

## The Role of Syntactic Analysis in Teaching University Students to Write Well-Formed English Sentences

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### Abstract:

*This paper aims to find out the role of syntactic analysis in teaching university students to write well-formed English sentences. The researcher uses a questionnaire as an instrument for collecting data of the study. The sample includes (30) English Language teachers whom were chosen randomly from two universities: Sudan University for Science and Technology and Omdurman Ahlia University. The results have revealed that the inability of students to construct correct sentences according to the rules of grammar and the patterns of English sentence. This is due to intralingual and interlanguage errors. Teachers always correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing. The writing activities which are given to students are not sufficient to practise the writing skill. The classroom time is not enough to give students a chance to practise activities.*

**Key words:** syntactic analysis, English sentences

### INTRODUCTION:

The main concern of this study will focus on syntax which covers a variety of linguistic aspects for example; grammar and

error analysis. The selection of this topic is due to two main reasons: First, syntax is a very crucial branch of linguistics, it touches the area of the writing system. Second, most of the Sudanese university students lack the ability to produce well-formed sentence and hence fail to express themselves in a good designed-work. There are many problems which encounter learners in sentence structure.

"The terms 'syntax' is form the ancient Greek 's'yntaxis, a verbal noun which literally means 'arrangement' or 'setting out together'" (Vanvalin: 2000).

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 535) define syntax as the ways in which words combine to form sentences and the rules which govern the formation of sentences, making some sentences possible and others not possible within a particular language.

Within traditional grammar, the syntax of a language is described in terms of a taxonomy (i.e classificatory list) of the range of different kinds of syntactic structures found in the language. The main assumption underpinning syntactic analysis in traditional grammar is that phrases and sentences are built up of a series of constituents (i.e. syntactic units) each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves specific grammatical function. Given this assumption, the role of the linguist analyzing the syntactic structure of any given type of sentence is to identify each of the constituents in the sentence, and (for each constituent) to say what category it belongs to and what function it serves. For example:

(Students protested vehemently).

*Traditionally, each of three words in sentence above belongs to a specific grammatical category (students being a plural noun, protested a past tense verb, and vehemently an adverb) and that each of them serves a specific grammatical function (protested being a predicate , students being its sole argument and functioning as the subject of protested, and vehemently being an adjunct i.e. an expression which provides*

*additional information about the time, place or manner of an event) . The overall sentence students protested vehemently has the categorial status of a clause which is finite in nature (by virtue of denoting an event taking place at a specific time) , and has the semantic function of expressing a proposition which is declarative in force ( in that it is used to make a statement rather than ask a question). (Radford: 2004: 1-2)*

The aims of this study are:

1. To discover the types of errors that are made by Sudanese university students in sentence construction.
2. To find out if the teachers correct students' errors in sentence construction or not.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

The study of syntax is the study of how words combine to form phrases and ultimately sentences in languages. Because it consists of phrases that are put together in a particular way, a sentence has a structure. The structure consists of the way in which the words are organized into phrases and the phrases are organized into larger phrases. The study of phrase and sentence structure is sometimes called grammar. (Tserdanelis and Wong (2004: 185)

In (1960s) Chomsky has differentiated between competence (the fluent native speaker's tacit knowledge of his or her language) and performance, (what people actually say or perceive by what someone else says on a given occasion). Competence is 'the speaker- hearer's knowledge of his language', while performance is the actual use of language in concrete situations(Chomsky: 1965: 4).

It is often to say that, performance is an imperfect reflection of competence. The native speakers make occasional slips of the tongue, hesitations, lapses of memory, coughing, clearing of throat, and so on. However, this does not mean that the native speaker doesn't know his native language or that he

doesn't have competence in it. Misproductions and misinterpretations are performance errors, attributable to a variety of performance factors like tiredness, boredom, drunkenness, drugs...etc.

