

## The Predominant Sentential Style in Selected Students' Writing and Some Possible Solutions to Appropriateness in Writing

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### Abstract

*The purpose of writing is to communicate in clear and effective language. Eventually, if in the course of writing, students vary sentences and inject style into them but fail to construct clear and lucid sentences, they have failed writing. Therefore, this paper investigated the predominant sentential style students use in writing to know the degree they display their knowledge of the various sentential styles. The theoretical framework used in the analysis is anchored on Chomsky's Minimalist Programme of 1993/1995. The test item used in carrying out the study was an essay topic given to one hundred and fifty SS3 students to write on. Fifteen students were selected from each of the ten senior secondary schools in the five educational zones in Imo State. These students were selected through a purposive sampling technique just for the study. Incidentally, the result of the findings showed significant differences in the sentential styles used by the students in their writing. The loose sentence style was dominating in their writing with 79=52.66%, followed by the mixed sentence style with 24=16%, the next in rank was the other sentence style with 20=13.33%, followed by the balanced sentence style and the parallel sentence style with 10=6.66% and 9=6% respectively and the last in rank was the periodic sentence style with 8=5.33%. Obviously, according to the findings, this means that there is monotony in their writing and monotonous writing is not effective writing. To proffer solution to monotony in writing, this paper suggests some possible solutions to appropriateness in writing for elegance and for effective communication and above all, for enhancement of performance in English.*

**Keywords:** Communication, sentential style, writing

### Introduction

Generally, the purpose of speaking or writing is to communicate in clear and effective language and if language users vary their sentences and also inject style into them but fail to construct clear and lucid sentences, they have failed speech or writing. Therefore, language users must note the three qualities of:

- a. variety through the use of different structures and styles,
- b. clarity through the use of meaningful expressions, and
- c. style through the use of appropriate expressions.

In addition to the above statement, Yule (2010, p.257) portrays style as a social feature of language use. According to him;

The most basic distinction in speech style is between formal style and informal uses. Formal style is when we pay more careful attention to

how we're speaking and informal style is when we pay less attention. They are sometimes described as 'careful style' and 'casual style'. A change from one to the other by an individual is called style-shifting.

It is obviously good to note that, one of the important rules for a good style is to be as concrete as possible. This means to illustrate tangibly general propositions. Also, the choice of words in relation to style is governed by certain standards of good taste. A word is said to be in good use if it is in present use and reputable use too. It is good to use if it belongs to our time and age not to the past; if it is accepted and used by educated men and women. Ogenyi (2002, p.209) contends that: 'It is therefore apparent that the learning of English especially by a second language user is impossible without considerable reference to grammar, and indeed without a detailed knowledge of grammatical processes'.



According to French (1948, p.38):

Every language has its own ways of fitting together to form sentences, and these ways take shape as sentence patterns. The word pattern means a model from which many things of the same kind and shape can be made...A sentence pattern is... a model for sentences which will be of the same shape and construction although made up of different words.

Unfortunately, most learners' rarely use style in their writing. Meanwhile, style as variation often adds life and freshness to writing. But still, in the quest for correctness and style, learners of English as a second language must use proper choice of words in their writing. This is because some words are generally not just important because they express all spheres of known and unknown phenomena but also by their structural intricacy in having complex layers of meanings. Some words in a language can change their meanings over a period of usage and therefore be accommodated as a new word with new meaning in that same particular language. Therefore, proper word choice is not an empty linguistic shunt meant to jolt the learner; rather, it is as real as the impression it leaves in the mind of the reader. In the use of English, learners are expected to bring out a kind of artistry into the use of words so as to create effectiveness and arouse the audience imagination. Therefore, it is always good to deviate from the normal style patterning of a word or a sentence should appear for a purpose to be achieved.

Style is a difficult concept to define accurately because of different views people have about it. Onwukwe (2012, p.8) notes that:

There are linguists that believe the concept of style derives from the distinction made between 'Language' and 'Parole' by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. According to him, 'Language' is a code of rules common to users of a language;

'Parole' on the other hand, is the particular selections from the system that individuals make or any people make in conversation, official communication or legal procedure.

