

Noun Phrase Complexity in Saudi University Students' Academic Writing

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Abstract:

This study investigates the use of various features of noun phrases employed in argumentative writing by Saudi college students, as well as differences in the complexity of these noun phrases between learners with varying levels of writing proficiency. Using the hypothesized developmental progression index proposed by Biber et al. (2011), the researcher analyzed argumentative essays to determine pronominal and postnominal modifiers. Additionally, manual coding of data was utilized to document and analyze the occurrence of noun premodifiers and postmodifiers. It was revealed that level-three students relied primarily on attributive adjectives and possessive nouns as premodifiers, whereas the most commonly used phrasal features for level-five students were of- phrases as noun modifiers and nouns as nominal pre-modifiers. The results of the study support the proposed developmental index by demonstrating that level-three students, who are less proficient, heavily relied on attributive adjectives. This finding aligns with the notion that attributive adjectives are acquired at an early stage. Furthermore, the utilization of noun modifiers by level-five students, who belong to the more proficient group, exhibited a much higher resemblance to the frequencies observed in published academic prose compared to the usage by the less proficient group. The results of the study have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of noun phrase use among Saudi EFL students' learning.

Keywords: noun phrase, premodifiers, postmodifiers, academic writing, argumentative essays.

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Introduction

Writing is a vital component of language competency since it is one of the two productive modalities. Writing skills have been acknowledged as an important component in a range of situations, including educational and professional settings (Powell, 2009). Learners need to be able to communicate clearly and concisely in writing if they want to be successful in the 21st century (Wagner, 2010). Writing in English is challenging, and writing in an academic environment or for professional audiences is even more demanding. Similarly, academic writing is a difficult skill for most Saudi EFL learners. The language used in academic writing is unique; it is distinct from the language used in the majority of other registers of English. Academic writing is often seen to be purposely convoluted and focused on informational density (Biber & Gray, 2016).

Having a thorough understanding of linguistic features can help second language (L2) learners improve their writing skills, including planning, drafting, and revising (Cumming, 2001). Complexity is an important and necessary characteristic of L2 performance. It not only indicates competence but also measures linguistic growth and development. According to scholars such as Biber et al. (2011) and Bulté and Housen (2014), complexity is considered a crucial and reliable characteristic of L2 proficiency. It serves as an indicator of proficiency and a measure of language development and progress. Indeed, it is a component of the three-dimensional framework, along with accuracy and fluency, used to assess the language proficiency of learners.

Syntactic complexity has emerged as a focal point in the field of SLA, drawing significant scholarly scrutiny. This heightened attention is attributed to its correlation with language output quality, as emphasized by Bulté and Housen (2012). Their comprehensive model offers a thorough and sophisticated understanding of linguistic complexity in L2 acquisition, encompassing various facets, including syntactic complexity, within a broader framework. Bulté and Housen's model elucidates the intricacies of syntactic complexity, offering a nuanced taxonomy that identifies distinctive types, dimensions, and components of L2 complexity. By establishing this multifaceted taxonomic model, they provide an analytical lens through which researchers can independently examine and measure specific aspects of L2 complexity. Moreover, their work critically evaluates the methodologies employed in empirical SLA research to gauge complexity, shedding light on how complexity is defined and operationalized as a construct within the field. As a result, this line of inquiry has generated invaluable theoretical frameworks and practical implications.

According to Yang and Weigle (2015), syntactic complexity is one of the most important variables to evaluate when assessing a student's language progress and ability. It may be precisely

defined as the use of complicated and challenging language structures (Ravid & Berman, 2010), or it can be defined in a wider meaning as the diversity of forms that evolve in language production and the level of complexity of such forms (Ortega, 2003). In language theory, syntactic complexity is frequently associated with elaboration and clausal embedding (Biber & Gray, 2016). It alludes to the plethora of forms that arise over the course of language development, as well as the growing complexity of those forms.

Research suggests that the syntactic complexity exhibited by L2 learners in their sentences, clauses, and phrases may serve as an indicator of their syntactic repertoire and exhibit a significant correlation with their L2 performance (e.g., Lu, 2011; Xue et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2022). Hence, the use of syntactic structures that are more linguistically complex is indicative of L2 learning (Ortega, 2012). In published works, syntactic complexity in L2 writing has garnered considerable attention. According to studies, there is a large difference in the syntactic complexity of the written output of EFL learners of varied skill levels. Syntactic complexity has long been used as a criterion for analyzing and comparing students' growth using various indices (e.g., Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). This has been done for many years. Furthermore, the extent of research on syntactic complexity in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has expanded due to its increasing usage in assessing academic work produced by writing professionals. The cultivation of academic writing skills is an important issue for university students, as they are obligated to express their thoughts in a clear and effective manner (Staples et al., 2016).

