



Sentential Styles in Students' Writing

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Abstract. This study explored sentential styles undergraduates employ in their writing and their effectiveness in communication. The purpose of this exploration is to ascertain the degree to which they display knowledge of various sentential styles and their effectiveness in achieving clarity, precision and grace. Lawal's (2012) explication of style as choice from variant forms and style as idiosyncratic and constant forms was employed in the analysis. An essay topic written by selected second year students of the University of Education, Winneba formed the data. The result revealed significant difference in the sentential styles used by the students in their writing. The mixed sentence style was dominant, followed by loose sentence style. The next in rank was periodic sentence, while parallel and balanced sentence styles were absent. This clearly suggests that there is monotony in their writing style and monotonous writing is ineffective writing style. The paper concluded by recommending possible solutions to effective and elegant writing for effective communication and enhanced performance in English.

Keywords: Writing, Sentential style, Styles as choice, Effective Communication

1. Introduction

Language is a form of social behaviour that serves as a means through which speakers communicate their feelings, ideas and emotions to one another. However, in order to fully achieve the purpose of the user, appropriate style must be employed in the choice of the structures. The structural styles employed must equally be made consciously for different reasons to serve the desired goals in writing. Therefore, the choice of varieties of style of sentences in one's writing should be able to have these three qualities:

variety through the use of different structures and styles clarity through the use of meaningful

expressions style through the use of appropriate expression. (Yule, 2010)

Writing is a later historical development than spoken language and it is a complex activity that includes some diverse mechanics. Ekpe (2022) notes that producing a coherent, fluent, and extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing to do in language regardless whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign. The act of writing is ingrained in every aspect of human live and the ability to write effectively gives one the opportunity to share and influence thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Baiys & Wershoven (2001) opine that "writing is a skill and like any other skills, improves by practice". This suggests that writing is an ability that can only be improved by constant practice. A writer is required to express the content of writing into a good composition by considering the aspects of writing and by varying the sentence style in the writing.

2. Style and Stylistics

Style and stylistics like some other concepts in linguistics have been divergently defined by various scholars, each emphasizing different aspects. Norgaard et al cited in Israel (2018) define style as the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose and so on. This implies that style is not restricted to a particular area but can be considered as a feature of a situation, a character, a particular text or linguistic expression investigated over time. Worthy of note is that the subject matter, the audience as well as the purpose of communication largely influenced what is communicated and how it is communicated (Quirk et al, 1972 cited in Okoh et al 2012). This also includes "the choice of linguistic forms which proceed from our attitude to the hearer (or reader), to the subject matter, to the purpose of communication." Furthermore, O'Donnelland Todd (1974) cited in Okoh (2012) posits that:

The style of any given occasion is the product of many separate language choices made in response to a network of contextual factors without however any one-to-one correspondence between elements of the language on the one hand and elements of context on the other.

Very important in the above assertion is the reference to how user's language choices are predicted on a network of contextual factors. Commenting on the interface between language and context, Akmajian et al (2010) maintain that the context of an utterance is an expandable notion which encompasses the linguistic, that is, the context of an utterances in the text, the immediate physical and social environment (the place, time, people, occasion, etc.) as well as the general knowledge of the particular parts in the communicative event. And all these contextual variables influence the interpretation of utterances.

They espouse that the comments people make during conversation often reflect features of the context of utterance in the people, and that people "watch their language" by avoiding certain words or phrases. Besides and more subtly, users' language contains structural devices, regarded as stylistic variants that permit them to merge more easily into the flow of conversation. This connection between language use and context is aptly pointed out in Enkvist's (1973) definition of style as "variations that correlate with contexts and situations". Style is the way in which form is executed or the means in which the context is expressed.

Style is applicable in both spoken and written language. Style in its simplest form is defined as "the perceived distinctive manner of expression in speaking or writing just as there is a perceived manner of doing things..." (Wales, 2001). This shows that different styles apply to different situations and the same activity can give rise to different stylistic variations. In this direction, style can be referred to as variation in language use.

