Uncovering Syntactic Features of Student Writing: A Case Study Of Weekly Journals

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Abstract

Teaching syntactic unit especially clause to students is a crucial issue because clause is an important part in sentence forming. This research focuses on clause patterns that is a part of syntax which is needed by students in improve their ability in English (Basri, Ampa, & Junaid, 2013). This research adopts qualitative descriptive method to analyze seven English clause patterns in students' weekly journal syntactically. The aims of this study are to know and analyze the types of clause pattern the students use in their weekly journal; to get information about the type of clause pattern that is frequently used by students in their weekly journal; and to gain the data about the way the students write the clause pattern in their weekly journal. This study took place in one of the vocational high schools in Cianjur by involving 32 students from XI AKKUL class. The data were gained from students' weekly journal entitled Weekly Diary from September 23rd to November 13th 2018. The findings show clause pattern S+V is written in 15 data (6,91%), clause pattern S+V+O is written in 38 data (17,51%), clause pattern S+V+Co is written in 69 data (31,8%), clause pattern S+V+O+O is written in 3 data (1,38%), clause pattern S+V+O+Co is written in 25 data (11,52%), clause pattern S+V+Ad is written in 18 data (8,3%), and clause pattern S+V+O+Ad is written in 49 data (22,58%). From the data collected, it can be seen that the students tend to write their clause with S+V+Co pattern. The students like giving a complement for the subject in their clauses and mostly in form of adjective.

Keywords: syntax, students, weekly journal, and clause patterns

INTRODUCTION

In daily activity the role of language cannot be separated from human's life. Language is the key of communication among the people in this world. By using language every part of human's life can be easier, it can be used to express someone's feeling, someone's need, someone's desire, and any other things that can support a human's life. Language is the expression of thought, with the translation of notions into words being the act of understanding (Helmie, 2014). Studying language is as important as other sciences because language is the basis of any disciplines, it is the bridge to deliver any ideas and thoughts.

Due to the importance of language, there is a scientific study focus on language called Linguistics. The referent of "linguistics" is a sphere of activities involving language study (and its products, such as journal articles) (Agha, 2007). This research focuses on syntax which is one of the structural linguistics in which the students need to develop in learning English (Basri, Ampa & Junaid, 2013). In general, syntax can be concluded that syntax is the study of arranging English patters; how it creates into phrase, clauses, and Sentences? There are three syntactic structures in English; syntactic function, syntactic categories, and syntactic unit. Each structure

has its own discussion. There are many syntactical researches were conducted whether to analyze phrase, clause patterns, kinds of sentence or to compare between two variables in terms of syntax. Mostly, the research obtained the data from novel, movie script, newspaper, or social media. There are found only a few of the researches where students as the resource of the data.

Based on background of the study explained above, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What types of clause pattern do the students use in their weekly journal?
2. What type of clause pattern that is frequently used by students in their weekly journal?
3. How do the students write the clause patterns in their weekly journal?

Theoretical Framework
Syntax

In linguistics, syntax refers to the rules that organize the ways in which words combine to the form of phrases, clauses, and sentences. Syntax is needed for students in developing their English skills to make them capable to speak and write accurately (Basri et al., 2013). The study of syntax is the study of how words combine to phrases and ultimately sentences in languages.

Fromkin *et* al., (2003) as cited in Misir defined syntax as the part of the grammar that represents a speaker's knowledge of sentences and their structures (Mısır, 2017). Syntax is frequently interpreted as word order and sentence structure. Syntax is the branch of linguistics which studies the formation of sentence. In other words, syntax is a science that studies sentence structure (Helmie, 2015). It can be said that syntax is the rule of sentence pattern and its structure that organizes the way words in a sentence arranged. In this case, it explains how words are arranged become phrases and clauses for constructing sentence.

Phrase

Phrase is a part of a sentence consists of two or more words. A phrase is a word or a group of words that form a particular meaning grammatically (Basri & Halijah, 2018). In linguistic analysis, a phrase is a group of words (or possibly a single word) that functions as a constituent in the syntax of a sentence, a single unit within a grammatical hierarchy (Osborne, Putnam, & Gross, 2011). According to Binsar Sihombing & Barbara S. Burton (2007) as cited in Helmie, a phrase is two or more words in sequence intended to have meaning, less completely predicated than a sentence, because it has no subject and verb (Helmie, 2015). Based on those definitions, it can be concluded that phrase is a group words which having no predicate and subject.

A phrase may have a partial subject or verb but not both, it is different with clause which may have both (McMurray, 2016).