Syntactic complexity includes phrasal complexity, which emphasizes phrasal elaboration (Shao et al., 2022). Research (including Biber & Gray, 2011; Taguchi, Crawford, & Wetzel, 2013; Yoon & Polio 2016) has shown that the utilization of advanced language at the phrasal level, such as noun modifiers and prepositional phrases as postmodifiers, is a distinguishing feature of high-quality writing. According to the findings of Biber and Gray (2011), nominal structures that include phrasal modification are found more often in academic writing than in conversation or fiction. Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) found that more complex noun modifiers were more prevalent in the writing of writers with greater levels of expertise versus those with lower levels of expertise. According to Mazgutova and Kormos (2015), the degree of syntactic complexity that occurs at the phrase level rather than the sentence level is a better indicator of L2 writing competence. Wang and Slater (2016) conducted a study contrasting the usage of complex nominal structures in the writing of EFL Chinese students with that of more skilled writers. They achieved this by drawing a distinction between the two groups of writers showing that more skilled writers employed more complex nominal structures than less skilled writers. According to Biber and Gray (2016), an important source of syntactic complexity

is noun phrase components. In reality, they serve the exact opposite function: they maximize structure compression rather than structure elaboration.

According to Biber and Gray (2016), a noun phrase that includes a determiner and a head noun is considered a basic noun phrase. Modifications to this structure can increase its phrasal complexity. As per Biber's (1988) findings, formal writing exhibits a higher frequency of phrases in comparison to speech, where clausal subordination is a prominent feature. Attributive adjectives and prepositional phrases that modify the head noun are frequently used in written registers. According to Biber et al. (1999), the fundamental structure of noun phrases comprises four elements: determiner, pre modification, head noun, and post modification. The complexity of the structure increases when multiple pre or postmodifiers are employed.

e.g., *a (new silver) car (that she purchased)*

The job (that he has dreamed about)

Noun Phrase Complexity in Academic Writing

According to Biber and Gray's (2011) assertion, academic writing is considered an advanced form of written communication that exhibits a preponderance of noun phrases. Biber et al. (2011) questioned the reliability of T-unit in measuring syntactic complexity, based on corpus-based research and the notion that T-unit analysis is insufficient in capturing the full extent of writing complexity. As a result, they proposed a series of developmental stages into the study of complexity in writing development. A comparison was carried out to evaluate the utilization of 28 features in spoken language and academic writing. The findings validate the notion that academic writing exhibits comparatively lower levels of clause complexity, while demonstrating a greater degree of complexity in terms of noun phrases.

Recent studies conducted by Jitpraneechai (2019) as well as Lan and Sun (2019) have established the reliability of utilizing noun phrase modifiers as an indicator of writing proficiency. Biber and Gray (2016) highlighted that certain syntactic structures, such as dependent clauses, were not commonly found in written registers. Conversely, phrasal structures were more commonly utilized. The study conducted by Staples et al. (2016) investigated the progression, spanning from their initial year of undergraduate studies to the graduate level. The researchers observed a rise in the utilization of phrasal features, while the use of clausal features declined as the students advanced academically.

In the field of research on L2 writing, there has been a notable focus on the analysis of language proficiency and developmental trajectories through the lens of syntactic complexity. This emphasis is evident in the works of scholars such as Biber et al. (2016), Kyle and Crossley (2018), and Norris and

Ortega (2009). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of syntactic complexity in L2 academic writing practices. This interest has been particularly influenced by Biber and Gray's (2010) arguments on the importance of analyzing written academic genres using phrasal complexity, specifically noun phrase complexity. This has led to an increase in research on the topic, as evidenced by studies such as Ansarifar et al. (2018) and Biber et al. (2016). Furthermore, Bulté and Housen (2014) as well as Yang et al. (2015) have demonstrated that the level of phrasal complexity is a significant determinant of writing quality.

Considerable research has been devoted to examining the intricacies of ESL writers. Nevertheless, a relatively limited body of literature has shed light on the utilization of syntactically intricate constructions in the writing of learners with diverse proficiency levels. Incorporating these students into the research serves as a frame of reference or a benchmark for writers who are in the process of honing their abilities. Biber and Gray (2010) posit that professional academic writing is often characterized by intricate syntax, complex structures, and explicit connections between ideas. The idea that the language features utilized in academic writing and speech are fundamentally distinct from each other is supported by the results of corpus studies. The exact variations, on the other hand, are fairly intriguing. They present evidence to support the notion that academic writing does not necessarily entail structural elaboration. The frequency of subordinate clauses, particularly finite dependent clauses, is noticeably higher in conversational language compared to academic writing. In contrast, academic writing exhibits a more compact structural arrangement, wherein phrasal modifiers (as opposed to clausal modifiers) are incorporated within noun phrases. They also hold a divergent perspective regarding the concept that academic writing is explicit in its meaning. According to Jitpraneechai (2019), it is contended that the compressed discourse style of academic writing is comparatively less explicit in its signification when compared to other writing styles that utilize elaborate structures. The aforementioned reading patterns are advantageous for learners who engage in professional reading, as they possess the ability to efficiently extract copious amounts of information from concise, condensed written material. Novice readers, conversely, may encounter challenges as they must acquire the ability to deduce semantic connections that are not overtly expressed among syntactic components.

