

## Dimensions in Tertiary EFL Learners' Syntactical Acquisition: Focus on Clausal Constructions

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### ABSTRACT

Linguistic performance, supported by socio-cognitive competencies, is a crucial aspect in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing. The study investigates the acquisition of English clause constructions among tertiary English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The research focuses on syntactical content, as it is crucial for primary communication in writing. However, there is a lack of research in this area, particularly regarding common clause construction errors. A corpus of 105 narrative essays from 105 tertiary English and non-English major students (75 females, 30 males) of Bangladeshi private and public universities was used as the qualitative content data. The data was analyzed using Hsieh and Shannon's summative content analysis method (2005) to identify acquisition challenges and pedagogical needs. Findings indicate that tertiary EFL students exhibit some ease in acquiring coordinate clauses, while they display a protracted struggle with the acquisition of subordinate clauses and subject-verb agreement. It further indicates that Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students' syntactic mastery across diverse clause subtypes and aspects is not only non-linear but also asymmetrical. Based on the findings, the study suggests reshaping syntax pedagogy to emphasize syntactic subordination and subject-verb agreement, adapting scaffolding to clause complexities, shifting traditional paradigms towards dynamic, engaging practice, and incorporating socio-cognitive schema.

**Keywords-** EFL Writing; Error Analysis; Syntactic Errors, Acquisition of Clause Construction; Tertiary EFL Education.

### I. INTRODUCTION

English is a widely used communication tool globally, and in Bangladesh, English language teaching (ELT) is a crucial program in all levels of education. However, despite its theoretical importance, ELT has faced challenges in the country. Although English is intended to be the country's second language in status, it is still considered as a foreign language (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023), causing a decline in English proficiency among learners. This digression has affected

all levels of ELT education in Bangladesh (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014).

A historical background of ELT in Bangladesh gives a better insight in current situation. During British rule, English was the official language in all formal sectors, a formal status that was also maintained Pakistani administration, where it was recognized as a state language and a second language. After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the 1972 constitution made Bangla the compulsory official language, promoting it to a higher level and restricting English use

in education. Post-independence, Bangladesh prioritized Bangla over English, fearing degradation. This policy lead to severe English proficiency decline among students and general users (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014). Inconsistent language policies and inadequate language planning have further deteriorated the situation, contributing to quality ELT across various education sectors and leading to social inequities (Islam & Hashim, 2019; Rahman & Pandian, 2018a, 2018b). Only a small percentage of Bangladeshi urban students in English medium schools and colleges show considerable English proficiency, while most general students in Bangla medium schools and colleges have poor English proficiency (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Hamid, 2016; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017; Rahman & Pandian, 2018a, 2018b).

Mastering writing skills is crucial in today's globalized world (Nordquist, 2020), making ELT an essential program in all tertiary institutions in Bangladesh (Sultana, 2019; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023; Patwary & Reza, 2024). Good command in tertiary-level academic writing is highly valued, and errors in this field are considered unacceptable (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). For tertiary EFL learners, learning sentence and clause structures, grammar, organization, and writing mechanics are of immense importance (Hogue, 2008). However, Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners exhibit common weaknesses in the acquisition of various clause constructions- structures that include independent, dependent, and relative clauses- that lead to their writing deficiency. "Clausal constructions" in English grammar refer to the structure and use of clauses, which consist of words with a subject and verb, to form complex sentences, including independent, dependent, and relative clauses (Google, n.d.).

While many Bangladeshi universities offer English language courses to help students improve their writing, due to inadequate language instructions, a lack of need-based curricula, and inappropriate teaching materials, many learners enter the tertiary level with inadequate writing skills (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). These deficiencies leave the learners ill prepared for the academic life and the highly competitive professional world. Moreover, many Bangladeshi students struggle with writing English skills due to lack of practice, inadequate instruction, and poor guidance from teachers (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023). This leads to poor English writing with faulty sentence structures and a lack of creativity. Traditionally, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is used in most educational institutions, though Bangladesh has adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the national ELT approach (Bipasha, 2025). However, CLT faces resistance from many teachers and stakeholders across Bangladesh due to its lack of proper implementation and inability to effectively improve students' English proficiency levels (Quader, 2001; Ali et al., 2018). Misapplications of English syntactic rules

further hinder the EFL learners to compose standard English sentences (Hossain & Ashikullah, 2023).