Generally, the English phrases consist of five types:
1. Noun Phrase (NP), is a phrase which a noun is the head. Noun phrase can be a subject, object, or complement in a clause or sentence.
2. Verb Phrase (VP), is a phrase which verb is the head. It can be a single phrase (only consists of auxiliary verbs and main verbs) or can be added complements and modifiers.
3. Adjective Phrase (Adj P), is a phrase which adjective is the head. It may contain modifier or complement to complete its meaning.
4. Adverbial Phrase (Adv P), has two definitions; some say it is a group of adverbs (very quickly), while others say it is any phrase (usually a prepositional phrase) that acts as an adverb.
5. Prepositional Phrase (Prep P), is a phrase which preposition is the head. Prepositional phrase has a noun or pronoun which called the object of preposition.

Clause

Clause is a kind of syntactic unit which higher than phrase but still not the highest. It is often contrasted with phrases. Traditionally, a clause was said to have both a finite verb and its subject, whereas a phrase either contained a finite verb but not its subject (in which case it is a verb phrase) or did not contain a finite verb (Helmie, 2015). Clauses are basic for several reasons. First, you need only one of them to make a sentence, though, of course, sentences may consist of an indefinite number of clauses. Second, in actual communication, shorter utterances are usually reconstructed and understood by reference to clauses (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010). Clause is a group of words consisting of a subject and a predicate.

There are two types of clause: Independent Clause and Dependent Clause. Independent clause is a clause that can stand alone by itself in a sentence forming and still make sense. Meanwhile, dependent clause is a clause that cannot stand alone by itself and it depends on independent clause to make a sentence makes sense.

Sentence

Sentence is the largest syntactical unit which Halliday and Matthiessen stated that "The sentence is the highest unit of punctuation on the graphological rank scale and has evolved in the writing system to represent the clause complex as the most extensive domain of grammatical structure." (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A sentence is a grammatical unit comprising a group of words that separates from other grammatical construction and usually consist of one subject with its predicate contains a finite verb or verb phrase.

There are 3 types of sentence: simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentence. A simple sentence has one independent clause with one or more subjects and one or more predicate (v) and there is no dependent clause. Compound sentence joining two independent clauses or sentences that could stand on their own linked by the co-ordinating conjunctions, and separate with a comma (,) or semicolon (;).A complex sentence is an independent clause joined by one or more dependent clauses. A compound-complex sentence is a sentence that has at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

METHOD

This research adopts qualitative descriptive method to analyze English clause patterns in students' weekly journal syntactically. Concerning this research, the writer analyzes all English clause patterns that found in students' weekly journal. The data described syntactically based on its kind of phrase, type of clause, and the clause pattern. This research data are phrase and clause. In addition the writer used library research, through many of books and other references such as articles, journals, and websites in doing the research to support the topic.

The data collection technique used in this research was document analysis. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen, 2017). The form of document for doing the analysis to finish this study is students' weekly journal. There are four steps to collect the data for this research. The first step is asking the students to write their weekly journal entitled Weekly Diary as much as 4 journals for each student. The journals were written from September 23rd to November 13th 2018. The second step was conducted after the students finished writing their journals, the step is collecting students' weekly journal that contains various clause pattern types in it. Next step is classifying the data based on its pattern. The fourth step as the final step is the data analyzed syntactically. The technique of data collecting in this research is students' weekly journals which contain many types of clause pattern are collected and then copied. The copied journal is marked to identify the types of clause pattern. The data found are finally classified based on its clause pattern and then analyzed syntactically.

The data analysis was started by classifying the clauses that found in students' weekly journal and then categorizing those clauses whether it is included into what types of clause pattern. The data was interpreted as the finding which discusses its kind of phrase, type of clause, and the clause pattern with applying the theory related to the problem of the research. To complete this study, the writer sought data from students' weekly journal which is related to the research material. As much as 32 students from XI AKKUL 3 in SMKN 1 Cianjur became the participants for this study. The students wrote their activities in English lesson time in their journal every week for 4 weeks.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Data Findings of Students' Clause Patterns
The data of clause patterns are taken from student's weekly journal from September 23rd to November 13th 2018, as much as 32 students were involved in this research.

There are seven patterns of English clause patterns, and those all clause patterns were found in Students' weekly journal in total 217 data, with details: clause pattern S+V as much as 15 data (6,91%), clause pattern S+V+O as much as 38 data (17,51%), clause pattern S+V+Co as much as 69 data (31,8%), clause pattern S+V+O+O as much as 3 data (1,38%), clause pattern S+V+O+Co as much as 25 data (11,52%), clause pattern S+V+Ad as much as 18 data (8,3%), and clause pattern S+V+O+Ad as much as 49 data (22,58%). From the data findings, it can be seen that 32 students of XI AKKUL class in SMKN 1 Cianjur as participants of this study tend to write their clause with S+V+Co pattern with amount 31,8% out of 100%.