Literature Review

Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) conducted a study investigation on the academic writing of two groups of graduate L2 writers, utilizing the developmental progression index established by Biber et al. (2011). Group one was preparing to enroll in a postgraduate program, while group two had already commenced their participation in a program. Both datasets were subjected to a thorough analysis aimed

at identifying noun phrases, followed by a manual coding of pre- and postmodifiers. The results of the study support the validity of the developmental index proposed, as they indicate that writers with lower proficiency tend to use attributive adjectives extensively. These modifiers are conventionally believed to be acquired during early stages of language acquisition. Furthermore, proficient writers employed noun modifiers that were significantly more aligned with the prescribed frequencies for academic writing, as compared to the less skilled writers.

In a study conducted by Ansarifar et al. (2018), the development of complex noun phrases in abstract writing among graduate students and expert writers was compared. The study revealed significant differences in noun phrase modification between MA, PhD, and expert writer groups. The study revealed that individuals with a PhD and those who are experts in writing research articles (RA) tend to utilize a greater number of noun, participle, adjective, and prepositional noun modifiers in their abstracts, as compared to MA students. However, it was observed that expert RA abstract writers predominantly employ prepositional noun modifiers more frequently than PhD writers. The results of this study underscore the importance of modifying noun phrases in academic writing conventions. Additionally, it suggests that it may be beneficial to incorporate a focus on noun phrases in EAP writing, with an emphasis on exploring the usage of intricate noun phrases and other complex structures in scholarly writing.

Recently, academics have conducted an analysis of syntactic complexity pertaining to the phrasal level and have explored the correlation between phrasal complexity and the quality of academic writing. The study conducted by Yoon and Polio (2017) aimed to analyze the development of narrative and argumentative essays among 37 ESL students. The researchers focused on genre differences and progression over time. The findings suggest argumentative essays exhibit a significantly higher level of syntactic complexity compared to narrative essays. Similarly, Polio and Yoon (2018) examined the efficacy of the differences in syntactic complexity between the two genres. The findings indicate that the degree of syntactic complexity observed in argumentative essays surpasses that observed in narrative essays.

Lan and Sun (2019) conducted a comprehensive study on the characteristics of academic writing at the noun phrase level, with a specific focus on the frequency and usage of modifiers, particularly those at the phrasal level. The study analyzed a total of 79 argumentative essays, focusing on the 11 noun modifiers as outlined by Biber et al. (2011). They analyzed the 11 noun modifiers included in Biber et al. (2011), and the findings reveal that modifiers are more prevalent in academic settings. According to Gardner et al. (2019), employing lengthy words, nominalizations, attributive adjectives,

and abstract nouns, which are collectively referred to as "informational density," was found to be positively correlated with one's level of academic attainment. Jitpraneechai (2019) employed Biber et al.'s (2011) postulated developmental phases to examine Thai and native learners' academic writing in argumentative English essays, specifically in relation to noun modification. The focus of their analysis was on the intricacy of noun phrases in written language. The identification and manual encoding of prenominal and postnominal modifiers were carried out. Both groups of writers predominantly used attributive adjectives, prenominal nouns, and postnominal prepositional phrases, with no noteworthy discrepancies in the employment of prenominal modifiers discernible between the two groups. The most notable difference observed between the two datasets was the utilization of prepositional phrases conveying abstract meanings, along with the presence of multiple prepositional phrases serving as postmodifiers. It is believed that these skills are typically attained in the later stages of learning and were found to be more frequently utilized by native English-speaking university learners in comparison to their Thai counterparts.

The literature review provides important insights into the topic of noun phrase complexity by presenting a collection of studies that offer valuable insights into the characteristics of noun phrase modification. The review also underscores the growing interest in studying syntactic complexity in L2 academic writing, particularly noun phrase complexity in argumentative essays. The review further emphasizes the significance of analyzing noun phrase modifiers as a measure of writing proficiency. Specifically, these studies emphasize the importance of determining the complexity levels of students' work by employing Biber et al.'s (2011) proposed developmental stages. The studies also support the idea of the hypothesized developmental stages in that presumably less proficient writers rely more heavily on the features of earlier stages than more proficient writers. The research contribution of the study lies in employing the developmental progression index established by Biber et al. (2011) to identify the most and least frequently used noun phrase modifiers in academic essays written by Saudi EFL students, aiming to contribute to the understanding and improvement of writing proficiency in this particular context. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What noun phrase modifiers are used the most and least often in academic essays written by Saudi EFL students?
2. Are there significant differences in noun modifiers in academic essays written by Saudi EFL students at different levels of proficiency?