Basically, style pertains to parole and so it is essentially the way a speaker or writer selects and employs his words, phrases, and sentences to achieve his desired effect in any given context. The style of our sentence is definitely the hallmark of effective communication because it helps in sentence clarity. As earlier mentioned, style is the use of the correct expressions in an appropriate manner during speech or writing. It can also be described as one's usual way of expressing ideas; the length and order of sentences is one important part of one's style. Enkvist (1964, p.19) defines style under four stages. Thus

1. Style as a set of individual characteristics.
2. Style as a set of collective characteristics.
3. Style as deviation from the norm.
4. Style as those linguistic entities that are suitable in terms of wider spans of text than sentence.

It is obviously necessary that learners change their style and use the acceptable style to get variety in output. This is because, a choppy style maybe caused by inability to subordinate or by a desire to give the writing an air of tenseness and urgency used consciously to produce an effect of fast action, it may be good when it is the result of ignorance but on the other hand, it is invariably bad. On the contrary, the expression 'fine writing' when applied to flowery writing, means ornate or excessively fastidious writing. Neither does it refer to literary and poetic writing, as distinguished from purely linguistic writing. It is rather pretentious, gaudy writing, so, it is always good for learners to avoid this inflated style otherwise known as 'fine writing'.

#### **Classification of Sentential Styles**

Sentences may be classified under style as; loose, periodic, mixed, balanced, parallel, active and passive, subordination, figures of rhetoric, and others.



The loose sentence is one of the multitude elements of style and variation in writing. It puts its subject and verb early. It is also called a cumulative sentence and is used to achieve immediate impression because the beginning part of the sentence has the main information. It is therefore, usually stated at the beginning of the sentence before the modifiers and may be a very long sentence that has the main point at the beginning. Therefore, McCrimmon et al (1984, p.141-2) refers to the loose sentence as “common sentence which consists of some variations of subject – predicator structures by retaining the common subject and verb, and by arranging the adjectives in series. By this process a number of sentence (or pieces of information) can combine into a single sentence. Tessler (2015, p.460) also agrees that a loose sentence is one that makes sense if brought to a close at one or more points before the end.

Examples are;

- a. The internet provides an endless source of entertainment, because of the variety of websites, fun, games, entertaining videos, and Wikipedia.
- b. The speaker sent forth a passionate plea to the audience, making use of dramatic language, extended metaphors, and pauses for emphasis.

A periodic sentence is an opposite of a loose sentence because the end part of the sentence contains the major information. Okeke and Chukwu (2013, p.166) affirm this:

‘Periodic sentence can only produce complete meaning at the final end. This is because, in it, the subordinate clause comes before the main clause’. In other words, a periodic sentence is one that suspends its meaning until the end, usually with subject and verb widely separated, and the verb as near the end as possible. Tessler (2015, p.460) believes that a periodic sentence is “One which makes complete sense only at the end”.

Examples are;

- a. On account of the variable arrival times, the stickiness that coats the floor and abundance of overly talkative

Frenchmen, riding my tricycle isn’t always the greatest experience.

- b. Troubled by a stubborn son and unable to bear it any longer, the man ran away from his house.

A mixed sentence is one with incompatible elements that begins with one type of sentence and shifts to another. Here, the user sets out to say or write one thing and abruptly switches to something else. This is obvious in practical terms because we cannot use just one type of sentence style all the way. The normal practice is, we mix up the different sentence styles in speech or writing.

Example; My main assignment is to eat and sleep but that notwithstanding, I have to stroll about so as to exercise my bones, my nerves and my dear body.

A balanced sentence employs parallel structures of approximately the same length and importance. It contains two parts that are structurally the same. McCrimmon et al (1984, p.147) reports that a balanced sentence structure points up the contrast in the thought so that the rhetorical pattern reflects and supports the logical pattern: Moreover, the regular rhythm of the matching clauses is itself attractive to a reader.

Example; Man proposes and God disposes.

In a balanced sentence, a coordinating conjunction links two or more independent clauses that are roughly parallel in structure. Maxine (2013, p.269-70) also believe that, “Effective balanced sentences merge the best attributes of coordination and parallelism ... in your writing; you might find balanced sentences effective for openings and closings, where you want readers to remember a major point. But they seem out of place in a more colloquial writing”.

A parallel sentence is a grammatical or rhetorical framing of words, phrases sentences, paragraphs to give structural similarity. It can be added to style of writing or speech for freshness. This type of sentence emphasizes coordinate structures. Strictly, any sentence in which elements are joined by coordinating conjunctions contains parallelism. Parallel sentences are closely related to balanced sentences in the sense

that, all balanced sentences are also parallel sentences but not all parallel sentences are balanced sentences. Also, parallelism is based on words of identical grammatical function.