Wales (2001) maintains that style is "distinctive... the set or sum of linguistic features that seem to be characteristics of register, genre or period." This is in reference to the style of the text. It is important to note that every user of language employs the language at his disposal at the time of speaking/writing to achieve his set purpose. Style is associated with the peculiar manner in which the language of the text is expressed in order to achieve a striking effect. Style is thus a distinctive way of saying, writing, or doing things. It could be anything at all as in the style of a dress, an address, a book, a

haircut, a carving/painting etc. Style is a kind of art, both inherent and acquired, and is often associated with the creative imagination. This is why style cannot be regarded as an ornament, a kind of embroidery on a cloth to be employed at will. Rather style is motivated by the speaker's personal choice, belief system as well as socio-cultural factors at every level (Ebeogu, 1998; Carter & Stockwell, 2008 in Norgaard et al 2010).

However, from the linguistic Encyclopaedia, style means a consistent occurrence in the text of certain items and structures, or type of items and structures among those offered by the language, while stylistics is simply regarded as the study and a detailed stylistic analysis of any text at all. According to Freeman (1970), linguistic studies of style are usually approached in one of the following three ways: 1. Style considered as the habitual choices made by an author among available linguistic alternatives, 2. Style viewed as recurring patterns of a text possibly on several level woven together with different degrees of elaboration, relatedness and binding the work into harmonious section in unique and interesting ways. And 3. Style could be seen as the grammar of abnormalities and deviation employed in provocative and creative ways to produce a whole.

On the other hand, differentiating between literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics, Hendricks (1974) in Adeyemi (2014) expresses his preference for the word "stylo-linguistics" which he defines thus: *Stylistics is a form of criticism and literature in its focus. It is therefore imperative that definition of stylistics has to embrace all subjects in its study. i.e. style, linguistics, and literature. Consequently, we may define it as a critical study of the linguistic style and culture artefacts/basis of a literary work of art or any other discourse that uses language.*

From the discussion above, it is quite clear that stylistics as field of study is concerned with the study of style. This suggests that as a discipline, stylistic study is a chief means of identifying the deliberate selection of linguistic forms by users for expressing/achieving specific purposes.

2.1 Sentential Styles in English

Teachers of composition pay considerable attention to questions of how to craft sentences. Despite this, some of them do not teach sentential style much at all and, if they do, they often do so merely to enhance the "clarity" of students' prose (Connors, 2000).

Varying sentential styles does more than that. It enhances the effectiveness of writing. This has implication on effective communication, precision and clarity. It creates elegance and brings about freshness by eliminating all forms of clumsiness.

Sentential styles may be classified as follows:

Loose or cumulative, periodic, mixed, balanced, parallel, active and passive, subordination, figurative of rhetoric and others (McCrimmon et al 1984; Corbett & Connors, 1999; Maxine, 2013; Okeke & Chukwu, 2013).

a. Loose or Cumulative Sentence: It is a sentence that puts its subject and verb early. It is used to achieve immediate impression because the beginning of the sentence has the main information. Therefore, the loose sentence is a common sentence which consists of some variations of subject-predicator structure by retaining the common subject and verb, and by arranging the adjectives in series: E.g.

- i. He came late to school today because he missed the morning bus.
- ii. The internet provides an endless source of entertainment, because of the variety of websites, fun, games, entertaining videos, and Wikipedia.
- iii. Janet received the award despite the fact that she was not the best graduating student.

b. Parallel Sentence: A parallel sentence is the grammatical framing of the words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs to give structural similarity. It brings freshness and some form of elegance to writing: E.g.

- i. With hard-work, with sound education, with proper guidance, we'll surely excel.
- ii. He is a thief, a cheat and a liar.
- iii. Having paid their fees, having paid for their ticket, having paid for their food, it is not surprising that they voted for him.

c. Mixed Sentence: This sentence is one with incompatible elements that begin with one type of sentence and shift to another. The speaker starts off to say one thing and abruptly switches to another: E.g.

- i. Our aim is to finish up this job today but in any case, we have to break for the movie show at the conference room.
- ii. Our main objective in this party is to contest, win and take over governance but in addition to this, we are here to eat, drink and party.
- iii. Your job is to clean the house and wash the dishes but that notwithstanding, you have to join your friends to play.

d. Balanced Sentence: A balanced sentence contains two parts that are structurally the same. It employs parallel structures of approximately the same length and importance and reflects and support logical pattern. The regular rhythm of the matching clauses is always attractive to the reader. Like the parallel sentence, it brings about elegance and grace in writing.