Globally, writing acquisition is a challenging task, particularly for English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) students (Negari, 2011; Klimova, 2014; Husna, 2017; Patwary et al., 2023). Consequently, extensive research has been conducted on the subject of teaching and learning writing in EFL/ESL (e.g., Raimes, 1983; Warschauer, 2007; Randolph, 2009; Teng et al., 2022; Kitamura, 2023). Most of this research has primarily focused on errors and feedback in higher-order concerns like organization and content, neglecting lower-order concerns like mechanics, grammar, syntax, and clausal constructions in EFL/ESL writing (Liu, 2018; Thi & Nikolov, 2022; Patwary et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous studies have not adequately explored the difficulty levels of different syntactic errors, especially clausal construction errors. Further, while some studies in non-native English-speaking contexts such as Thailand, Pakistan, India, and Taiwan (e.g., Sermsook, Liamnimitr, & Pochakorn 2017; Pornthanachotanan, 2020; Sultan, 2015; Benzigar, 2013; Shirban & Lai, 2021) have focused on general linguistic issues of syntax, few have provided specific insights into the acquisition of clausal constructions. In addition, there is a significant research gap on this issue in the tertiary EFL education context of Bangladesh, and it underscores the need for further investigation into clausal construction errors and their remediation.

The current study aims to investigate syntactic errors, specifically clause construction errors, among tertiary-level EFL students in Bangladesh. By analyzing the syntactic complexity of their narrative essays, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of clausal construction errors and aims to assist educators in improving students' writing skills and understanding syntax by refining teaching methods and resources.

## II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to understand clause construction errors made by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students in writing, focusing on prevalent types. It aims to identify patterns and provide instructional strategies for improved grammatical accuracy, addressing the following research question:

**R.Q.** What are the dimensions of syntactic complexity in clause constructions manifested in tertiary EFL learners' academic writing?

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Error Analysis and Common Errors Committed by ESL/EFL Students

Second language errors can be explained by behavioristic, contrastive analysis, and Chomsky's nativist theories. Behavioristic theory suggests learners'

first language rules cause errors in the second language (Abied, Ali, & Ashfello, 2023), while contrastive analysis helps compare language rules (Lado, 1957). Chomsky's (1995) nativist theory emphasizes universal grammar and rule learning. Understanding errors and their sources is beneficial for both teachers and learners in ELT (Harmer, 2004; Glasswell and Harland, 2004; Richards, 1970). Classifying errors helps diagnose learning problems and track changes over time (Brown, Glasswell, and Harland, 2004; Erdogan, 2005). Intra-lingual errors can occur due to inadequate learning, difficulties, inappropriate teaching methods, or confused thinking (Brown 1994).

### 3.2 Clausal Constructions of English

#### 3.2.1 Defining Clauses and Clause Elements

A clause is a group of words consisting of a subject and a verb, forming a sentence or part of a sentence Bradbery (2020). Berry (2012), explains that clauses are built up from phrases and have one complete idea. The formal properties of clauses include having at least one subject and verb, one finite verb form, and allowing other elements based on the verb's patterns (ibid.). Berry (2012) further identifies non-finite and verbless clauses, which do not meet all three characteristics, share some features of clauses.

Berry (2012) identifies five clause elements: subject, verb, object, predicative, and adverbial. Subjects can be noun phrases or clauses, determining the form of the finite verb in the present tense. The verb is the central element in a clause, influencing other elements like objects and predicatives. Objects can be noun phrases, pronouns, or other clauses. There are three types of objects: direct, indirect, and prepositional. Direct objects indicate the person or thing directly involved in the action, while indirect objects indicate the human recipient or beneficiary. Predicatives, also known as complements, are noun phrases, adjective phrases, or clauses that can be subject or object. There are two types of predicatives: subject predicative (Ps) and object predicative (Po). Adverbials can consist of an adverb phrase, prepositional phrase, clause, noun phrase, or non-finite clause, and can occur multiple times in a clause.

#### 3.2.2 Basic Clause Patterns

Berry (2012) explains that the structure of basic clauses in English can be analyzed using five clause elements, yielding seven patterns: SV: They laughed; SVO: Ali cleaned it; SVP: Shameema looked happy; SVA: They were lying on the floor; SVOO: My mom bought me a drink; SVOP: He painted it white; and SVOA: She put it in her shelf.

#### 3.2.3 Types of Main Clause

Berry (2012) identifies four main clause types: declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives. Declaratives are the most common type, containing all clause elements and following the basic English word order. They convey information or feelings, such as "It is ten o'clock." Interrogatives are

formal clauses that involve the inversion of the subject with the first auxiliary, such as "Can you spell it for me?". Examples include yes/no, alternative questions, tag questions, and wh- questions. Exclamatives are sentences expressing strong emotions, usually signaled by an exclamation mark. Imperatives are formal clauses without a subject, requiring the basic form of the verb. Examples include "Take care," "Be quiet," and "Don't laugh at me."