Methodology

Participants of the Study

A total of 65 EFL university students were selected from the Department of English and Literature, College of Languages and Translation at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) in Saudi Arabia. The participants were specifically enrolled in the Level-3 and Level-5 Writing Courses during the first semester of the academic year 2022. This sample presented a diverse and representative composition of the targeted academic group, with 34 students identified as level-three participants and 31 as level-five participants. The mean age of the level-three students was calculated at 19.81 years, with an age range between 19 and 21 years, indicating a relatively narrow age distribution within this subgroup. Conversely, the level-five students demonstrated a slightly higher mean age of 21.35 years, with ages ranging from 19 to 23 years, reflecting a wider age span.

These selected participants from the College of Languages and Translation at IMSIU were chosen for their diverse academic backgrounds and varying linguistic proficiencies. The sample's diversity aimed to enable a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between noun phrase complexity in the academic writing of Saudi university students, enhancing the depth and richness of the study's findings.

Data Collection

Forms of informed consent allowing the researcher to utilize the participants' writings were gathered. Accordingly, argumentative essays were received from Saudi level-three and level-five university students. As a component of the course prerequisites, every student prepared an argumentative essay arguing for or against *obtaining a college degree via online classes*. This kind of academic writing is selected because it is thought to necessitate higher-order thinking (Lu, 2011; Way et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is expected that individuals will utilize a diverse array of, such as noun phrases and various types of noun modifiers, to effectively present their logical reasoning through persuasive arguments.

Before writing the argumentative essay, the students spent a week reading and discussing the topic of *obtaining a college degree via online classes*. Essay writing took one hour in class. The written pieces were completed during class time, with an approximate length of 300-400 words, and without the use of any electronic devices. Table 1 shows the number of essays, average length, and total words. Although both corpora have similar word counts, level-five students have written longer essays.

Table 1*Corpora of participants' data*

Students' level	Number of essays	Mean length of essays	Total number of words
Level-three students	34	314.82	10,704
Level-five students	31	356.06	11,038

Certain statistical steps were carried out to manipulate and interpret the information provided in Table 1. These steps include collating the data on the number of essays, mean length of the essays, and the total number of words for each group of participants. Additionally, the data were organized to highlight the differences in essay length between the level-three and level-five students, indicating a higher mean length for the essays composed by the level-five students despite the similarity in word counts between the two groups.

Coding and Analyzing Data

Utilizing Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in the current study is foundational for exploring potential variations in the use of noun modifiers between two distinct groups. ANOVA, as advocated by Weiss (2016), functions as an indispensable statistical method specifically designed to elucidate variations in quantitative variables among disparate groups by facilitating a comparison of means across multiple groups. ANOVA allows for the identification of significant differences in mean values across the varied sets being examined, thereby serving as a robust inferential tool to ascertain and quantify potential disparities in noun modifier utilization within the study's distinct groupings. Furthermore, the application of ANOVA is rooted in several fundamental assumptions, including the normal distribution of data, equality of variances across groups, and independence of observations, collectively underscoring the meticulous statistical considerations crucial for its utilization in this research. Additionally, ANOVA is a parametric analysis that makes certain assumptions about the underlying population distribution. The ANOVA results, including the significance levels, F values, and mean scores, are displayed in Table 2. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (r^2) values for each modifier of noun phrases at both proficiency levels are provided. By adhering to these assumptions, ANOVA provides a systematic framework to rigorously evaluate and interpret the variations in noun modifier usage, thereby enhancing the empirical robustness and analytical depth of the study's findings.

Manual coding was employed in the study because of limited data. According to Biber and Gray's (2011) argument, the tagging of prepositional phrases and appositive noun phrases by automated taggers may not be precise. The analysis excluded target structures that exhibited significant syntactic

errors that impeded comprehension, while those with minor errors that did not hinder comprehension were incorporated. For example, the use of "on" instead of "in" in the collocation "obtaining a college degree via online classes has a role in getting a good job" was counted. The study documented the occurrence of noun premodifiers and postmodifiers.

Following the initial coding by the researcher, another coder meticulously coded each essay to ensure uniformity. The second coder is a tenured associate professor at the university who has been teaching EFL classes to undergraduates for the last 16 years. The researcher taught him how to code the data according to the supplied coding standards. By calculating the percentages of agreement and correlation, consistency and consensus in inter-coder reliability were identified. A correlation analysis revealed that both raters reached a consensus on 91.08 percent of the items. For every coded feature, the correlation coefficient exceeded 0.92. Significant importance is attributed to a score exceeding 0.90 for both processes (Salkind, 2011).

