout the 36 analyzed compositions. Thus, the accuracy of constructing the structures of the noun postmodification still needed to be learned by the students. In writing, especially when using multiple postmodification, the students should be able to construct concisely and clearly to get readers' attention. The ambiguity problem was found on some single and multiple embedded phrases that look generally fine, but logically confusing, such as the following example:

... *the [disadvantages] <of the [social media] <used by teenagers>>*.

The example may structurally look perfectly constructed but there was actually one flaw that made the postmodification imperfect semantically. We can see that the head noun *disadvantages* was modified by the preposition phrase *of the social media used by teenagers*. This was where the flaw was revealed because the postmodifying

preposition phrase did not specify explicitly of how or when such disadvantages would arise. A little modification could be done by rephrasing the past participle clause *used by teenagers* that postmodified the embedded head noun *social media* with a finite clause beginning with the relative pronoun, also termed relativizer (Biber et al., 1999), *when*. Thus, the rephrased noun phrase would read *These are the [disadvantages] <of the [social media] <when (it is) used negatively by teenagers>>*. Then, the sentence was clear that disadvantages happen when social media is negatively used. Such a piece of inaccuracy was not the only one, which, again, showed the degree of the acquisition of the structure of the noun postmodification.

The efficiency of noun postmodification structures. The efficiency was also an issue despite its single occurrence. The following example taken from the analyzed data showed such a special finding.

Universal language here means that it is a [language] <which can be used to talk to anyone>, and a [language] <which anyone has to master in order to be able to communicate with [people] <that do not speak the same language as they do>>.

The two long bolded, postmodified noun phrases were actually condensable into just a single noun phrase. Both noun phrases actually refer to the same discussion of head noun *language*. Thus, we simply may rephrase them with *a [language] <which can be used to talk to anyone and mastered in order to be able to communicate with [people] <that do not speak the same language as they do>>*.

Thus, the four factors of (1) the low variability of the types of postmodifiers with the dominance of preposition phrase compared, (2) the low complexity of the

noun postmodification with the dominance of zero embedding and the zero percentage of multiple postmodification, (3) the accuracy of the structures of noun postmodification with the dominance of the postmodified nouns without ambiguity, and (4) the efficiency of the structures of noun postmodification with the dominance of the postmodified nouns with decent conciseness suggest mixed levels of the acquisition of varied, concise, unambiguous, and efficient noun postmodification structures.

Conclusion and the Implications for Pedagogy

The results of the frequency and complexity analyses revealed some issues of the imperfections of structures in terms of variability, complexity, accuracy, and efficiency found in the compositions of the English Department students when they constructed Noun Phrases with their postmodifiers.

Thus, based on the result of the study, the writer proposed that all aforementioned issues of English noun postmodification structures may be solved by substitution and meaningful exercises. Such exercises, the substitution and meaningful drills, should enable students to practice with different types of noun postmodification structures in their contextual meaning.

In substitution and meaningful exercises, students are provided with more chances to practice in written forms with different types of postmodifiers to enable them to create more variable, complex, accurate, and efficient structures of postmodifications. Despite the shared similar function, substitution and meaningful exercises differ in the difficulty levels and variations of exercises.

In substitution exercises, students are simply assigned to replace a phrase, or a clause that postmodifies a head noun.

Substitution exercises are used for a beginner learner because of its simpler task of replacing some phrases or clauses. For example, the students are expected to replace the italicized part of the sentence with the one in parentheses.

- Variability:

Facebook and Twitter are social media *that are popular among teenagers.* (*popular among teenagers*)

→ Facebook and Twitter are social media *popular among teenagers*

- Complexity:

The first reason *why social medias bring good impact* is because it is useful.

(*why social medias bring good impact to human life*)

→ The first reason *why social medias bring good impact to human life is because it is useful.*

- Accuracy:

Parents need to avoid the disadvantages of the social media *used by teenagers.*

(*used negatively by teenagers*)

→ Parents need to avoid the disadvantages of the social media *used negatively by teenagers.*

- Efficiency:

They need to learn a language *that helps them to communicate and a language that enables them to survive when they travel abroad.*

(*that helps them to communicate and to survive when they travel abroad*)

→ They need to learn a language *that helps them to communicate and enables them to survive when they travel abroad.*

In meaningful exercises, students are assigned to combine sentences into one sentence. Meaningful exercises are used for learners who have mastered the basic English constructions because combining sentences require a higher understanding of English structures. For example, the

students are asked to combine sentences in accordance to the instructions stated in parentheses. The following example shows students' ability to construct sentences well. They can show their skills to vary their sentence which is complex, but accurate and efficient.

Joko is a teacher. He teaches English. He loves his job much. He lives next door.

→ *Joko, who is a teacher of English, loves his job much and lives next door.*

→ *Joko, who lives next door, is a teacher of English and loves his job much.*

→ *Joko, living next door, is a teacher of English and loves his job much.*

→ *Joko, being a teacher of English and living next door, loves his job much.*

The future study is expected to reveal students' acquisition of English noun phrase constructions with not only the postmodification structures but also the pre-modification ones. With this it is expected that comprehensive solutions for the improvement will be better devised, proposed, and implemented through better syllabi and lesson plans.

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