Discussions of Student's Clause Pattern S+V
Data 1:

I Heard
S V

Syntactically, this data contains two 2 phrases, those are noun phrase and verb phrase. Each phrase contains only one single head word. The word *I* is a noun phrase with one single head word, its position is as the subject of the clause. The verb phrase in the clause is the word *heard*, it is a single head word and becomes the main verb of the clause. This type of clause is an independent clause because it does not need to attach to others in sentence forming and it has a complete structure and can be a major sentence.

It only has one independent clause and expresses a single complete thought. From the analysis, it can be concluded that the clause pattern of this clause is S+V because there is no objects or complements and only consist of subject and verb. The word *I* is subject of the clause, and the word *heard* is the verb.

Discussions of Student's Clause Pattern S+V+O
Data 2:

I wrote material
S V   O

Based on the data, there are three words which have its own role in the clause. The clause has 3 phrases, two noun phrases and one verb phrase. There are 2 noun phrases in the clause, the first is a single head word *I*, and this noun phrase is the subject of this clause. The second noun clause is the word *material*, it is also a single head word and has position as an object in the clause. The only one verb phrase in this clause is *wrote*, it is a single head word without any modifiers and the only one verb in the clause.

Thus, the clause pattern of this clause is S+V+O, *I* as subject, *wrote* as verb, and *material* as object. This is kind of independent clause because the clause has a complete structure in sentence forming and it can be understood completely, so it can stand alone by itself and does not need to attach to other clauses.

Discussions of Student's Clause Patterns S+V+Co
Data 3:

<p align="center"><u>Ms Vega</u> <u>is</u> <u>always cheerful</u>
S   V   Co</p>

In data 24, it can be seen there are three phrases in the clause; noun phrase, verb phrase, and adjective phrase. The noun phrase in the clause is a proper noun, *Ms Vega*. It is a single head word and has a role as subject of the clause. The verb phrase is an auxiliary verb *is*. It is a single head word and becomes the main verb of the clause. Further, the adjective phrase in the clause is *always cheerful*, it comprises modifier *always* and head word *cheerful*. This adjective phrase is complement of the clause.

There is not found any conjunction in this clause, so it is an independent clause because it can stand alone by itself to construct a complete meaning in sentence. Thus, the clause pattern of this clause is S+V+Co. As explained above, *Ms Vega* is subject, *is* is verb, and *always cheerful* is complement for subject.

Discussions of Student's Clause Patterns S+V+O+O

<p align="center">Data 4
<u>Mrs. Ayu</u> <u>taught</u> <u>me</u> <u>some tenses</u>
S   V   O   O</p>

Syntactically, there are 2 types of phrase in this clause; noun phrase and verb phrase. This clause consists of three noun phrase and one verb phrase. The first noun phrase is a proper noun which is the head of the phrase, *Mrs. Ayu*. It has a role as subject of the clause. The second noun phrase is pronoun which is also a single head word, that is *me*. It has a role as indirect object of the clause. The last noun phrase is *some tenses*. It encompasses pre-modifier *some* and the head word *tenses*. The role of the third noun phrases is as direct object. Then, the verb phrase is a single head word *taught*. It is the only one verb in the clause, so it becomes main verb of the clause.

According to explanation above, it can be concluded the pattern of this pattern is S+V+O+O. There are two objects in this clause, indirect and direct object. And certainly must parts of the clause, subject and verb. In addition, this clause is an independent clause, because it has complete structure in sentence forming.

Discussions of Student's Clause Patterns S+V+O+Co
Data 5:

<p align="center"><u>Ms Vega</u> <u>applied</u> <u>this material</u> <u>to one of my favorite songs</u>
S   V   O   Co</p>

Syntactically, data 16 has 5 phrases; they are 3 noun phrases, one verb phrase and one prepositional phrase. The noun phrases are *Ms Vega*, *this material*, and *one of my favorite songs*. The first noun phrase, *Ms Vega*, is a proper noun which having a single head word. Its role is as subject of the clause. The second noun phrase, *this material*, comprises *this* as pre-modifier and *material* as the head word. Its role is as object of the clause. The last noun phrase,

one of my favorite songs, is constructed by *one of my favorite* as pre-modifier consisting of a degree, preposition, possessive pronoun, and an adjective. The head word of the last noun phrase is *songs*. This noun phrase is an object of preposition and becomes object complement of the clause. The verb phrase is *applied* which is a single head word and a single verb in the clause. Its role is as main verb. Lastly, the prepositional phrase is *to one of my favorite songs*, it consists of preposition *to* as the head and noun phrase *one of my favorite songs*.