#### 3.2.4 Types of Subordinate Clause

According to Berry (2012) and Brinton (2000), subordinate (sometimes called 'dependent') clauses cannot stand alone as major sentences. For example, the clause "Because she is tired." is an example of a minor sentence or fragment. Subordinate clauses can be finite or non-finite. Finite subordinate clauses represent a clause element or some part of a clause element, while non-finite and verbless clauses are incomplete in some way (Berry, 2012; Brinton, 2000). Berry (2012) identifies four types of finite subordinate clauses: nominal clauses, adverbial clauses, complement clauses, and relative clauses.

The first category is nominal clauses. Berry (2012) maintains that nominal clauses are subordinate clauses that replace noun phrases as the subject, object, or predicative of a clause. He further adds they begin with wh-words or that (subject): "What I like best is swimming" and "That she is brilliant is well known"; (object): "I know what you like / where you're going / how we can do it / that you're unhappy"; and (predicative): "This is what I like best." Nominal clauses also appear as the object of reporting verbs, such as "She said that she is coming home this month." (ibid.).

The second category of the finite subordinate clause is adverbial clause. According to Berry (2012) and Brinton (2000), adverbial clauses are introduced by subordinating conjunctions like because, before, after, etc., and can be placed in more than one position. Examples of adverbial clauses are "She got the job because she has a lot of experience," "I left before the concert finished," and "Although he's rich, he has few friends." Berry (2012) further maintains that another test for adverbial clauses is to replace them with a prepositional phrase or an adverb: She got the job for that reason. Despite his wealth, he has few friends. Adverbial clauses can be placed in more than one position, and the following are some alternatives to the above examples: "He has few friends, although he's rich."; "Because she has a lot of experience, she got the job." (ibid.).

Berry (2012) further maintains appositive clauses are introduced by that (which can be omitted) and form the post-modification of noun phrases. They are associated with abstract nouns such as facts and news. Some examples of appositive clauses are "The fact that you are here proves it." and "The news that he has recovered has cheered everyone up." (Brinton (2000).

Berry (2012) further contends that some subordinate clauses can complement adjectives and nouns in phrases, such as "I'm afraid that we'll be late" or "Also, I'm afraid we'll be late." These subordinate clauses are called complement clauses. They can also be paraphrased with a related verb and a nominal clause, such as "They believe that it prevents aging." (ibid.)

Another important category of finite subordinate clause is relative clause. Relative clauses are subordinate clauses that provide additional information about a noun phrase (Murphy, 2019). Berry (2012) contends that they are often introduced by relative pronouns and determiners, such as who, whom, which, what, that, whose, and 'zero'. The choice between these clauses depends on several factors. Examples of relative clauses include "I know a man who can help us" and "I know a man whom we can help." (Berry, 2000, p. 126). In addition, Berry (2000) distinguishes between defining and non-defining relative clauses, also known as restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, which apply to all relatives (Berry, 2000, p. 126).

### 3.2.5 Incomplete Subordinate Clauses

#### *Non-finite Subordinate Clauses*

Brinton (2000) maintains that non-finite clauses are clauses without a subject and finite verb form, but they still have some clause structure. He further adds that non-finite clauses are introduced by four non-finite verb forms and can be divided into four types: zero infinitive clauses, to-infinitive clauses, -ing (participle) clauses, and -ed (participle) clauses. Examples of non-finite clauses include "I saw Sarah leave the hotel. (zero infinitive clauses)"; "I want to give you his address" (to-infinitive clauses); "I heard the girl shouting for help." (-ing participle clauses); and "I got the watch repaired in town." (-ing clauses). Non-finite clauses in examples have unique clause structures, and Berry (2000) suggests that wh-words can also be used in infinitive clauses, as seen in "I know what to do." The -ed participle indicates a passive meaning, while the -ing participle indicates an active meaning. -ing clauses can be preceded by prepositions and can be part of prepositional phrases, such as "On hearing this, the crowd gave a big roar." (ibid.).

### 3.3 The Structural Relations Between Clauses

The structural relationship between clauses considers the structure and type of clauses connected, which can be created through coordination, subordination, and adverbial links (Leech and Svartvik, 2008; Biber et al., 2002). These relations are discussed below.