- i. She called and we answered.
- ii. He came, saw and conquered.
- iii. Man proposes and God disposes.

e. Periodic Sentence: This is an opposite of loose sentence because the end part contains the major information. Periodic sentence can only produce complete meaning at the end of the structure. This is because, in it, the subordinate clause comes before the main clause. By so doing, it suspends its meaning until the end, usually with subject and verb wisely separated, and the verb as near the end as possible. Because a periodic sentence can makes complete sense only at the end of the structure, the structures can be clumsy at times: E.g.

- i. On getting home late in the evening, he found that the funeral had already taken place
- ii. Troubled by the stubborn son and unable to bear it any longer, the man ran away from his house.
- iii. As he visited his fiancée and waited outside for the whole day as she was not at home, Emeka decided to break off the engagement.

f. Other Sent types: Other sentence style includes active/passive, subordination, direct/indirect structures, figure of rhetoric sentences: E.g.

- (a) Ama's answers are wrong as usual.
- (b) Party shoes should not be worn to class, of course.
- (c) The students who had been good all year were given a price.
- (d) "The soccer is over", announced the referee.
- (e) She was a peacock.
- (f) She displayed herself as if she were a peacock.
- (g) Oh, what a life!

3. Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- identify and examine the sentential styles in the essays of selected 2nd year undergraduates of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW)
- analyze their effects in relation to effective writing
- suggest possible solutions to elegant and effective writing

4. Questions

This study is set to provide answers to the following questions:

- What styles do 2nd year undergraduates of UEW exhibit in their essays?
- How effective are these styles?
- What are the possible solutions to elegance and effective writing?

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Lawal's (2012) explication of style as choice from variant forms and style as idiosyncratic and constant forms. Style as choice from variant form implies that every language has different varieties as a result of variables of location, time and situation and this invariably means that variety of language use is an inevitable fact of life. Style as idiosyncratic and constant forms derives from the sociolinguistic concept of "idiolect" and the influence of science and the computer/internet. This approach emphasizes the objective description of relative frequencies of style features in a piece of discourse.

Lawal (2012) views style from two major approaches:

Choice from Variant Form: The principle of this theory views style as deliberate choice from the variant and competing forms. As an approach, it's predicated on the selection possibilities and constraints which exist within each language with regard to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations among linguistic elements. The language user makes certain choices from an array of possible elements and their combination to express a particular attitude, mood and intention relevant to the particular situation.

Deviation from the Norm: This theory relies on the notion that language is both rule-governed behaviour

and accumulation of norms – "accuracy" (grammatical correctness) and "appropriateness" (social acceptability), which are the hallmark of the "standard" variety of any language. This norm "variety refers to a 'variety-less' or 'normal' or 'unmarked' set of grammatical structures, which account for features occurring with similar frequency and distribution in all varieties of the language". Beyond "grammar", there are norms at other levels of linguistic analysis such as: Graphological, phonological, lexico-semantic, morphological, syntactic and discourse rules of language.

6. Methodology

This qualitative study adopted a content analysis of the written composition of second year students of the UEW. The data was drawn from the writing course taught at the Department of English Education titled ENG233 – Advanced Composition and the academic year in was 2021/2022. This course is offered by three departments in the University namely, Department of English Education, Department of French Education and Department of Special Education. In the year in focus, 321 students registered for the course and through the purposive sampling technique, 30 scripts were sampled. Being the lecturer for this course and having taught the course for 6 consecutive years, the researcher decided to examine the sentential styles of the students to ascertain how effective or otherwise this contributes to their low performance in the end-of-year-examinations. The students were taught for 9 weeks out of the 13 weeks in the semester before this exercise. They were asked to write on the topic – Is Ghana ready for a female president? They were asked to write not more than 1000 words. The topic given to the students to write on was a familiar one as similar topics had been discussed in class during the teaching weeks; therefore, if all the variables were constant, the testing instrument was reliable because the test type was a mid-semester examination type for ESL students.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Question One: What sentential styles do 2nd year undergraduates of UEW exhibit in their essays?