Example; Without an education, without a home, without a single positive influence in their lives, these kids will suffer.

Other sentence style includes active and passive voice, subordinations, direct and indirect speech, addition of restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers, figures of rhetoric, etc. Examples; Ijeoma's answers are wrong as usual.

Party shoes should not be worn to class, of course.

The students who had been good all year were given a party.

The yam that was tender was delicious.

The car which runs perfectly is not worth selling.

"The soccer is over", announced the referee.

He was a peacock.

He displayed himself as if he were a peacock.

### Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the Minimalist Program of Noam Chomsky (1993,1995). This Programme is the most recent version of generative grammar that is motivated by the search for explanatory adequacy and for a certain level of formal simplicity and elegance. It allows for the formation of complex words, whose internal structure and structural properties are not determined by the syntax. The object obtained after spell-out also qualifies as a word, in the technical sense of having a label and a structure which is inaccessible to the syntax. In 1993, Chomsky proposes the inclusiveness condition, which confines the power of syntax to rearrangements of lexical items, banning syntax from creating new objects.

The condition is very appealing conceptually due to its restrictive nature and has also led to re-examinations of several phenomena that have yielded positively in syntax. On the LF side, there is at least some choice in deciding where deletion should take place in nontrivial chains, with preference for deletion of the restriction of the wh-operator in the head of operator-variable chains as in;

a) Uchechi wondered which portrait of herself Ike bought.

b) Uchechi wondered which portrait {of herself} Ike bought.

c) Uchechi wondered which portrait Ike bought.

Chomsky argues that there is a preference for minimizing operator in LF which normally leads to deletion in the head of  $\bar{A}$ -chains.

Chomsky (1995) suggests a way of deducing the ban on PF/LF insertion. Consider the lexical item *Uchechi*. Like any lexical item, *Uchechi* is a set of features, with at least three kinds of formal features which are; case feature, phonological feature and semantic feature.

In the Minimalist Programme by Chomsky (1995a, p.385-386), syntactic structure is built bottom-up by the Operation Merge, which has two crucial properties:

i) Merge is a binary operation which combines two elements into one constituent, and

ii) Merge is recursive, where the output of merge may subsequently be submitted to merge with other elements yielding a further constituent. The items that are subjected to Merge are drawn from a list called the numeration.

### Testing Instrument and the Population of the Study

The instrument used for the collection of data was a written essay test and the selected students were asked to write on a particular topic. They were asked to write not more than 300 words. The topic given to the students to write on was a familiar topic; therefore, if all the variables were constant, the testing instrument was reliable because the test type was an examination question type for second language learners at their level. A total population of one hundred and fifty (150) students was used for this study. These students were chosen through a purposive sampling technique for the study from all the educational zones in Imo State without any bias on sex.



**Method of Data Analysis:** This was a qualitative research therefore, the investigation made a frequency count of the sentence styles in the selected students' writing. Therefore, all the sentences found in the study were collected,

organized, grouped, and qualified according to their style. The researcher used the simple percentage method as the statistical tool in calculation.

**Analysis of the Research Question: Research question 1**

What are the predominant sentential styles in the selected students' writing?

S/N	School	Frequency of loose sentence style	Frequency of parallel sentence style	Frequency of other sentence style	Frequency of balanced sentence style	Frequency of periodic sentence style	Frequency of mixed sentence style
1	Government Secondary School, Owerri	7	1	3	1	1	3
2	Community Secondary School, Owerri	8	1	2	1	1	2
3	Ihioma Girls' Secondary School, Orlu	7	1	2	1	1	3
4	Boys' High School, Umuaka	8	1	2	1	1	2
5	Mbaise Secondary School	6	1	3	1	1	3
6	Ekwerazu Girls' Secondary School	7	1	2	1	1	3
7	Avu Compre Secondary School	10	1	1	1	1	1
8	Community Secondary School, Ohoba	10	1	1	1	0	2
9	Queen of Apostles Sec. Sch, Okigwe	6	1	3	1	1	3
10	Compre. Sec. Sch, Umulolo	10	0	2	1	0	2
11	Grand Total/Percentage 150=100%	79=52.66%	9=6%	20=13.33%	10=6.66%	8=5.33%	24=16%