#### *Coordination*

Coordination is a relation of equality, meaning conjoined units are of equal importance and syntactic role. It can be words, phrases, clauses, or sentences and is considered "looser" and less emphatic in English. Coordinated clauses should be of equal partners, with at least two main clauses linked to result in a compound sentence (Leech and Svartvik, 2008). Coordinating

conjunctions, also called coordinators, signal the coordination of clauses and can be grouped into simple and complex categories. Coordination is often punctuated with a full stop in English writing. Simple coordinators consist of one word, like and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet, and have specific meanings. Complex coordinators consist of multiple words and have specific meanings to be conveyed. According to Sinclair (2011), a comma must be included between sentences if they are connected by central coordinators and, or, and but, but not by a marginal coordinator. If the clauses are brief, punctuation is not necessary. Ellipsis is an option to create coordination between two conjoined clauses to avoid redundancy in a sentence (Sinclair, 2011).

#### *Subordination*

Subordination is a method of linking clauses that forms a hierarchy where a subordinated clause is a constituent of the main clause, unlike coordination, which conjoins two clauses of the same level of constituent structure, as shown in the following sentence: "that you can do it" is a subordinate clause and acts as an object for the main clause (Quirk et al., 1985). I know [that you can do it] [if you try].

Subordination is a form of linking clauses, where an overt link is introduced by an infinitive, ing-participle, or ed-participle, such as because, after, or although. Biber et al. (2002) state that subordination occurs in a fixed position at the front of clauses and is always a dependent clause. It should not be separated from the main clause using full stops or semicolons, and a comma is required before the main clause if a sentence starts with the subordinate clause.

#### *Adverbial Links*

Adverbial links are essential in connecting sentences and larger units of discourse, expressing relationships such as contrast, addition, and concession. They are mobile and can occupy several positions in a sentence, such as front, mid, or final. They are also referred to as 'sentence adverbials' (Leech & Svartvik, 2008), (Quirk et al., 1985), and 'conjunctive adjuncts' (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). Biber et al. (2002) state that adverbial links can be categorized into six main types: enumeration and addition, summation, apposition, results and inference, contrast and concession, and transition. They are mobile and can occupy several positions in a sentence, with the most common position being the initial position.

### 3.4 Syntactical Errors Committed by the EFL/ESL Learners

Syntactical problems in essays often result from imperfect sentence development and incomplete syntax mastery. Oshima and Houge (1991) identified four types of errors EFL learners commit related to sentence constructions during essay writing assignments: sentence fragments, choppy sentences, run-on sentences or comma splices, and stringy sentences. Numerous error analysis studies have identified common types of errors in ESL learners' interlanguage, including subject-verb



agreement errors, faulty constructions of noun and verb phrases (Tse, 2014; Sawalmeh, 2013), word order errors, sentence structure errors, sentence fragments, run-ons, comma splices, subordination errors, and coordination errors (Bennui, 2008; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Urdaneta, 2011). Pornthanachotanan (2020) and Sultan (2015) discovered that common sentence errors made by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) include comma splices, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments.

#### IV. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Numerous studies have identified common errors in EFL writing, such as run-on sentences, fragments, subject-verb agreement errors, and coordination problems, across various educational contexts.

Benzigar's 2013 study on Indian tertiary EFL learners' English errors revealed that they made significant grammatical and syntactic mistakes, including poor coordination, flawed sentence structures, incorrect word order, fragments, and run-ons/comma splices. The study collected 165 English writings from six Madurai district colleges and analyzed the errors in grammatical terms. Similarly, Sultan's (2015) study examined syntactic errors in Pakistani undergraduates' written English at a renowned private university. The study involved 88 students from different academic writing courses. The students took a writing test, and the corpus was analyzed using a content analysis approach. Major syntactic errors identified were erroneous verb phrases, run-on sentences, and ill-formed clauses. Verb phrases were the most challenging grammatical structure for learners, particularly in subject-verb agreement rules. Run-on sentences were the second-biggest category of syntactic errors.

In the Thai context, a study by Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn (2017) and Pornthanachotanan (2020) found that writing mechanics errors, subject-verb agreement errors, and fragments are the most common errors in English major students' writing. Another study in the Thai context, by Pornthanachotanan (2020), on the other hand, found that comma splices were the most common error type in the science-math group, accounting for 44.44% of errors, while run-on sentences were the most common in the intensive science-math group, accounting for 47.24%. Sentence fragments were the second most common error type in both groups. These findings align with those from Indonesia, where Solikhah (2017) found similar challenges among tertiary students, with sentence fragments and choppy sentences being the most common errors.