Grammar of a language tells learners what they need to know in order to have native-like competence in the language (i.e. to have an ability to speak the language as same as a fluent native speaker ): hence, it is evident that grammar is interested in competence rather than performance. This is not to deny the interest of performance as a field of study, but merely to assert that performance is more properly studied within the different-though related-discipline of psycholinguistics, which studies the psychological processes underlying speech production and comprehension. (Radford: 2004: 2 - 3)

## **CONSTITUENT STRUCTURE:**

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 535) state that, one of the most important goals of linguistics is to identify the syntactic rules of a language and to supply descriptions that group together those words in a sentence which hang closely together both formally and semantically. These groups are called constituents.

Constituent structure is another term of phrase structure and syntactic structure. Constituent structure is a representation of the set of constituents that an expression contains. For example, the constituents of the English noun phrase "this big house" are the demonstrative (this) + the adjective (big) + the noun (house). Constituent structure is usually represented in terms of a labelled bracketing or a tree diagram. (Richards and Schmidt: 2002: 400).

To put words in the correct order in the sentence requires syntactic knowledge. But sentences are more than just one word placed after another. The words form groups, and within the groups they form subgroups, and so on . For

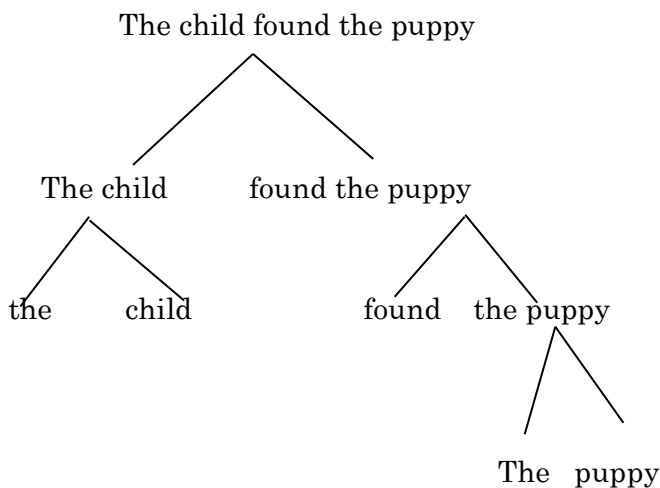
example; The sentence (the child found the puppy) can be divided into two parts: The child/found the puppy.

Any other division, such as in the examples below would be wrong because the words in each part do not seem to belong together.

The / child found the puppy.

The child found the / puppy.

If this division process were continued, and all the separate units were diagrammed, the diagram below would be the result:

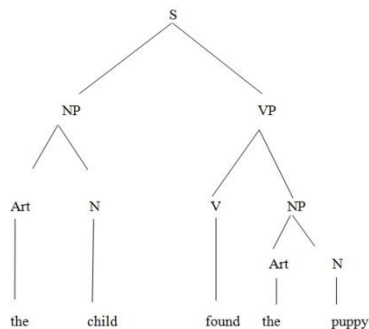


The groups and subgroups of words that go together as in the diagram above, are called the constituents of the sentence. Thus, (found the puppy) is a constituent, but (found the) is not. All sentences in all languages have constituent structure. And all languages have syntactic rules that determine the linear order of words and how the words are grouped to give the constituent structure. The certain constituents can be replaced by other constituents without affecting the grammar of the sentence (although the meaning may change). In the sentence (the child found the puppy) the constituents (the puppy) and (the child) can be substituted for one another to give:  
[the puppy] [found [the child]]

In the example above, constituent structure is indicated by means of the brackets instead of diagram. Constituents that can be substituted for one another without losing of grammaticality form a syntactic category. The syntactic category that the child and the puppy belong to is Noun phrase (NP). Noun phrases can function as “subject” or “object” in a sentence, and only noun phrases may do so. It often consists of a noun or pronoun. (infinitives also function as noun phrases). The constituent (found the puppy) is a verb phrase (VP). Verb phrases always consist of a (verb), which perhaps follows by other constituents, such as a noun phrase.

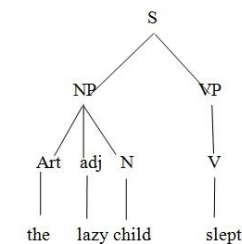
The constituent structure of (the child found the puppy) can be represented to indicate what syntactic category and each constituent belongs to.

The child found the puppy.



