

Composition Writing in a Primary School¹

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In many studies of language development, the usual approach has been to analyse mean sentence length, mean clause length and subordination ratio. Subordinate clauses, in turn, are divided into noun, adverb and adjective types, and the frequency of each type is studied. Adverb clauses are further classified according to different categories of meaning.

In a recent study², however, Hunt has devised a new unit of measurement in place of sentence length. Noting that the fourth grade children in his study tended to use many *ands*, without enough periods, and occasionally, to use sentence fragments, he decided to ignore the pupils' punctuation and their co-ordinating conjunctions between clauses. What remained was still as grammatical as it was before. He then cut up this connected discourse into the shortest segments which it would be allowable to write with a capital letter at one end and a period or question mark at the other, leaving no fragment as residue. In his own words:

Segments containing only one clause would be like simple sentences. Segments containing more than one clause would all be like complex sentences. There would be no compound sentences, but there might be some compound-complex sentences, for co-ordinators between subordinate clauses would all go untouched.

As an example, here is a theme as it was originally written by the fourth grader who had the longest average sentences. The theme is 68 words long. It contains eleven clauses but no periods.

'I like the movie we saw about Moby Dick the white whale the captain said if you can kill the white whale Moby Dick I will give this gold to the one that can do it and it is worth sixteen dollars they tried and tried but while they were trying they killed a whale and use the oil for the lamps they almost caught the white whale.'

Here is the same theme cut into segments as described above:

'I like the movie we saw about Moby Dick the white whale/ The captain said if you can kill the white whale Moby Dick I will give this gold to the one that can do it/ (and) It is worth sixteen dollars/ They tried and tried/ (but) While they were trying they killed a whale' and use(d) the oil for the lamps/ They almost caught the white whale.' (pp. 30–31).

Notice that there are two co-ordinating conjunctions, one in the fourth segment and the other in the fifth. The fourth segment has a main clause with co-ordinate verbs. The fifth segment is a compound-complex sentence, which has a main clause with co-ordinate predicates and an adverb clause.

¹The full report of this study will appear in the next issue of *Jurnal Pendidikan*, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya.

²Hunt, K.W., *Differences in Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels*, – Cooperative Research Project # 1998, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, 1964.

The above units preserve all the subordination of the students' original sentences and also the internal co-ordination but are free of the co-ordination which was mainly a rhetorical grouping signal over-used. Hunt called these units terminable units (or T-units for short). Sentences with subordinate clause were referred to as multi-clause T-units.

Hunt found that these units turned out to have practical value. For the writings he investigated they provided the best index of maturity. They were a better index than the subordination ratio, the length of clause or the length of sentence.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of the present study is to find out the differences in the writing of a sample of Malaysian children in Stds 1, 2, 3 and 4, and hence to establish the extent and manner of their language development. The rationale for it is that, as far as the writers are aware, no study has been made of the development of written English among children whose mother tongue is other than English.

Procedure

Children in the English-medium classes in the then University Primary School were asked to write three little compositions in class without help from the teacher. They were given half an hour for each piece of writing. In the first exercise (or P test) they were each given a piece of paper on which was a series of four pictures. The first showed a schoolboy standing at a bus stop; the second a school bus with some passengers and a boy boarding the bus; the third a bus passing two human figures, and some fruit on the roadside; the fourth a school, and children getting off the bus. The children were asked to look at the pictures and write a story.

In the second exercise, (the S test) the teacher read a short story to the class and the children were asked to reproduce the story.

In the third exercise, (the MF test) the teacher wrote the title "My Friend" on the blackboard and asked the

children to write down as many things as they liked about their friend. There were intervals of a few hours or a day between the writings.

The reason for collecting three samples of writing from each child is that the investigators wanted to find out if different kinds of stimuli made any difference at all in the writing, and, if so, the nature of these differences.

When the compositions were collected from the teachers, who had been given printed instructions on what to say to the children in class, the investigators read them, eliminated the incomprehensible fragments and made the cuts for the T-units. A preliminary count was also made of the number of words and T-units. The count was later checked by two students who were paid for the job.

Results

As Table I shows, in all the three tests there is a progressive increase in the mean number of words over the standards, except for Standard 2 to Standard 3 in the S test. Secondly, on all the three tests there is a progressive increase in the mean length of the T-units over the standards except for Standard 3 to 4 in the S test.