Some studies have highlighted the challenges that EFL learners encounter in effectively utilizing coordination and subordination. In the Chinese tertiary EFL context, Qin's (2017) study, conducted on 120

sophomores at Henan Polytechnic University, found that lexical errors were the most common linguistic error category, followed by syntactic and discourse-level errors. The study also found that within the syntactic category, the most error-prone areas were coordination (39%), subordination (33%), and subject-verb agreement (16%). The study highlights the importance of addressing these errors in the Chinese tertiary EFL context. Similarly, in an Algerian study, Kemassi and Boulifa (2019) found that interlingual transfer significantly affects students' coordination and subordination errors, with subordination errors (58%) being more frequent than coordination errors (42%), indicating persistent issues in sentence connectivity and clause integration across EFL contexts. Another large-scale study by Shirban and Lai (2021) in Taiwan systematically analyzed 5703 essays from 430 students, identifying 63,460 errors in four groups: sentence construction issues (51.55%), omission errors (21.30%), writing mechanics errors (15.13%), and unnecessary additions (12.01%), highlighting sentence structure problems as a persistent challenge for EFL learners.

In the Bangladesh EFL context, Hossain and Ashikullah's (2023) study analyzed linguistic errors in the written texts of English department students at a Bangladeshi private university. They used Corder's error analysis model and collected 120 paragraphs from 60 students. The study found that the most frequently occurring grammar errors were in subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, wrong word order, and problems with punctuation, prepositions, tenses, and articles. Another study, in the Bangladeshi tertiary EFL context, was conducted by Hossain (2024). The study focused on first-year English department students for essay writing tasks. Samples are chosen from three semi-urban universities in Bangladesh. The findings revealed that common syntactical errors made by EFL learners include errors in subject-verb agreement, subordination and coordination. The main reasons for these errors include poor background knowledge of English writing skills, excessive use of informal English, and lack of practice in improving writing skills.

#### Research Gap

Research on clause construction errors in Bangladeshi tertiary EFL education is limited, with most studies focusing on general grammatical issues, while some focus on syntactical errors. In the Taiwanese context, the research of Shirban and Lai (2021) focused on general grammatical issues, including syntax. The studies in the Pakistani and Indian contexts focus on syntactic categories more explicitly. In the Thai context, Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn's (2017) study focused on writing mechanics errors, subject-verb agreement errors, and sentence construction errors, but the research site was only one college, and the study is much older. Solikhah's (2017) study on seventh-semester students at IAIN Surakarta University, Indonesia, focused mainly on sentence construction and

linguistic issues. The study found that syntactic errors, particularly the sentence-level problems, included sentence fragments.

In the Bangladeshi context, Hossain and Ashikullah's (2023) study focused on tertiary EFL learners' common errors in subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, wrong word order, punctuation, prepositions, tenses, and articles. In addition, Hossain's (2024) study in the Bangladesh context focused on common errors in writing mechanics, prepositions, tenses, subject-verb agreement, parallelism, modifiers, subordination, and coordination. However, Hossain's study gives a general overview of the categories of errors, and it fails to provide detailed quantitative analysis of syntactical and grammatical errors. Therefore, it is seen that there is a significant research gap in understanding clause construction errors among Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners, as there is no dedicated investigation into their types and patterns and no clear method for addressing these issues through curriculum modifications.

## V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Research Design

This study aimed to analyze the difficulties faced by tertiary EFL students in clause constructions in their essay writing. The researchers used a qualitative research design to address the research issues, as written products are qualitative data. Qualitative data were collected from students' essays so that their errors could be described, classified, and explained. The researchers counted errors made by students using error tables and the MS Excel program. They compared these errors across different subcategories using summative content analysis (SCA), suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Schaaf et al. (2022), which involved analyzing written texts and counting targeted contents, or errors, and comparing them. The study aimed to identify students' writing errors in various clause construction categories and subcategories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kemassi & Boulifa, 2019).

### 5.2 Research Participants

The study involved 105 tertiary EFL students, 75 females and 30 males, enrolled in Bachelor's programs in linguistics, English, mechatronics, business, law, and computer studies at seven Bangladeshi universities, including three public and four private. These universities were located in three distinct regions of the country. As the population was large, the present study used simple random sampling for recruiting student respondents from these universities (Morris, 1996; Bickman & Rog, 2008). All these students underwent a compulsory 13-year EFL learning experience in Bangla medium during primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels, gaining a basic understanding of English and writing strategies. The study was conducted during the first or second academic

year of the students. The researchers selected students with varying levels of writing proficiency, aided by their English language instructors, for the writing tests. The respondents received at least one English language course that taught them writing different genres, and at this level it was expected that the participants were able to write different types of English essays; consequently, their use of syntax, especially clauses, could be examined easily.