Table 1: Summary of Sentential Styles in the Student's Essay

S/N	Sentential Type/Style	Total
1.	Number of sentences in the essay	1,058
2.	Complete sentences	873
3.	Fragments	106
4.	Comma Splice	21
5.	Run-together sentences	33
6.	Dangling Modifier	25
7.	Simple sentences	401
8.	Compound sentences	222
9.	Complex sentences	55
10.	Declarative sentences	76
11.	Imperative sentences	4
12.	Interrogative sentences	37
13.	Exclamative sentences	0
14.	Mixed sentences	28
15.	Loose sentences	41
16.	Periodic sentences	3
17.	Parallel sentences	0
18.	Balanced sentence	0

As we can see in the table above, apart from the traditional sentence types – structure and function, the sentential styles were not well exhibited in the essays. This shows their lack of understanding of how communicative effective sentential styles are to writing despite that this has been explained in classroom discussions.

Below are samples of a few sentential styles in the students’ essay:

(a) Mixed Style

- i. Although we have concluded our work, we still have a lot more to accomplish; however, if I may ask, how many times did our opponent paid them a visit?
- i. The women folk is not to be troubled by those empty threats, but in any case, let me thank those of you who believe in us.

(b) Loose Style

- i. She gave us a good start, stating the plan, roadmap and the possible solution.
- ii. The president sent a passionate appeal to the members, making a dramatic language, extended metaphor, and pauses for emphasis.

(c) Periodic Style

- i. Pacing round the room and not knowing what next to do, the woman let out a shrill cry.
- ii. Driving through muddy road and unable to avoid the deep pothole in the middle of the road, we had an accident.

Erroneous structures abound in the students’ writing. This can be seen from the numerous ill-structured sentences we have – fragments, comma splice, run-together sentences and dangling modifiers. Let’s examine them:

(d) Fragments

Fragments are incomplete structures. If one is not careful to have both a subject and a predicate in the sentences and to express a complete thought, one will write sentence fragments instead of complete sentences.

Here are examples from the data:

- i. Who was the outstanding athlete of her class and also the best scholar.
- ii. Although she has been well recommended by her former employer.
- iii. Because women have all it takes to bring a positive change in Ghana.

(e) Comma Splice

Use of a comma between two independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction is a major error called the comma splice (This term comes from the idea of splicing or “patching” together two clauses that should be more strongly separated). For instance:

Comma Splice: I enjoyed his company, I do not know that he enjoyed mine.
 Correction: I enjoyed his company, but I do not know that he enjoyed mine.
I enjoyed his company; I do not know that he enjoyed mine.

I enjoyed his company; however, I do not know that he enjoyed mine.

Examples from the students’ essay:

- i. This is the 21st century, women must rise to the occasion.
- ii. She contested the election, she won by a land’s slide.

(f) Run-together Sentence

The run-together sentence results from omitting punctuation between the two independent clauses not joined by a conjunction. Basically, the error is the same as that of the comma splice: it shows ignorance of sentence structure:

Twilight had fallen it was dark under the old Iroko tree near the house.

When you read the sentence just given, you have difficulty in getting the meaning at first because the ideas are run together.

There are, however, four reliable devices for correcting the run-together sentence:

Connect two independent clauses by a comma and a coordinating conjunction if the two clauses are logically of equal importance.

Twilight had fallen; and it was dark under the old Iroko tree near the house.

Connect two independent clauses by a semicolon if they are close enough in thought to make one sentence and you want to omit the conjunction.

Twilight had fallen; it was dark under the old Iroko tree near the house.

Write the two independent clauses as separate sentences if you wish to give them separate emphasis.

Twilight had fallen. It was dark under the old Iroko tree near the house.

Subordinate one of the independent clauses:

When twilight had fallen, it was dark under the iroko oak tree near the house.

Examples from the students' essay:

i. It was done at the party level the woman association needs to support the plan.

ii. A woman president is possible in Ghana political parties in the country must see the need to make this happen.

(g) Dangling Modifier

A modifier must always have a word to modify. A modifier is said to dangle when the word or expression it is supposed to modify is not present in the sentence. Such modifiers usually appear as two types of constructions — as verbal phrases and as elliptical clauses. (An elliptical clause is a dependent clause in which the subject and/or verb are omitted).

Examples of dangling modifiers:

1. *To play terms well*, the racket must be held properly.

2. *When only ten years old*, my father took me to London.

3. *Having gone round this morning*, the problem is more serious than I thought

4. *On getting home*, the burial had already taken place.