The formular for calculation is =  $\frac{\text{Total frequency of sentence style} \times 100}{\text{Total number of students} \times 1}$

$$\text{Loose sentence style} = \frac{79 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 52.66\%$$

$$\text{Parallel sentence style} = \frac{9 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 6\%$$

$$\text{Other sentence style} = \frac{20 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 13.33\%$$

$$\text{Balance sentence style} = \frac{10 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 6.66\%$$

$$\text{Periodic sentence style} = \frac{8 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 5.33\%$$

$$\text{Mixed sentence style} = \frac{24 \times 100}{150 \times 1} = 16\%$$

The above table and calculations show that 79 students representing 52.66% of the 150 population of students used the loose sentence style in their writing, 9 students representing 6% of the remaining population of students used the parallel sentential style in their writing, 20 students representing 13.33% of the remaining population of students used the other sentential style in their writing, 10 students representing 6.66% of the remaining population of students used the balance sentential style in their writing, 8 students again representing 5.33% of the remaining population of students used the periodic sentential style in their writing, and 24 students representing 16% of the remaining population of students used the mixed sentential styles in their writing.

### Discussions of Findings

Looking at the results of the table above on sentential styles in the selected students' writing, it is obvious that the loose sentence style dominates the students' writing with 52.66%, followed by the mixed sentence style with 16%, the third in rank is the other sentence style (which includes subordination, active and passive voices, direct and indirect speech etc) with 13.33%, whereas, the fourth in rank is the balance sentence style with 6.66%, the fifth is the parallel sentence style with 6% and the last in rank is the periodic sentence style with 5.33%.

This research paper therefore concludes

that, the loose sentential style is dominating the other sentence styles in the selected students' writing. And the mixed sentential style rates second in rank while on the other hand, the periodic sentential style rates last in rank.

### Stylistic Analysis of some of the Sentences from the Students' Writing Using the Minimalist Program of Chomsky

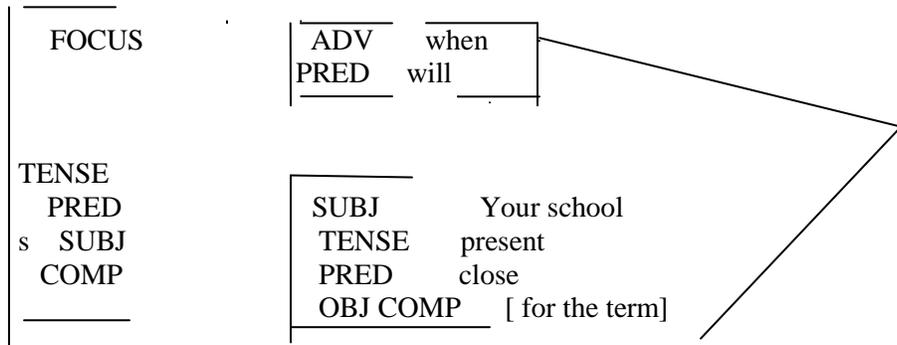
We can use some sentences from the students' writing to show Chomsky's (1993,1995) illustration of the search of explanatory adequacy and for a certain level of simplicity and elegance:

S-Structure How is everybody around your house and school doing?

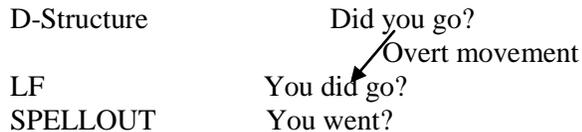
SPELLOUT How is everybody [around your house] doing?

LF How is everybody doing?

The sharing of feature structures is used to define long distance dependencies such as the relationship between a *wh*-phrase and the trace it is associated with. There is a special grammatical function: FOCUS, which is found in *wh*-constructions. This function is associated with the Specifier of CP in English. The element taking the FOCUS function must share features with some argument. The following is the f-structure for the sentence *when will your school close for the term?*



The FOCUS shares the features of the OBJ COMP function of the complement clause indicating that they are identical. There are two kinds of complement that happens between D-Structure and SPELLOUT called overt movement and movement that happens between SPELLOUT and LF called covert movement. Since covert movement happens after the branching off to the PF component, we simply can't hear it happen in English. To make this clearer, let us show the derivation in the movement:



The illustration above has a complementary distribution with V-movement.



These sentences mean the same thing, so they have identical LFs. The word order in the two sentences is different, so the SPELLOUTs are different.