### 5.3 Data Collection Instrument and Data Collection Method

The study utilized 105 handwritten narrative essays as qualitative content data. The essays were collected for a PhD project of the principal researcher examining writing problems among tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh. The narrative essays were written by 105 EFL tertiary students (15 from every university) in Bangladesh between June 2022 and June 2023. The essays were part of the principal author's PhD project on identifying writing challenges of tertiary EFL students. The essays were titled "A Memorable Day of Your University Life." The test was chosen for its focus on writing, as it allowed students to express themselves. Writing for oneself is a key source of natural data for writing studies (Hyland, 2009). The principal researcher obtained necessary permission from all seven universities' concerned departments, faculty members, and students. The principal researcher, along with the faculty members and his co-researchers, organized the test in every university where students were given one hour to handwrite their essays. The principal researcher as well as the faculty members invigilated the writing sessions and provided clarifications to the respondents. The researchers ensured that the test was conducted in a regular class setting, allowing students to complete the task in their own comfortable environment, which led to writing samples that largely reflect spontaneous language use. After completion, students submitted their essays to faculty members, who then handed them over to the principal researcher.

### 5.4 Data Analysis Process

After collecting the test papers, the researchers selected a corpus of 105 narrative essays, taking 15 papers from every university. The researchers used Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) summative content analysis to analyze data from narrative essays. They identified clause construction errors through a three-round coding process and then quantified and categorized the errors into categories and subcategories. During the identification and classification of errors, the researchers also consulted the theories of Corder (1967), Halliday and Hassan (1976), and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). The data tables display coded errors as numbers and percentages. To compare difficulty levels of errors, the researchers recalculated the tabulated errors in some subcategories, presenting varying difficulty levels as percentages and numerical values. The frequencies of occurrence for the errors' types and sources were

calculated as percentages, with  $P = (F / N) \times 100$  representing the total number of cases. The results were displayed in charts using Microsoft Excel, providing answers to the research questions about the errors in sentence and clause constructions made by EFL students. Finally, the errors were evaluated from a pedagogical perspective to provide necessary recommendations to the relevant stakeholders. To maintain confidentiality, respondents were coded as U1-S1 to U7-S10, with U1 representing university number 1 and S1 representing student number 1 and the like.

**Validity and Reliability of the Content Analysis Process**

The researchers employed multiple strategies to ensure the reliability and validity of their content analysis procedure. First, they used manual text analysis to improve the validity of the analysis. Second, to improve reproducibility and to mitigate single-author coding bias, they applied multiple reviewer coding. High consistency in coding was achieved through the intense involvement of the principal researcher and two co-researchers, two experienced university ELT teachers, as reviewers. Third, the qualitative study was conducted with rigor, focusing on gathering the high-quality essays directly from the source. The principal researcher, along

with his research assistants, visited all seven universities and took all possible initiatives to create a conducive writing environment for students to elicit authentic texts. A meticulous data analysis procedure was conducted over six months, reinforcing the study's validity and reliability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Street & Ward, 2012).

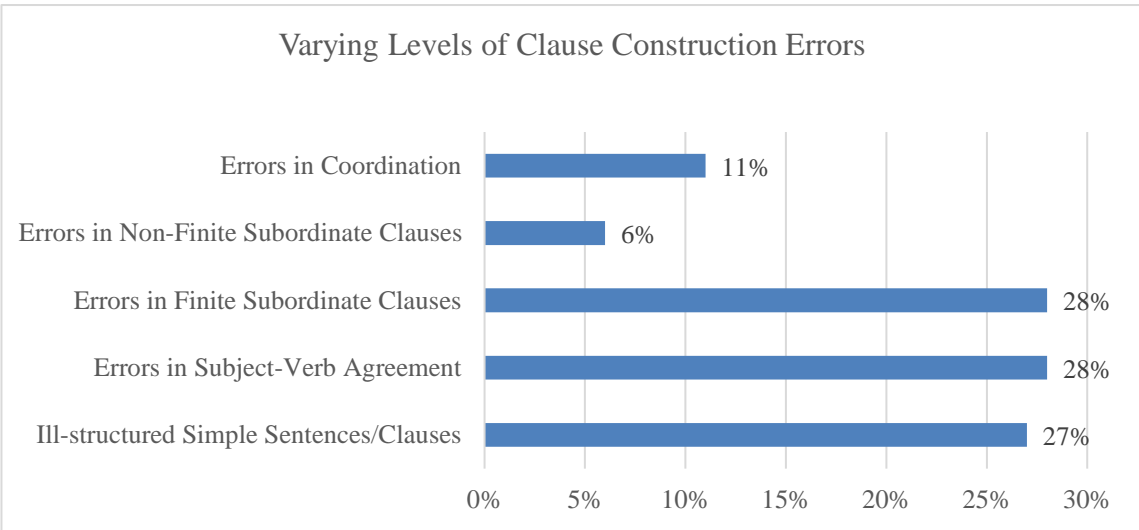
**VI. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