Every English sentence can be represented in a constituent structure tree. The examples below show the syntactic categories:

The lazy child slept.



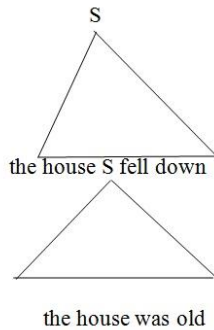
(Fromkin and Rodman: 1978: 198-201).

### **Deep and surface structures:**

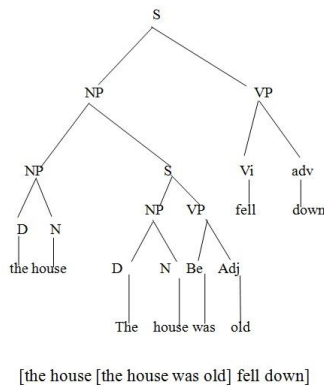
There are two types of structure for each sentence. One structure would be that of the sentence as it is actually produced and the other structure would consist of all the units and relationships that are necessary for explaining the meaning of the sentence. For examples; the sentence (The old house fell down), this sentence has two structures: one is the structure of the sentence as it is pronounced or written, and the other is a more abstract structure that permits a native speaker of English to know that this sentence means both (The house fell down) and (The house was old). In the same way, a native speaker of English knows that (The boy chased the girl) and (The girl was chased by the boy) have similar meanings. Both sentences should be provided with the same abstract structure, but to provide this abstract structure with two different realized structures, because the actuality of production sentences are different. An ambiguous sentence such as (He needed the money more than Mary) should have different abstract structures, because it has two clearly distinct meanings.

The terms deep structure and surface structure can be used to refer to the abstract structure and to the actuality production structure. An important problem arises in stating the relationship of deep structure to surface structure, or vice versa. The term transformational will be utilized to refer to the relationship. Since the relationship is usually a complex one, the transformational can be used to apply to all the steps that relate deep structure to surface structures.

*Wardhaugh (1977:18) states that, The transformational relationship between deep and surface structures and the transformations which relate the two kinds of structures can be illustrated by reference to the sentences given previously. The sentence The old house fell down is derived from a deep structure presented schematically with each triangle representing a clause (or S) as follows:*



The above drawing can be replaced by the following, representation of the deep structure:

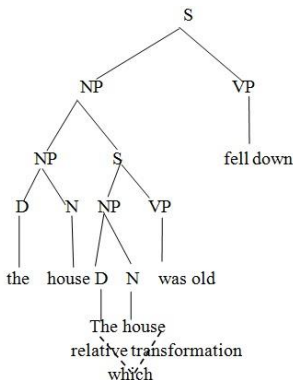


**Transformations:**

There is a problem that is deriving (The old house fell down) from, the house [the house was old] fell down and of showing how the old house fell down is also related to (the house **which** was old fell down). A grammar of a language consists of one set of rules, the phrase-structure rules, which produce deep structure like the house [the house was old] fell down. It also consists of a set of transformational rules to turn deep structures into surface structures, that is, into actually produced sentences. If an (NP + S) sequence occurs dominated by an (Np), and if that (S) dominates a (Np) whose referent is the same as the Np in the NP+S sequence, then the dominated



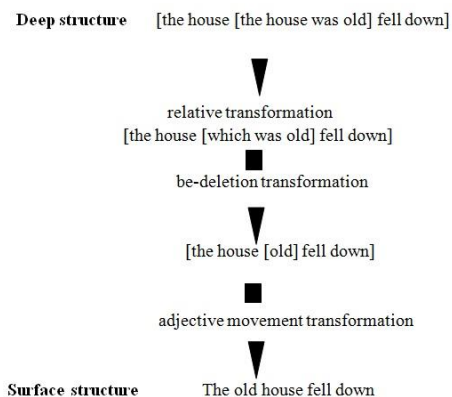
NP becomes either who or which. This rule is called the relative transformation.



The house which was old fell down.

The optional rule is the deletion transformation that permits to remove (who or which) together with any form of the verb (be) that follows, giving the house [old] fell down. There is another rule (adj movement transformation) moves any resulting single (adj) between the (D) and the (N), that is, between (**the**) and (**house**) to produce (The old house fell down).