The fact that in both measures, mean number of words and mean length of T-units, the exception occurs in the S test is significant. The investigators had given three different tests to find out if the different stimuli made any difference in the children's writings. The S test being the reproduction of a short story tended to have an inhibiting effect, at least in so far as developing their ideas was concerned. It will be seen that in all the standards the S test produced the least number of words. The children were limited, so to speak, by the length of the story itself. The length of T-units also appears to have been affected by the language in the S test. In both Standard 2 and Standard 3, the mean length of T-units for the S test is greater than for either the P test or MF test. In Standard 2 the number of words used (8.3) in the S test exceeded the average of 6.5 words for both P and MF tests. In Standard 3, the increase is from 6.9

Table I. Mean No. of Words and Length of T-units

Class (Standard)	No. of pupils	Mean No. of Words			Mean Length of T-units		
		P	S	MF	P	S	MF
2	98	80.0	52.7	56.8	6.5	8.3	6.5
3	119	96.2	51.2	62.5	6.9	9.5	6.9
4	54	104.2	64.1	97.0	8.7	7.7	7.6

words in both the P and MF tests to 9.5 in the S test. In Standard 4 the mean length of T-units seems to be more stable over the three tests. It would appear as if by the time the children reached Standard 4 their control over the second language was such as to be less affected by the language of the story they had heard. It would be interesting to conduct an experiment to find out if constant practice in reproducing stories in which the T-units tend to be longer than those normally used by children in Standards 2 and 3 would alter their language patterns in other kinds of writing.

That the kind of stimulus seems to make a difference is also indicated when we take the mean number of words in the two tests into consideration. The same pattern runs through all the standards. The mean number of words is greatest in the P test and smallest in the S test with the MF test coming in between. There is no exception in the patterns for this measure as there is for the mean length of T-unit. It would appear that when a series of pictures is provided as a stimulus for writing in the primary school, the children write more copiously. It may be that the pictures present them with some ideas to write about, so that that aspect of the problem in writing has been partially solved for them, and they can concentrate on the language.

The above interpretation of the differences in the amount of writing is borne out by a closer look at the pattern of differences. In Standards 2, 3 & 4 the differences between the S test and MF test are much smaller (4.1, 11.3 and 7.2 respectively) than the difference between the S test and the P test, which are 27.3, 45 and 40.1 respectively. When the investigators devised the three tests, they thought that the S test would be most inhibiting. This conjecture is supported by the results. They also thought that the P test would limit the children more than the MF test which would seem to

give the greatest freedom to the children, but the results show that the P test stimulated more writing. A different kind of reaction seems to be at work here. While in the P test, as was pointed out earlier, the children were circumscribed by the ideas and the language given in the short story, in the MF test, they were nearly as inhibited by the fact that they were free of the constraints of ideas and language! This might, perhaps, have been anticipated, since it bears out the experience often encountered in a free composition where even older children face the problem of "what to say" and "how to say it".

Table II shows that there is little or no difference in the mean length of T-units for boys and girls, except in Standard 4. Here the girls show a greater mean length in two tests, the P and S tests and the boys in the MF test.

In the use of multi-clause T-units, as Table III shows, there is an increasing number of children who use them from Standard 2 through Standard 4. Table IV shows a corresponding increase in the recurrence of multi-clause T-unit. It is interesting to note that though the mean number of words is greatest for the P test, there is not a correspondingly greater percentage of children who use multi-clauses in the P test. In fact, in Standards 2 and 3 the P test shows the smallest percentage of children using multi-clauses. For the S and MF tests the percentage remains more or less the same. In Standard 4 there is little difference in the percentage over all three tests. In this measure as in the mean length of T-units discussed above, the older children's writing seems to be less affected by the kind of test.