To ameliorate the comprehensibility of the study results, it is essential to incorporate the results of ANOVA analysis of research question 1, alongside the qualitative examples and analysis associated with research question 2. By integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses, the transparency and comprehensibility of the overall study would be further augmented. This inclusion would seamlessly merge the quantitative insights derived from the ANOVA analysis with the qualitative understanding imparted by examining participants' writing excerpts. The qualitative examples and analysis would serve as a means to elucidate, substantiate, and contextualize the statistical results obtained from the ANOVA analysis. Such a holistic approach would foster a more robust, comprehensive, and insightful exploration of the research questions, significantly enriching the interpretability and applicability of the study results.

Results

This section examines the proportions of distinct noun modifiers used by level-three and level-five students, allowing the researcher to identify which phrasal features were preferred by each group of students. The frequency of each phrasal feature was calculated per 1000 words and compared to the frequencies reported for academic writing in Biber and Gray (2011). Table 2 depicts the frequency of noun modifiers and the percentage of noun modifiers in each group. Each argumentative essay's rate of occurrence for each syntactic feature was calculated, together with the mean scores as well as the standard deviations for these linguistic features. These statistical comparisons are made to assess if the mean scores for level-three and level-five students' academic writing vary substantially.

Table 2*Noun phrase modifiers in Saudi level-three and level-five students' academic writing*

Noun phrase modifier	Level-three students	Level-five students	Standard deviation	ANOVA (F) value	Significance	Coefficient of determination (r ²)
Attributive adjectives	187.02	183.94	8.35	5.1	p < .01	.07
Participial pre-modifiers	60.21	94.57	10.45	11.8	p < .001	.14
Relative clauses	28.41	26.5	3.95	36.0	p < .0001	.31
Nouns as nominal pre-modifiers	157.96	193.3	15.25	115.6	p < .0001	.67
Possessive nouns as premodifiers	174.5	73.39	28.45	139.1	p < .0001	.78
of-phrases as noun modifiers	164.08	203.83	18.50	36.7	p < .0001	.32
<i>ed-</i> participles as noun modifiers	18.77	18.19	2.75	14.9	p < .001	.23
<i>ing-</i> participles as noun modifiers	22.28	29.23	4.45	12.8	p < .05	.19
<i>of-</i> ing	104.65	79.36	10.90	56.8	p < .0001	.42
j). Appositive noun phrases	8.34	13.64	8.15	23.9	p < .05	.28
k). Other prepositional phrases as noun modifiers	73.78	84.05	6.45	7.9	p < .001	.11

Following a meticulous calculation of the distinct noun modifiers' frequency in the academic essays of level-three and level-five students, ANOVA was utilized to compute and compare the mean scores and standard deviations for each syntactic feature to discern significant variations in academic writing between the two student groups. Table 2 presents the means of various noun modifiers in the academic writing of Saudi level-three and level-five students, along with their standard deviation. Additionally, the F value, significance level, and the r² value for each linguistic feature are provided. These statistics allow for a comprehensive data analysis and facilitate the interpretation of the results.

Discussion of the Results

The goal of academic writing is to effectively convey information by providing detailed explanations and well-supported arguments. Academic writing often incorporates a variety of linguistic elements such as nouns, adjectives, and nominalizations to enhance the clarity and sophistication of the discourse. This study specifically focuses on the discourse style within academic writing, highlighting the significance of phrasal modifiers. The extensive use of phrasal modifiers is observed in the

academic writing of both level-three and level-five students, indicating a deliberate emphasis on these linguistic features. Subsequent sections delve into a comprehensive discussion of the results, analyzing them within the context of the two research questions posed in this study.

Research Question 1. Which noun phrase modifiers are used the most and least often in academic essays written by Saudi EFL students?

The first linguistic feature under consideration is that of attributive adjectives. As indicated in Table 2, level-three students manifest a mean usage of 187.02, slightly surpassing the mean of 183.94 exhibited by level-five students, with a standard deviation of 8.35. This difference is statistically significant, as supported by an F value of 5.1 ($p < .01$), signaling that level-three students employ attributive adjectives more frequently than their level-five counterparts. Furthermore, the r^2 value of .07 indicates that this particular linguistic feature accounts for 7% of the observed variance, a notable explanatory proportion.

Proceeding to participial pre-modifiers, the mean usage by level-three students is 60.21, while level-five students exhibit a notably higher mean of 94.57, with a standard deviation of 10.45. This difference is statistically significant, with an F value of 11.8 ($p < .001$). The r^2 value of .14 suggests that the English language proficiency level of the students contributes to 14% of the variance in the usage of participial pre-modifiers, highlighting the greater frequency with which level-five students employ this feature.

In terms of relative clauses, level-three students present a mean usage of 28.41, slightly exceeding the mean of 26.5 exhibited by level-five students, with a standard deviation of 3.95. This difference is statistically significant, evidenced by an F value of 36.0 ($p < .0001$), indicating that the usage of relative clauses varies substantively between the two proficiency levels. Furthermore, the r^2 value of .31 suggests that this feature serves as a robust predictor of the students' proficiency level.