In addition, linguistic style as we know is the study of style in a piece of writing and in order to study the style of the students' writing, we must begin by analyzing the stylistic components. Essentially, these components can be broken into three levels. They are; diction, syntax and paragraph.

- 1) Diction or Words: Most of the words found in the selected students' essays were simple and formal and based on the denotative level of meaning. The verb tense was the simple present, simple past and the present continuous forms. There were pronouns, verbs, determiners, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions and few exclamations. There were many proper nouns and common nouns especially where the students were exchanging pleasantries. There were many monosyllabic words, disyllabic words, trisyllabic words and few polysyllabic words.
2. Syntax or Sentences: They made the highest use of simple sentence, declarative sentence, and loose sentence. The next in rank were the complex sentence, interrogative sentence, and mixed sentence. The least among the sentences they used were the compound-complex sentence, exclamatory sentence, and the parallel sentence. There were phrases and fragments too. Their sentences were mainly in the active form with the SV, SVO, SVC, SVOC, SVOCA patterns and few passive sentences. They mostly used 3-9 words per sentence. There were few metaphors, similes and no personification, hyperbole, metonymy, oxymoron, onomatopoeia, antithesis, asyndeton, polyptoton, intertext and listing. There were also no quotation and paraphrase.

- 3) Paragraph: There were paragraphs ranging from two-five paragraphs. Many used the indented form of paragraphing and a few used the block form. Some made use of linkers in connecting their paragraphs while others did not link their paragraphs. There were few anaphoras as ornaments in their paragraphs but no allegory, epistrophe, parallelism, intertext, and listing.

### **A Sample Stylistic Analysis of an Essay Written by a Student**

Total number of sentences in the essay: 41

Complete sentences: 33

Fragments: 7

Simple: 24

Complex: 5

Compound: 2

Compound-complex: 0

Exclamatory: 0

Interrogative: 2

Declarative: 24

Imperative: 0

Loose: 26

Periodic: 0

Parallel: 0

Balanced: 0

Mixed: 6

Other sentence style: 3

Total number of words: 213

Polysyllabic words: 9

Trisyllabic words: 64

Disyllabic words: 83

Monosyllabic words: 67

Diction level: simple and formal

Total number of nouns: 92

Proper nouns: 22

Common nouns: 70

Pronouns: 30

Prepositions: 14

Verbs: 34

Adverbs: 13

Determiners: 24

Adjectives: 7

Exclamations: 0

Conjunctions: 5

Anaphoras: 3 occurrences

Listing: 0

### **Some Suggestions for Second Language Learners**

Students should know that the longer the sentence, the greater the chances of confusion and ambiguity or even being misunderstood by the examiners and readers at large. This of course, is enough to hinder efficient and effective communication in writing. Experience has shown that most essays written by students lack vitality, interest and effectiveness because of monotony in their style of writing. Students must learn that a good writing does not mean a mere mass collection of sentences that can drown the reader in an ocean of words.

Okoh (1998, p.41) warns that a failure by our students to understand the principles of paragraph construction remains a major cause of bad composition. Therefore, the invitation to strive for greater concreteness and vividness in writing need not be misunderstood by students because we all know that, a virtue carried too far becomes folly; nobody would want a page littered with fenetic and exploding sentences with the sentence pattern. Also, monotony in writing is fully as bad as dull and drab writing. Therefore, this paper is suggesting that there is plenty of room between the two extremes for students to experiment with words and sentences.

### **Possible Solutions for Appropriateness in Writing**

Students should bear in mind that effective writing depends on the selection of vivid and interesting details like;

- 1) Learning the Structure of the English Sentences: This must be represented using the SVCOA paradigm of the following;
  - a. simple sentence e.g. She is my best friend.
  - b. complex sentence e.g. I came when he was sleeping.
  - c. compound sentence e.g. We will not be coerced, nor be bought.
  - d. compound- complex sentence or fused sentence e.g. The Nanny swept the compound when she was less busy but the children refused to do theirs.

- e. multiple sentence e.g. My main assignment is to eat and sleep but that not withstanding, I have to stroll about so as to exercise my bones, my nerves, and my dear body.