An alternative way of showing these transformations and the relationship of deep to surface structures is as follows:



The transformational process also relates (The old house fell down) to (The house which was old fell down) since it drives the

former through the later in the process of going from deep to surface structure.

The sentences "The boy chased the girl" and "The girl was chased by the boy" are related. The second sentence is not a transformation of the first. Transformations do not alter one sentence into another, they change one structure into another, a deep structures into a surface structure. These two sentences have slightly different deep structures. A verb chase may be active or passive, depending on (NP) occurs in the first position in the sentence. (Wardhaugh: 1977: 14-21)

### **Generative-Transformational Grammar:**

A generative-transformation grammar consists of two sets of rules. First, phrase structure rules, generates deep structures. Second, transformational rules, changes these deep structures into surface structures.

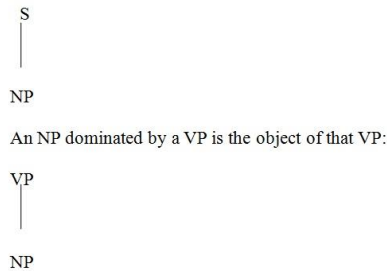
Languages are different (English is unlike Japanese), but similarities do exist among languages. These similarities are sometimes referred to as linguistic universals. The grammar of any language shows which characteristics of that language are universal and which are specific to the language.

A generative-transformational grammar succeeds in this task through the claim that certain conventions such as the "consists of" (rewriting) convention ( ), parentheses and braces, rule-ordering, and transformations operating on structures must be employed in the description of all languages. In English Noun is rewritten as (book/ dog/ house), and so on, or that the English subject (NP) precedes the English object (NP), or that the English passive transformation switches the subject and the object and introduces a form of (be /past participle), and by into surface structure, are facts peculiar to English, and therefore, not universal.

There are different grammatical constituents such as (noun phrase/verb phrase/noun/verb) and so on which define by the rules of a generative-transformational grammar. If (NP)

may be rewritten as either (NP+S) or (D+N), then sentences must occur in which both (NP+S) and (D+N) function alike, as in the two passive sentences (He was attacked by the bear which killed the horse) and (He was attacked by the bear). In these two sentences (the bear which killed the horse) and the bear is a subject (NPs) in the deep structures of the respective sentences. The passive transformation has moved them after the (verb and by).

Different relations in the phrase-structure trees may also be labeled For instance; an (NP) dominated by an (S) is the subject of that (S):



(Wardhaugh: 1977: 123-124)

### **Subject-Verb Agreement:**

Langan (2004: 173) mentions that, a verb must agree with its subject in number. A singular subject (one person or thing) takes a singular verb. A plural subject (more than one person or thing) takes a plural verb. Mistakes in subject-verb agreement are sometimes made in the following situations:

1. When words come between the subject and the verb.
2. When a verb comes before the subject.
3. With indefinite pronouns.
4. With compound subjects.
5. With who which and that.

### **Words between the subject and the verb:**

If the words come between the subject and the verb, they will not change subject-verb agreement:

The breakfast cereals in the pantry are made mostly of sugar.

In the above sentence, the subject (cereals) is plural and so the verb (are) is plural. The words (**in the pantry**) that come between the subject and the verb don't affect subject-verb agreement. To recognize the subject of certain sentences, the prepositional phrases should be crossed out. For examples; One ~~of the crooked politicians~~ was jailed for a month. The posters ~~on my little brother's wall~~ included rock singers, monsters and blond television stars.

### Common prepositions:

about	before	by	inside	over
above	behind	during	into	through
across	below	except	of	to
among	beneath	for	off	toward
around	beside	from	on	under
at	between	in	onto	with

### Verb before the subject:

If the verb comes before the subject, it will agree it. Words that may precede the subject include (there, here), and in questions,(who, which, what, where).

Inside the storage shed **are** the garden tools.

At the street corner **were** two panhandlers.

There **are** times I'm ready to quit my job.

where **are** the instructions for the microwave oven?