"When" clauses seem to predominate in all three standards and over all three tests. They account for more than 50% of the multi-clause T-units in all standards and for all tests except the P and MF tests in Standard 4. "Because" "that" and "if" clauses come next, in that

Table II. Mean Length of T-Units According to Sex

Class (Standard)	No. of Pupils		Mean Length of T-Units					
			P		S		MF	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2	57	41	6.5	6.5	8.4	8.2	6.8	6.6
3	72	47	6.9	7.0	9.5	9.6	6.8	6.8
4	33	21	8.3	9.4	7.5	8.2	8.2	7.0

Table III. Occurrence of Multi-clause T-Units

	Std. 2(n=98)			Std. 3 (n=119)			Std. 4 (n=54)		
	P	S	MF	P	S	MF	P	S	MF
No. using multi-clause T-units	14	27	28	37	48	51	30	30	31
% " " "	14.2%	27.5%	28.5%	31%	40.3%	42.8%	55.5%	55.5%	57%
Total No. of " "	28	27	46	72	52	97	61	37	77
" " " "when" clauses	15	26	25	40	44	53	29	29	31
" " " "because" "	6		5	11	5	15	9	1	11
" " " "which" "				1	2			3	3
" " " "that" "	1			2	4	12	2	5	3
" " " "what" "					1	1	1		
" " " "where" "		1		2			2		
" " " "until" "	4		1	2			2		
" " " "while" "	1						1		
" " " "if" "			6	2		8	1		6
" " " "than" "			2						5
" " " "so" "			1		1	1			
" " " "wherever" "			1						1
" " " "who" "			3		3		4		3
" " " "as" "			1			1	2		3
" " " "as soon as" "	1			2					
" " " "after" "			1	3		1	3		1
" " " "before" "				1		2	1		1
" " " "for" "				1			2		
" " " "whether" "						2		1	
" " " "as well as" "						1			
" " " "whose" "							1		2
" " " "so that" "							1		

order of importance. The other kinds of clauses appear in small numbers as Table III shows. It is of interest to note that throughout Stds 2 to 4 the 'when' clause appears the most times in the 'MF' test although one would expect that it would be used most often in the P test, which is an arrangement of sequential events in pictures, and next, the S test, which is a piece of narration,

both cases involving the time element to a large extent. Taken together with the other types of multi-clauses, the inference is that children use multi-clauses most often when they write a relatively free composition, even if their writing in this instance was less copious, as was mentioned earlier.

Table IV. Occurrence of Multi-clauses T-Units expressed as percentage of total number of T-Units

	Std. 2			Std. 3			Std. 4		
	P	S	MF	P	S	MF	P	S	MF
All multi-clause T-Units	2.3	4.3	5.3	4.3	8.1	9.0	9.4	8.3	11.1
"when" clauses	1.2	4.2	2.9	2.4	6.8	4.9	4.5	4.5	4.5
"because" clauses	0.5	—	0.5	0.6	0.7	1.3	1.3	0.2	1.5
"that" clauses	0.08	—	—	0.1	0.6	1.1	0.3	1.1	0.4
"if" clauses	—	—	0.7	0.1	—	0.7	0.1	—	0.8

All the multi-clause T-units contain two clauses except for one four-clause and six three-clause T-units. These occur as follows:

Standard	4 Blue	4 Red	3 Blue	3 Green
4-clause	1	—	—	—
3-clause	—	2	3	1

Conclusions

As children go up from one standard to the next the number of words they can write in the second language on the same topic within a specified time increases. So does the mean length of the T-units as Hunt and his predecessors who investigated first language development found. Also, more and more children make use of multi-clause T-units, though by Standard 4 they are still largely confined to the two-clause T-units. Multi-clause T-units that contain three or four clauses occur very rarely indeed. The most common conjunction over all standards is “when” followed by “because” “that” and “if”.

The kind of stimulus provided to elicit children’s writing made a difference to the amount of writing produced. Pictures proved to be the most stimulating in this respect. They seemed to solve the problem of what to say and so freed the children to concentrate on the writing itself. Where the stimulus is a story read for the children to reproduce, the language pattern of the original is reflected in the children’s reproduction over and above the ideas inherent in the story.

There is little or no difference in the mean length of T-units between the boys’ and the girls’ writings.

Although the investigators would not presume to generalise from this study of the children in one primary school to all primary schools, to the extent that the children studied are typical of Malaysian children, the findings may provide certain leads for primary school teachers. They can expect children in Standard 2 to write T-units whose mean length is approximately 6.5, in Standard 3, 6.9 and standard 4, 8.7. If they provide a model where the T-units are longer, the children’s T-units may also increase in length. They could experiment with such models for a period of time to see if the increased length would generalise to writing which is not reproduction. They could make more use of pictures or picture strips to facilitate children’s writing. If teachers wish their pupils to use conjunctions other than “when” and “because”, then they must make an effort to give the children more practice in making sentences with a wider range of conjunctions.