Sentences containing dangling modifiers can be corrected in one of two ways. One way is leave the modifier as it is and to reword

the main clause, making the subject a word to which the modifier logically refers, e.g.

To play tennis, one must hold the racket properly.

When only ten years old, I was taken to London by my father.

The second way is to expand the modifier into dependent clauses, e.g.

When I got home, the ceremony had already taken place.

Here are examples from students' essays:

i. On getting to the station, the voting had taken place.

ii. Having spoken so eloquently at the rally, the people cheered happily.

Objective Two: How effective are these styles?

In this discussing this, let us examine the component of the linguistic style in the essay. The components can be examined in 3 levels:

Diction

Syntax

Paragraph

Diction

Most words in the essays were simple, formal and denotative. Verbs tenses were simple present/past/present continuous forms. There were concord errors. There were pronouns, determiners, adverbs adjectives, prepositions and conjunctions but many of them were misused.

Syntax

Simple, declarative and mixed sentences dominated the structures. There were many declarative sentences. Many of which would have been regarded as complex sentences were all misused. A lot of sentences were fragmented. Comma slice errors, run-together sentences and dangling modifiers were rampant. Most of the structures were in active voice with SV, SVO, SVC, SVAA, SVOC pattern. Again, they used about 6 – 36 words per sentence. Many sentences were excessively long and incoherent.

Paragraph

Almost all the paragraphs in the essays were faulty. The paragraphs ranged from 5 – 14 lines. Most paragraphs lacked topic sentence and those with a topic sentence were not fully developed.

Out of 30 essays examined, only 7 essays had their thesis statements clearly stated at the introductory paragraphs. Many paragraphs had no linkers.

Question 3: What are the possible solutions to elegance and effective writing?

Every student/writer should bear in mind that effective writing depends heavily on the selection of appropriate words arranged in a particular order. Therefore, the following should be considered:

1. Learning and varying sentence structures in English using SVCOA paradigm is key. Example:

S V
(a) Uche cried.

S V C
(b) Uche became the leader.

S V O
(c) Uche bought the book.

S V A
(d) The children played in the garden.

2. Learning and varying sentence types is equally very important. Eg.

(a) The pupils submitted their homework. **Simple sentence**

(b) Jennet cooked the food and Ngozi washed the dishes. **Compound sentence**

(c) Why he did it is still a mystery. **Complex sentence**

3. Varying the sentential styles as have been listed and discussed above is very crucial in achieving effective communication, elegance and grace.

4. Learning and bring in artistry in writing also facilitate clarity, precision and grace. This can be achieved by consulting the dictionary often, learning new words and their spelling and applying them in ones writing.

5. Learning the writing techniques is also key. This could be achieved by avoiding the choppy style which causes the inability to subordinate and give writing an air of urgency. Again a writer must be conscious of appropriateness in the choice of words because though there are a lot of synonyms in English, for instance, there is no absolute synonymy.

6. Punctuate well. It is important to know that the punctuation marks in English are just like words. They say things the words do only that they say it more economically. The full stops end complete sentences and remarks while commas mark pauses. The first letters of proper names and names of places, rivers, mountains and identifiable landmarks are usually capital letters just as the first letter of the first word of a sentence is usually in a capital letter. Semi-colons are used to connect two closely related sentences which enjoy the status of main clauses.

7. Coherence and cohesion which brings unity in paragraphs must be noted. The length of the sentence/paragraph has nothing to do with its unity. A unified sentence/paragraph must be grammatically complete irrespective of what it says. Again learners should also know that the expression “fine writing” does not mean good writing. Nor does it refer to literary or poetic writing. Rather it has more to do with unity or completeness of thought in sentences.

7. Conclusion

Many students do not understand the various sentential styles available and therefore do not know how to vary these various styles to enhance the effectiveness of their writing. Their attention is largely on the sentences types (structure and function) which makes their essays monotonous and monotonous writing is not effective writing. This equally has a negative implication on effective communication and general performance in their use of English as their writings often times are tasteless, lack elegance and grace.

It is necessary for the L2 users of English to build an active vocabulary, learn the writing process and also be aware of different sentential styles available so that they can see the need to be selective as they express themselves. It is advisable also to pay attention not only to what is said, but to how (style) it is said. Attention to how, will go a long way in helping to eradicate many clumsy structures in their sentence construction.

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