As explained above, it can be concluded the pattern of this data is S+V+O+Co. *Ms Vega* is the subject, *applied* as the verb, *this material* is the object, *to one of my favorite songs* is the complement for object. Data 16 has one independent clause and there is not any conjunction found. Therefore, this clause can stand alone by itself without attaching to other clauses.

Discussions of Student's Clause Patterns S+V+Ad
Data 6:

$$\underline{\text{A text}} \ \underline{\text{was given}} \ \underline{\text{to me}}$$
$$\text{S}\text{V}\text{Ad}$$

Based on the data 155, there are six words which are incorporated in 3 types of phrase. The types of phrase in this clause are noun phrases, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase. There are 2 noun phrases in the clause, the first is *a text* which formed by a determiner *a* as pre-modifier and *text* as the head word. This noun phrase is the subject of this clause. Next the noun clause, *me*, is an object pronoun that placed in prepositional phrase. Its role is as object preposition. The only one verb phrase in this clause is *was given*, it consists of an auxiliary verb *was* as modifier and *given* as the head word. The prepositional phrase is *to me* which comprises preposition *to* and a single head word noun phrase *me*, this phrase has a role as adverbial of the clause.

Thus, the clause pattern of this clause is S+V+Ad, *a text* as subject, *was given* as verb, and *to me* as adverbial. It is considered as S+V+Ad clause pattern because the prepositional phrase *to me* denotes to whom the subject do the action, albeit there is no object in this clause. This is kind of independent clause because it can be understood completely so it can stand alone by itself.

Discussions of Student's Clause Patterns S+V+O+Ad
Data 7:

$$\underline{\text{I}} \ \underline{\text{do not like}} \ \underline{\text{English lessons}} \ \underline{\text{a little}}$$
$$\text{S}\text{V}\text{O}\text{Ad}$$

The clause in data 29 shows there are 4 phrases in the clause. The phrases are two noun phrases, one verb phrase, and one adverbial phrase. The first noun phrase is a single head word *I*, and the second noun phrase is *English lessons*. The second noun phrase consists of two words; *English* which is the head word, and *lessons* as the post-modifier. The verb phrase is *do not like*, it is constructed by complement *do not* to show negation, and the main verb *like*. This verb phrase is the main verb of the clause. The adverbial phrase is the words *a little* consisting of determiner *a* and adjective *little*, it shows the degree of how much the subject like the object.

As a result, the word *I* stands for subject, the words *do not like* is the verb, *English lessons* is as the object, and *a little* is the adverbial of the clause. Based on the data it can be concluded the clause pattern of this clause is S+V+O+Ad. This clause is a kind of independent clause because it does not need to other clauses and it can be a major sentence.

Discussion

The present study investigated the syntactic clause patterns used by vocational high school students in their weekly journals. The findings indicate that all seven basic English clause patterns appeared in the students' writing, with S + V + Complement (SVC) emerging as the most frequently used pattern, accounting for 31.8% of the total 217 clauses identified. In contrast, the S + V + O + O (SVOO) pattern was the least frequent, appearing only three times. These findings reveal important insights into the syntactic competence and writing tendencies of EFL learners at the secondary school level.

The predominance of the SVC clause pattern suggests that learners tend to construct sentences that describe states, qualities, or identities rather than actions involving multiple arguments. This tendency aligns with findings in second language acquisition research, which indicate that beginner and intermediate learners often rely on structurally simpler clause constructions when producing written texts (Ellis, 2008). In many EFL contexts, students initially develop their grammatical competence through copular constructions such as be + adjective or be + noun phrase, which are syntactically simpler and cognitively less demanding than clauses containing multiple objects or embedded structures (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999).

The high frequency of SVC patterns also reflects the communicative function of weekly journal writing. Journals typically encourage students to express personal experiences, feelings, or evaluations. As a result, students frequently produce clauses such as I was happy, The lesson was interesting, or My teacher is kind. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), such constructions represent relational processes in systemic functional grammar, where the clause serves to attribute qualities or identities to the subject. Therefore, the dominance of relational clauses in students' journals is not surprising, as reflective writing often relies on descriptive and evaluative language (Purnamasari, 2018).