To recognize the subject, ask (who or what) of the verb for example; in the first sentence above ask, " what are inside the storage shed ?", the answer, garden tools, is the subject.

### Indefinite Pronouns:

The indefinite pronouns always take singular verbs.

Indefinite Pronouns:

(- one word)	(- body words)	(- thing word)
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One	nobody	anything	each
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anyone	everybody	something	neither
someone	somebody	nothing	either
everyone	anybody	everything	

**Both** always takes a plural verb.

For example:

One of my children **eats** raw onions as if they were apple.

Nobody **wanders** in those woods during hunting season without wearing bright-colored clothing.

Neither of those last two books on the list **is** required for the course.

Somebody **has** been playing my records.

Both of these belts no longer **fit**.

### **Compound Subjects:**

Subjects joined by and generally take a plural verb:

Yoga and biking **are** Lola's ways of staying in shape.

Ambition and good luck **are** the keys to his success.

When subjects are joined by (or, either.....or, neither ....nor, not only .... but also), the verb agrees with the subject closer to the verb. For example,

Either the restaurant manager or his assistants **deserve** to be fired for the spoiled meat used in the stew.

The nearer subject in the above example, assistants, is plural, assistants, is plural, and so the verb is plural.

### **Who, Which, and That:**

If (who, which, and that) are used as subjects, they will take singular verbs when the word they stand for is singular and plural verbs if the word they stand for is plural. For example,

Freddie is one of those people who **are** very private.  
the verb is plural, because (who) stands for people, which is plural. But in the sentence

Freddie is a person who **is** very private.

the verb is singular, because (who) stands for person, which is singular.

The dogs which **roam** around this area are household pets abandoned by cruel owners.

A sharp pain that **begins** in the lower abdomen may signal appendicitis.

The heavy trucks that **thunder** past my Honda make me feel as though I'm being blown off the road. (Langan: 2004: 173-177)

### **Relative Clauses:**

*Defining relative clause (restrictive relative clause). A clause which gives additional information about a noun or noun phrase in a sentence. A defining relative clause restricts or helps to define the meaning of the noun. It usually begins with (who, which, whom, whose or that), and in written English is not separated from the noun by a comma. (Richards and Schmidt: 2002: 146-147).*

### **Defining relative clauses with, who, that, and which**

For examples:

I spoke to the woman who owns the hotel.

Did you see the letter that came this morning.

The defining relative clauses in the two sentences above are **(who owns the hotels)** tells us which woman; and **(that came this morning)** tells us which letter).

### **Who is used for people:**

I spoke to the woman. She owns the hotel.

I spoke to the woman **who** owns the hotel.

The man was very nice. He interviewed me.

The man **who** interviewed me was very nice.

### **That is used for things:**

Did you see the letter? It came this morning

Did you see the letter **that** came this morning?

The keys have disappeared. They were on this table.

The keys **that** were on this table have disappeared.

Who and that replace the pronoun. For example;

I spoke to the woman who owns the hotel. Not (\*I spoke to the woman who **she** owns the hotel).

Which can be used instead of that (to talk about things) in a defining relative clause.

Did you see the letter **which** came this morning?

The keys **which** were on this table have disappeared

That can be utilized instead of (who) (to talk about people) in an informal style.

I spoke to the woman **that** owns the hotel.

**Leaving out who, that and which in defining relative clauses:**

Who, that, and which can be the subject or the object of a defining relative clause.

Marianne is the girl **who** invited us to the party.

Who is the subject: **she** invited us to the party.

Marianne is the girl **who** we met last night,

Who is the object: we met **her** last night

Who, that or which are often left when they are the objects in defining relative clauses.

Marianne is the girl we met last night. (we met her last night)

Have you seen the book I put on this table? (I put it on this table).

But (who, that or which) cannot be omitted when they are the subject in these clauses.

Mona is the girl **who invited us to the party**. (Not Mona is the girl **invited us to the party**.)

Have you seen the book **that was on this table**. (Not Have you seen the book **was on this table**.)

(Whom) can be used in quite formal speech. Instead the learners can use (who or that) (or they leave them out).