*Answer to the Research Question: What are the dimensions of syntactic complexity in clause constructions manifested in tertiary EFL learners' academic writing?*

A total of 105 narrative essays were analyzed to find students' syntactic errors in clause constructions. The entire corpus was found to contain approximately 2,100 sentences. Out of these 2100 sentences, 691 sentences had errors in clause constructions. Table 1 details major clause construction errors, and their types, frequency of occurrence, and percentage of each error category.

**Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Clause Construction Error Classification and the Frequency Distribution with Percentage**

Sl. No.	Error Type	Frequency Count (f)	Percentage %	Rank
1	Ill-structured Simple Sentences/Clauses	189	27%	2nd
2	Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement	192	28%	1st
3	Errors in Finite Subordinate Clauses: Nominal Clauses, Appositive Clauses, Relative Clauses and Adverbial Clauses	192	28%	1st
4	Errors in Non-Finite Subordinate Clauses: zero infinitive clauses, to-infinitive clauses, -ing (participle) clauses, and -ed (participle) clauses	44	6%	4th
5	Errors in Coordination	74	11%	3rd
	<b>Total</b>	<b>691</b>	<b>100%</b>	



**Chart 1: Varying Levels of Syntactic Errors in Clause Constructions**

As shown in Table 1 and Chart 1, the most frequent type of clause construction error committed by the Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners was errors linked to subordination involving 236 (192 finite subordinate clauses + 44 non-finite subordinate clauses) tokens, accounting for 36% (28% finite subordinate clauses + 6% non-finite subordinate clauses) of all major types of clause construction errors, followed by subject-verb agreement errors (192 tokens), accounting for 28% of errors, and ill-structured simple sentences/clauses involving 189 errors, accounting for 27% of all errors. The least frequent syntactic error type was coordination errors, involving 74 tokens and accounting for 11% of all errors.

Some representational examples of clause construction errors committed by Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners are given below. At the end of the examples, the capital letters in brackets, U and S, denote university and student, respectively.

### 6.1 Errors in Subordination

#### 6.1.1 Errors in Finite Subordinate Clauses

- i. "Our friends who also bought some books." (U5-S2)
- ii. "When I admit myself in University I was so excited." (U1-S8)
- iii. "After 30 minutes- we had arrived at our university." (U2-S8)
- iv. "The first day of my university life will always stays in my mind for lifetime." (U6-S6)
- v. "Then in the evening our program was end. (U5-S4)
- vi. "Memories of our life are deeply attached with us. Because we live in hopes and memories." (U6-S4)

#### 6.1.2 Errors in Non-Finite Subordinate Clauses

- i. "We got know each other very well, which builded our friendship more stronger." (U4-S2)
- ii. "Online classes cannot be good for judge our knowledge. (U1-S4)
- iii. "Then our VC sir came and gave his valuable speech and told follow the campus instructions." (U4-S3)
- iv. "I had no other way expect to get wet." (U5-S7)
- v. "The most memorable is, chatting in the beautiful canteen. Introducing with new new friends." (U1-S2)

### 6.2 Errors in Coordination

- i. "And when I saw my University, it was amazing." (U1-S3)
- ii. "I am just came up university then I meet my all classmates." (U2-S3)
- iii. "But also in other hand it is also a very entertaining place for us." (U2-S7)
- iv. "There are many good friends, many good teachers." (U6-S5)
- v. "As I love to meet new people." (U5-S6)

### 6.3 Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

- i. "Every student have a dream to study in a university." (U5-S3) "My university life start with a orientation program." (U3-S7)
- ii. "He giving knowledge about English lecture, literature and so many." (U4-S5)

- iii. "So, I can see that, these days was very significant in my life." (U6-S5)
- iv. "Memory is the special event which make or remains our mind fresh." (U5-S8)

### 6.4 Errors in Ill-Structured Simple Sentences or Clauses

- i. "My first day in University it is my memorable day." (U2-S3)
- ii. "My first day at University, it is an remarkable day of my life." (U4-S6)
- iii. "I kept wondering how my teachers and classmates will be, would they be nice would I be able to adjust in the department." (U3-S9)
- iv. "We were enjoy the day". (U5-S4)
- v. "Badly miss those days and all of my memory." (U4-S3)