Another significant finding is the relatively high occurrence of the S + V + O + Adverbial (SVOA) pattern, which accounted for 22.58% of the clauses. This indicates that students are capable of extending clause structures with adverbial elements to provide contextual information such as time, place, or manner. In writing development theory, the inclusion of adverbials represents an important stage in syntactic expansion because it allows learners to produce more informative and contextually rich sentences (Hyland, 2019). However, the findings also suggest that these adverbials are frequently realized as simple prepositional phrases rather than more complex structures, indicating that students are still developing their syntactic flexibility.

Conversely, the rarity of SVOO constructions suggests that students experience difficulty producing clauses with both direct and indirect objects. In English grammar, double-object constructions require learners to understand argument structure and verb valency, which are typically acquired at more advanced stages of language development (Radford, 2009). For EFL learners whose first language may employ different syntactic patterns for object relations, such constructions can be particularly challenging. This observation supports previous studies that report limited use of complex argument structures in early stages of second language writing (Biber et al., 1999).

The analysis also revealed several syntactic inaccuracies in students' clauses, including missing subjects, incomplete predicates, or unnecessary prepositions. These errors indicate that while students demonstrate basic awareness of clause structures, their syntactic competence remains developing. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), syntactic errors are a natural part of language development and often occur when learners attempt to construct sentences beyond their current level of grammatical mastery. Such errors highlight the importance of explicit grammar instruction that focuses on clause structure and syntactic functions.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the need for more systematic instruction in clause construction within EFL writing classrooms. Explicit teaching of syntactic patterns—including subject, verb, object, complement, and adverbial elements—can help students understand how clauses function as the fundamental building blocks of sentences. Research in language pedagogy suggests that visual tools such as tree diagrams, sentence pattern exercises, and syntactic parsing activities can significantly improve learners' grammatical awareness (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, & Williams, 2010). By integrating such instructional strategies into writing instruction, teachers can support students in producing more varied and grammatically accurate sentences.

Furthermore, the use of weekly journals itself appears to be a valuable pedagogical tool for developing syntactic awareness. Journal writing encourages learners to practice writing regularly in a low-anxiety environment, allowing them to experiment with different clause structures without the pressure of formal assessment. According to Hyland (2019), regular reflective writing activities promote language fluency and help learners gradually develop more complex grammatical structures over time.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of syntactic development in EFL student writing. The results demonstrate that while students are capable of producing several types of clause patterns, their writing still relies heavily on structurally simple constructions. This suggests that continued instruction and practice in syntactic variation are necessary to support the development of more sophisticated writing skills. Strengthening students' mastery of clause structures will not only improve grammatical accuracy but also enhance their ability to construct coherent and stylistically varied texts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the syntactic clause patterns used by vocational high school students in their weekly journal writing. The analysis of 217 clauses produced by 32 students revealed that all seven English clause patterns were present in the students' writing, although their distribution varied considerably. The findings show that the S + V + Complement (SVC) pattern was the most frequently used clause structure, while the S + V + O + O (SVOO) pattern appeared least frequently. These results suggest that students tend to construct clauses that describe states, qualities, or identities rather than more syntactically complex structures involving multiple objects.

The dominance of relatively simple clause structures indicates that students' syntactic competence is still developing. Although learners demonstrated the ability to produce various clause patterns, many clauses were formed using simple lexical heads and limited syntactic expansion. In some cases, errors such as missing subjects, incomplete verbs, or inappropriate prepositions were also identified. These findings imply that while students possess basic knowledge of clause construction, they require further support to develop greater syntactic variety and grammatical accuracy in their writing.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results highlight the importance of strengthening explicit instruction in syntactic units, particularly clause structures, within English language learning. Teachers are encouraged to provide systematic guidance on the functions of subjects, verbs, objects, complements, and adverbials, as well as to incorporate instructional strategies such as sentence pattern analysis, clause identification exercises, and visual representations of sentence structure. Such practices may help learners develop a clearer understanding of how clauses function as the fundamental building blocks of sentences.

Furthermore, the use of weekly journal writing appears to provide a meaningful context for observing students' natural language production. Through regular reflective writing activities, learners can practice constructing sentences and gradually develop more complex

syntactic structures. Therefore, integrating journal writing with focused grammar instruction may contribute to improving students' writing competence.

Overall, this study demonstrates that analyzing clause patterns in students' writing can provide valuable insights into their syntactic development. Future research may extend this investigation by examining syntactic complexity across different writing genres, educational levels, or instructional approaches to further understand how learners develop advanced clause structures in English writing.

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