2) Varying their Sentences: Variation of sentence structures among other things aims at achieving style that is acceptable as a matter of expression. A learner must try to vary monotonous series of sentences that have the same structure to improve sentence style so as to hold his readers' interest. Crystal (1997, p.66) sees style as one of the thorniest concepts. He says, "To Samuel Wesley, it was a dress of thought; to Jonathan Swift, it was the proper words in proper places; to W. B. Yeats, it was high breeding in words and argument". Learners of English as a second language and also users of English can achieve variation in sentences using the active and the passive voices. Voice is the form a verb takes to indicate whether the subject of the verb performs or receives the action. Murthy (2007, p.286) explains that:

We can begin a sentence either with the subject or object. This fact decides whether a sentence is active or passive...voice is the form of the verb which indicates whether a person or a thing does something or something has been done to a person or a thing. When a verb form shows that the subject has done something, it is known as active voice. When a verb form shows that something has been done to the subject, it is known as passive.

Again, in sentence variation, a choppy style may be caused by learners' inability to subordinate or by the desire to give the writing an air of tenseness and urgency.

3) Varying their Styles in Writing: Sentential style as variation of sentence structure adds life and freshness to writing. Unfortunately, learners' rarely use style in their writing and most of these second language learners have developed allergy to the mere idea of using figures of rhetoric in speech or writing. Figures of rhetoric are natural

form of expression. It is an important aspect that learners' must take note of in writing. Also, idioms are often figures and learners must also use them in writing or speech. Therefore, learners need proper and adequate knowledge on how to use figures of rhetoric in speech and writing, Anyanwu (2008, p.12) asks learners to "be systematic because English words exhibit some unique features which learners must be familiar with and also conscious of as they choose them in connected speech. In the quest for correctness and style, learners of English as a second language must use proper choice of words in their speech and writing". This is vital because some words are generally not just important because they express all spheres of known and unknown phenomena but also by their structural intricacy in having complex layers of meanings. Some words in a language can change their meanings over a period of usage and therefore be accommodated as a new word with new meaning in that same particular language. Therefore, proper word choice is not an empty linguistic shunt meant to jolt the learner; rather it is as real as the impression which the items of furniture in a living room leave on a visitor. They tell about the house owner's level of sophistication.

4) Bring out Artistry in their Writing: In the use of English, learners are expected to bring out a kind of artistry into the use of words so as to create effectiveness and arouse the audience imagination.

5) Students should learn that a choppy style may be caused by inability to subordinate or by a desire to give the writing an air of urgency. It may be good when used consciously to produce an effect of fast action but bad when it is a result of ignorance. They must know that omissions and short cuts that are acceptable in speech are usually out of place in writing.

6) The learner should know that blanced sentence style is a tool of effective writing because it uses the form of sentences to make the content more emphatic. Also, if the writer is writing a sentence which deals with a series of ideas of varying importance, he should arrange these ideas in the order of climax. Climax is a rhetorical device which can occasionally be used with real effect. It



cannot be often used. It is appropriate under one condition and the condition is, there must be a number of ideas of unequal importance.

7) Unity in Sentences: It is worthy to note also that, unity in any given sentence means singleness of thought. Like many simplified definitions, this one does not make much sense until its simplicity is explained away. Second language learners or users should know that the real point is whatever that is put in a sentence must be related in some way to every thing else that is put in that sentence. The length of a sentence has nothing to do with its unity. A sentence filling a half page may be more unified than a short one. A unified sentence must be grammatically complete irrespective of what it says. A sentence may lack unity because the thoughts in it have no possible relation to each other, but it may also lack unity because the thoughts seem unrelated. Learners should also know that the expression “fine writing” does not mean good writing. Never does it refer to literary or poetic writing. Rather, it has a lot to do with unity or completeness of thought in sentences. When a learner is told to avoid wordiness, he is inclined to retort. Brevity on the other hand is not

the same as conciseness. As such, wordy writing is puffy while concise writing is firm. The point of violation of sentence unity is very common in most learners’ writing. Therefore, to achieve unity in sentence construction, learners must be very familiar with concord.

### Conclusion

This paper concludes that proficiency in language learning has a lot to do with students’ choice of sentence styles in writing. The paper also testifies that there were styles that were predominant in the selected students’ writing and therefore suggests that, in the study of grammar, for the second language learner, it should be part of the learner’s built in knowledge of English, to be able to recognize when a group of words forms a sentence and when it does not. In addition, users of English should avoid empty wordiness in their writing rather, they should pack their themes with ideas and concrete details because concise writing is firm. Thus; the expression ‘fine writing’ when applied to flowery writing means that the writing is ornate or excessively fastidious. It does not mean good writing.

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