## VII. DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore a crucial phenomenon in second-language acquisition, which is EFL students' fallibility in English syntax, particularly in clause construction errors. Applying an error analysis approach to the error patterns, the present study articulates the understanding derived from previous studies (e.g., Kemassi and Boulifa, 2019; Hossain, 2024) that *subordination errors* are one of the most frequent clause construction errors that EFL students of global contexts, including those of Bangladesh, commit. This syntactic lapse suggests that EFL students undergo a prolonged grappling with the holistic internalization of subordinate clauses. In addition, when compared, the dimensions of the EFL students' committed errors in subordinate clause subtypes reveal an asymmetry. Learners exhibit a relatively moderated tendency for committing syntactical deviations in the forms of non-finite subordinate clauses, while a heightened occurrence of finite subordinate clauses is reflected in their EFL writing. The non-linear trajectory of syntactical internalization among EFL students may be influenced by socio-cognitive factors, leading to differential syntactic acquisition.

Furthermore, the study provides a global perspective on the syntactic unpredictability experienced by EFL students globally (Qin, 2017; Hossain and Ashikullah, 2023; Hossain, 2024), including those from Bangladesh. It is manifested in the second-highest syntactic deviations in clause constructions with subject-verb agreement. This finding underscores that EFL students undergo a longitudinal cognitive challenge to fix the complexities in subject-verb agreement in writing. Precisely, tertiary EFL students exhibit a persistent performance failure in syntactical accuracy, especially manifested in subordination and subject-verb agreement in their writing, followed by errors in ill-structured simple sentences or clauses.

The study further reveals that coordination skill is the most easily acquired syntactical sub-skill among



Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners, despite the difficulty in acquiring syntactical difficulty. This proficiency is evident in their writing, where EFL learners exhibit proficiency in constructing coordinate clauses, making this sub-skill their strongest area of syntactical mastery.

## VIII. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study aimed to understand the dimensions of EFL students' syntactical acquisition. Based on the discussion in the above section, the paper concludes that syntactical acquisition is an asymmetrical and non-linear course of cognitive internalization. Besides, the study confirms the transnational phenomenology of global EFL learners' syntactic instability, as they struggle with the acquisition of subordinate clauses over a long period. The transnationality of syntactic weakness among EFL writers is further reinforced by their persistent performance failure in the acquisition of subject-verb agreement knowledge, resulting in too many errors in the subject-verb agreement. In addition, another remarkable dimension of EFL students' syntactic acquisition is that they acquire coordinate clauses much more easily. Precisely, the present study manifests the understanding that EFL students undergo a longitudinal challenge of syntactical acquisition in clause constructions, and the phenomenon, therefore, deserves more scholarly attention from socio-cognitive perspectives for nuanced understanding. Apart from this, this study underscores the following critical pedagogical reconfiguration needed to address the complexities surrounding EFL students' syntactical acquisition in clause constructions:

- The pedagogy of syntaxes should be restructured to emphasize the teaching of syntactic subordination and subject-verb agreement, two fundamental elements of clause and sentence constructions.
- Pedagogical scaffolding should be adapted to the hierarchical complexities of clause constructions.
- Traditional pedagogical paradigms should be shifted toward more dynamic, engaging, and metacognitively enriched practice.
- The pedagogy of syntaxes should incorporate socio-cognitive schema and mediation to ensure effective learning, promoting active engagement in social contexts and meaningful interactions.

## LIMITATIONS AND SCOPES OF FURTHER RESEARCH

This study contributes to error analysis (EA) but has limitations. First, this study is limited to only three syntactical subtypes, including subordinate clauses, coordinate clauses, and subject-verb agreement. Further research may be directed to other subtypes that EFL students grapple with. Second, it is limited to a corpus of

narrative genres. Further, studies may, therefore, be undertaken to explore whether EFL students' performance has any intersectionality with genre divergences. Third, it is limited to first- and second-year students. Further studies with different samples comprising master's-level students may be carried out to explore whether the EFL students' syntactical acquisition protracts over more advanced years. Further, it is limited to a qualitative approach. A positivist philosophy is imperative to quantitatively explore the generalizable truth about the phenomenon of syntactical acquisition. Finally, this study is limited to the students with a background education in Bengali medium and local curricula. Further studies, thus, may be ventured into exploring whether students' educational culture, such as English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and Indigenous and Western curricula, co-relate students' syntactical acquisition.

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### Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants of the research.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest among them.

### Data Availability

Data may be made available upon request to the corresponding author.

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