Analyzing nouns as nominal pre-modifiers, level-three students exhibit a mean usage of 157.96, while level-five students demonstrate a significantly higher mean of 193.3, with a standard deviation of 15.25. This difference is highly significant, supported by an F value of 115.6 ($p < .0001$). Additionally, the r^2 value of .67 indicates that the variation in English language proficiency explains a substantial proportion of the difference observed in the utilization of nouns as nominal pre-modifiers.

A substantial difference is observed in the usage of possessive nouns as pre-modifiers between the two student levels. Level-three students have a mean of 174.5, in stark contrast to level-five students' noticeably lower mean of 73.39, with a standard deviation of 28.45. This is highly significant, substantiated by an F value of 139.1 ($p < .0001$). Additionally, the r^2 value of .78 highlights that the

variation in English language proficiency explains a substantial proportion of the observed variation in the usage of possessive nouns as pre-modifiers.

Shifting the focus to the usage of "of" phrases as noun modifiers, level-three students display a mean usage of 164.08, lower than the mean of 203.83 exhibited by level-five students, with a standard deviation of 18.50. This difference is highly significant, as indicated by an F value of 36.7 ($p < .0001$). Furthermore, the r^2 value of .32 suggests that the variation in English language proficiency accounts for a significant portion of the variation observed in the usage of "of" phrases as noun modifiers.

When examining "ed"-participles as noun modifiers, both student levels exhibit relatively similar mean values. Level-three students have a mean of 18.77, while level-five students have a slightly lower mean of 18.19, with a standard deviation of 2.75. This subtle difference remains statistically significant, as indicated by the F value of 14.9 ($p < .001$). The r^2 value is .23, suggesting that the variation in English language proficiency accounts for a moderate proportion of the variation in the usage of "ed"-participles.

The mean usage frequency of ing-participles as noun modifiers was 22.28 for level-three students and 29.23 for level-five students, with a standard deviation of 4.45. The F value revealed a significant F value of 12.8 ($p < .05$) and an r^2 of .19. This suggests that ing-participles as noun modifiers are more commonly utilized by level-five students compared to level-three students.

Furthermore, the mean usage frequency of of-ing modifiers was 104.65 for level-three students and 79.36 for level-five students, with a standard deviation of 10.90. The analysis demonstrated a highly significant F value of 56.8 ($p < .0001$) and an r^2 of .42. These findings indicate that of-ing modifiers are significantly more prevalent among level-three students.

Additionally, the mean usage frequency of appositive noun phrases was 8.34 for level-three students and 13.64 for level-five students, with a standard deviation of 8.15. The F value yielded a significant F value of 23.9 ($p < .05$) and an r^2 of .28. This suggests that appositive noun phrases are utilized significantly more frequently by level-five students.

Lastly, the mean usage frequency of other prepositional phrases as noun modifiers was 73.78 for level-three students and 84.05 for level-five students, with a standard deviation of 6.45. The analysis revealed a highly significant F value of 7.9 ($p < .001$) and an r^2 of .11. These findings indicate that other prepositional phrases as noun modifiers are more commonly employed by level-five students.

As such, the data pertaining to the first question indicate that the predominant phrase modifier in the database of level-three students was attributive adjectives, while possessive nouns as premodifiers followed closely behind. Meanwhile, the dataset related to level-five students exhibited the greatest dependence on of-phrases as noun modifiers and nouns serving as nominal pre-modifiers. These

results align with Biber and Clark's (2002) assertion that academic writing is characterized by the use of attributive adjectives, pre-modifying nouns, and post-modifying prepositional phrases. The results also corroborate earlier research, such as that conducted by Jitpraneechai (2019) and Pu et al. (2022), which identified attributive adjectives and nouns as the most common types of noun premodifiers, and prepositional phrases as the most frequent type of noun postmodifiers. According to Ansarifar et al. (2018), it has been observed that phrasal features, including noun phrases with attributive adjectives and pre-modifying nouns, are considered to be important features of academic writing.

Regarding the features that were utilized with the lowest frequency, the study's results indicate that the utilization of ed-participles as noun modifiers and appositive noun phrases is relatively low. These results corroborate Biber et al.'s (1999) assertion that full relative clauses are a more favored feature compared to participles. Furthermore, as per the developmental stages hypothesized by Biber et al. (2011), relative clauses are categorized under stage 3, indicating their acquisition at an earlier stage compared to participles. Hence, it is plausible that students at both the third and fifth levels of proficiency may exhibit a greater propensity towards utilizing relative clauses as opposed to -ed or -ing participles, as per the findings of this research. Noun complement clauses, specifically those utilizing "of + ing" and "that + noun complement clauses," are commonly utilized in academic writing. However, it is important to note that these modifiers are not inherently prevalent in isolation, as per the study conducted by Biber and Gray (2016). Hence, it is unsurprising that they were marginally utilized by each group of the participants. Furthermore, despite the emphasis placed by Biber and Gray (2011) on the increasing significance of appositive noun phrases in academic writing, this analysis revealed that these phrasal features were among the least utilized features. This result lends credence to Biber et al.'s (2011) classification of appositive noun phrases as belonging to stage 5, which is considered the most advanced stage. The present study's results are also consistent with Parkinson and Musgrave's (2014), as these structures were identified as the least favored in students' writing.