I met a woman (**who**) **I know**.

### **Defining Relative Clauses with whose, where, when and why/ that.**

(Whose) can be utilized in relative clauses (in place of his / her / their ...etc) to talk about possession:

I have got a friend. **His** brother is an actor.

I have got a friend **whose** brother is an actor.

They are the people. **Their** house caught fire.

They are the people **whose** house caught fire.

### **Where / when and why / that:**

(Where) can be used (for places) and when ( for times) in relative clauses.

The factory **where I work** is going to close down.

Is there a time **when we can meet?**

After the word reason, (**why** or **that**) can be used in relative clauses.

Is there a **reason why /that you want to leave now?**

(Where) can be left if a preposition is used.

The hotel **we stayed at** was very small.

### **Non –defining relative clauses:**

"Non –defining relative clauses do not tell us which person thing, etc the speaker means; these clauses give more information about a person or thing already identified ." (Beaumont and Granger: 1992: 156).

Ken's mother **who is 69**, has just passed her driving test (who is 69 does not tell us which woman, because we already know that it is Ken's mother.

Sue's house **which is in the centre of town**, is over 100 years old.

(which is in the center of town does not tell us which house ; we already know that it is Sue's house)

Non-defining clauses are common in a formal style, especially in writing. Non-defining clauses are restricted by putting commas (,) at the beginning of the clause (and often at the end of the clause).



Last weekend I met Sue, **who told me she was going on holiday soon.**

Frank Morris, **who is one of my best friends,** has decided to go and live in France.

In a non-defining clause, who is used for people and (which) is used for things, but (that) can not be used.

She gave me the key, **which** I put in my pocket.

(She gave me the key, **that** I put in my pocket). incorrect.

In a non-defining clause (who or which) can not be left.

My uncle John, **who lives in Manchester,** coming to visit me next week.

(My uncle John **lives in Manchester,** is coming to visit me next week). incorrect.

She gave me the key, **which I put in my pocket.**

(She gave me the key, **I put in my pocket**). incorrect

### **Non –defining relative clauses with whose , where ,when, and whom;**

(Whose, where, and when) can be used in non-defining relative clauses.

Tina Harris, **whose brother is the actor Paul Harris,** is a good friend of mine.

We visited a town called Christchurch, **where we had lunch in an Italian restaurant.**

We are going on holiday in September, **when the weather isn't so hot.**

(Whom )can be used instead of (who) when it is the object of the verb in a non- defining clause.

Sara Ross, **who /whom you met in Madrid last Summer,** will be at party tonight. (Beaumont and Granger: 1992: 236-241)

**Population of the Study:**

The population of the study are teachers who teach English Language as a foreign language.

**Sample of the Study:**

The sample includes (30) teachers whom were chosen randomly from Sudan University for Science and Technology and Omdurman Ahlia University.

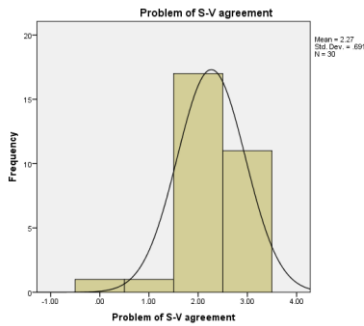
**Instrument of the study:**

The researcher has used the descriptive analytical approach as well as a questionnaire as a tool in the collection of data.

**Finding and Results:**

**Table (1): Problem of S-V agreement**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Rarely	1	3.3	3.3	6.7
	Sometimes	17	56.7	56.7	63.3
	Usually	11	36.7	36.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	



**Histogram (1): Problem of S-V agreement**

The curve in histogram (1) shows that the data of this item is normally distributed. The table (1) shows that:

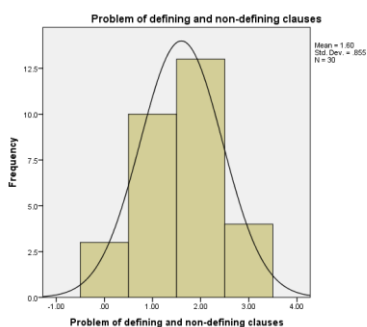
- 1) 56.7% of the sample agree that university students sometimes have problems arranging agreements between subject and verb.
- 2) 36.7% of the sample agree that university students usually have problems in matching the subject with its verb.
- 3) 3.3% of the sample agree that university students rarely have problems in the area of subject-verb agreement.
- 4) 3.3 % of the sample agree that university students never have problems in matching the subject with its verb.