Research Question 2. Are there significant differences in noun modifiers in academic essays written by Saudi EFL students at different levels of proficiency?

Significant variations in the academic writing of participants at various proficiency levels are revealed by the findings. This would enable a more comprehensive analysis of the differences in overall performance and average scores between students at levels three and five, by providing a better understanding of the distribution and variation within each syntactic feature. An array of concrete examples exemplifying the most frequently deployed noun phrase modifiers by both level-three and level-five students is presented in the subsequent section. It should be noted that the selected noun

phrase modifiers are indicated through the use of italics in the provided excerpts from the participants' writing (included in Appendix 1 of this study). Moreover, in instances where multiple linguistic features exist within the same structure, the first linguistic feature is italicized, while the second linguistic feature is both italicized and underlined for ease of identification and interpretation.

Table 3

Examples of noun phrase modifiers in level-three and level-five students' academic writing excerpts

Linguistic feature	Level-three students	Level-five students
Attributive adjectives	<i>online</i> discussions	<i>great</i> number
Participial pre-modifiers	widely- <i>researched</i> topic	<i>covered</i> courses
Relative clauses	<i>that will broaden your horizons</i>	<i>that can be earned completely online</i>
Nouns as nominal pre-modifiers	<i>education</i> platform	<i>education</i> platform
Possessive nouns as premodifiers	<i>students'</i> online discussions	<i>today's</i> world
of-phrases as noun modifiers	a world of <i>possibilities</i>	field of <i>education</i>
<i>ed-</i> participles as noun post-modifiers	getting a degree, <i>limited</i> by geographical barriers, ...	knowledge and skills <i>needed</i> in the job market
<i>ing-</i> participles as noun post-modifiers	learners <i>having different backgrounds</i>	learners <i>having versatile skills</i>
<i>of-</i> ing	idea of <i>getting</i> a degree	a sense of <i>belonging</i>
d. Appositive noun phrases	Online education, <i>a game-changer</i> , ...	Online learning, <i>a transformative experience</i> , ...
e. Other prepositional phrases as noun modifiers	learners <i>from all fields of life</i>	individuals to study at their own pace <i>around other commitments</i>

As evidenced by the data presented in Table 3, there exists a diverse range of occurrences of phrasal features within the academic writing of level-three and level-five students. In accordance with the results of the study, the two excerpts from the two groups' writing samples (see Appendix 1) revealed that the most frequently occurring noun phrase modifiers among level-three students were attributive adjectives (13 instances) and possessive nouns as premodifiers (5 instances), while the most frequently occurring noun phrase modifiers among level-five students were of- phrases as noun modifiers (10 instances) and nouns as nominal pre-modifiers (7 instances). One notable observation is that excerpts from level-five students demonstrate a broader range of vocabulary. Their writing is additionally characterized by intricate concepts and expanded linguistic elements.

When comparing students with varying degrees of proficiency, it has been shown that level-three students are considered intermediate in their use of phrasal modifiers as compared to level-five

students. This finding reflects the fact that level-three students are not as advanced as level-five students. This study concurs with previous research (e.g., Atak & Saricaoglu, 2021; Shao et al., 2022) highlighting nominalizations as especially frequent in academic writing, and that there are moderate statistical relationships among students with varying degrees of proficiency. This result aligns with the assertion made by Biber and Gray (2010) that complex noun phrases may serve as adequate indicators of syntactic complexity in contrast to embedded clauses. This fact resonates with the findings of Biber et al. (2013), who emphasized the significance of taking into account the unique syntactic features of L2 academic writing. It also echoes Biber et al. (2013), who highlighted the criticality of considering the distinctive syntactic features of academic register, i.e., phrasal modifiers when conducting syntactic complexity analysis in L2 writing research.

There are several limitations to be noted in this study. One primary limitation is the small sample size of 34 argumentative essays for level-three students and 31 argumentative essays for level-five students. This limited sample size may affect the generalizability of the findings and the ability to draw definitive conclusions. For instance, it may be challenging to make sweeping generalizations about the entire population of Saudi college students based on such a small sample. Thus, the generalizability of the findings should be treated with caution. Another limitation concerns the use of manual coding for data analysis, which is susceptible to subjectivity and human error. Although efforts were made to ensure consistency between the researcher and the second coder, variations in interpretation and coding may still remain. A related issue is the fact that the students' English proficiency was not assessed but rather assumed given their different levels of study (level-three students and level-five students). This assumption introduces a potential bias as language proficiency can vary within each level of study, and not all students at the same level necessarily possess the same level of language competence.