So, it can be said that, most of the teachers agree that the subject-verb agreement is an area in which university students have problems with.

"Students use defining and non-defining clauses correctly"

**Table (2): Problem of defining and non-defining clauses**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	3	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Rarely	10	33.3	33.3	43.3
	Sometimes	13	43.3	43.3	86.7
	Usually	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	



**Histogram (2): Problem of defining and non-defining clauses**

The curve in histogram (2) shows that the data of this item is normally distributed. The table (2) shows that:

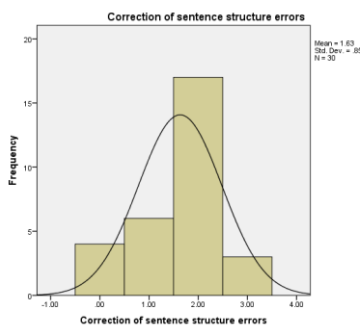
- 1) 43.3% of the sample agree that university students sometimes use defining and non-defining clauses correctly.
- 2) 33.3% of the sample agree that university students rarely use defining and non-defining clauses accurately.
- 3) 13.3% of the sample agree that university students usually use defining and non-defining clauses properly.
- 4) 10% of the sample agree that university students never use defining and non-defining clauses correctly.

So, it can be concluded that, the vast majority of the teachers agree that defining and non-defining clauses is an area which university students have problems with.

"Teachers do not correct errors that related to sentence structure".

**Table (3): Correction of sentence structure errors**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	4	13.3	13.3	13.3
	Rarely	6	20.0	20.0	33.3
	sometimes	17	56.7	56.7	90.0
	Usually	3	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	



**Histogram (3): Correction of sentence structure errors**

The curve in histogram (3) shows that the data of this item is normally distributed. The table (3) shows that:

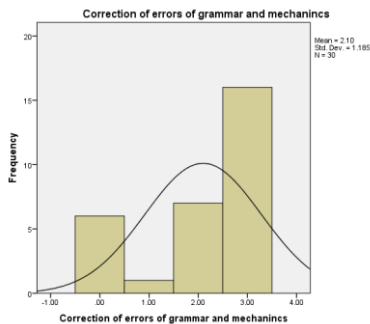
- 1) 56.7% of the sample agree that teachers sometimes don't correct errors that related to sentence structure.
- 2) 20% of the sample agree that teachers rarely correct errors that related to sentence structure.
- 3) 13.3% of the sample agree that teachers never correct errors that related to sentence structure.
- 4) 10% of the sample agree that teachers usually don't correct errors that related to sentence structure.

So, it can be said that, most of the teachers agree that teachers don't correct errors that related to sentence structure.

"Teachers only correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing".

**Table (4): Correction of errors of grammar and mechanics**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	6	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Rarely	1	3.3	3.3	23.3
	sometimes	7	23.3	23.3	46.7
	Usually	16	53.3	53.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	



**Histogram (4): Correction of errors of grammar and mechanics**

The curve in histogram (4) shows that the data of this item is normally distributed. The table (4) shows that:

- 1) 53.3% of the sample agree that teachers usually correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing.

- 2) 23.3% of the sample agree that teachers sometimes correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing.
- 3) 20% of the sample agree that teachers never correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing only.
- 4) 3.3% of the sample agree that teachers rarely correct errors that related to grammar and mechanics of writing only.

As a result, it can be said that the greater part of the teachers agree that teachers only correct errors that relate to grammar and mechanics of writing.

### **Recommendations:**

The researcher mentions some points for recommendations.

1. The techniques which are used by the teachers in initial phase of teaching new structures and patterns in second language should be effective.
2. Teachers should correct errors that relate to sentence constructions
3. Teachers should give students more practices.

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