Furthermore, the study mainly focuses on the use of noun phrase modifiers in argumentative writing by Saudi college students, which confines the external validity of the findings. The extent to which the results can be generalized to other student populations, other types of writing, or even other levels of proficiency within Saudi college students remains uncertain. Consequently, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to a broader context, as the specific demographics of the sample limit the generalizability. Lastly, the reliance on a single developmental index for the analysis of noun phrase modifiers may oversimplify the complex nature of writing proficiency. It is possible that other factors and linguistic features not considered in this study could influence the complexity and usage of noun phrase modifiers.

In conclusion, this study's limitations include a small sample size, the potential subjectivity of manual coding, limited generalizability, limited scope of genre, and the reliance on a single developmental index. These limitations highlight the need for future research with larger and more diverse samples, integrated automated analyses, and consideration of additional linguistic features to provide a more comprehensive understanding of noun phrase modifiers in academic writing.

Conclusions and Implications

This study offers significant insights into the utilization of noun phrase modifiers in the academic writing of Saudi EFL students, addressing two key research. Firstly, concerning the frequency of different noun phrase modifiers, the results indicate that level-three students predominantly employ attributive adjectives and possessive nouns as premodifiers. This finding aligns with the notion that attributive adjectives are typically acquired at an early stage of language development. On the other hand, level-five students, representing a more proficient group, primarily utilize of-phrases as noun modifiers and nouns as nominal premodifiers. This demonstrates a closer resemblance to the frequency patterns observed in published academic prose.

From these findings, it can be concluded that the usage of noun phrase modifiers in academic writing exhibits a developmental pattern, with students at different proficiency levels employing different types of modifiers. These results lend support to the proposed developmental index, which highlights the progression of noun phrase complexity as students advance in proficiency. Consequently, these findings have implications for the teaching of L2 writing.

The significance of integrating focused instruction and practice exercises pertaining to particular categories of phrasal modifiers that are frequently utilized in academic writing is emphasized in this study. L2 learners can be assisted in mastering the effective utilization of these complex noun phrase structures by instructors who place emphasis on pre-nominal and post-nominal phrases. Explicit instruction, modeling, and guided practice activities can be employed to highlight the appropriate use of these phrasal modifiers in diverse contexts.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the significance of considering learners' proficiency levels when designing L2 writing instruction. The observed differences in noun phrase complexity between level-three and level-five students underscore the need for tailored instructional practices. Instructors should address the specific needs and challenges faced by students at different proficiency levels, providing targeted support and scaffolding to enhance their proficiency in noun phrase complexity in academic writing.

Moreover, this study contributes to the understanding of academic written features, particularly emphasizing the unique syntactic style characterized by the abundant usage of nouns and phrasal

modifiers. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the importance of nominalizations as a key feature in academic writing. Building upon the work of scholars such as Halliday (2004) and Banks (2008), this study underscores the preference for noun phrase modifiers over clausal embedding in academic writing. This knowledge can enhance writing instruction and evaluation, shedding light on L2 writing growth and assisting instructors in designing effective writing curricula. Examples of phrasal elaboration include the utilization of attributive adjectives as premodifiers and prepositional phrases as postmodifiers. According to Biber and Gray (2011), Biber et al. (2011), Lu (2011), and Norris and Ortega (2009), it has been suggested that in academic writing, noun phrase modifiers are preferred over clausal embedding. The complexity of noun phrases can illuminate L2 writing growth, further enriching writing instruction and evaluation (Taguchi et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the usage of noun phrase modifiers in the academic writing of Saudi EFL students. The implications for L2 writing instruction are significant, encompassing targeted instruction on specific types of phrasal modifiers, considering learners' proficiency levels, and enhancing the understanding of academic written features. By incorporating these implications into teaching practices, instructors can support students in developing their skills in noun phrase complexity and improve their overall academic writing proficiency.

المستخلص

تعقيد العبارة الاسمية في الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلاب المرحلة الجامعية السعوديين

محمد بن عبدالله الراشد

تبحث هذه الدراسة في السمات المختلفة للعبارات الاسمية المستخدمة في الكتابة الجدلية من قبل طلاب المرحلة الجامعية السعوديين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، بالإضافة إلى الاختلافات في تعقيد هذه العبارات الاسمية بين الطلاب من مستويات مختلفة للكفاءة اللغوية. وتسعى الدراسة إلى تحديد سمات العبارات الاسمية الأكثر والأقل شيوعاً المستخدمة في الكتابة الأكاديمية، بالإضافة إلى الاختلافات في سمات العبارات الاسمية. واستخدم الباحث the hypothesized developmental progression index الذي اقترحه بيبر وآخرون (2011) لتحليل 37 مقالة جدلية، وتم استخدام الترميز اليدوي للبيانات لتوثيق وتحليل وجود المعرفات المستخدمة قبل وبعد الأسماء. وأظهرت النتائج أن طلاب المستوى الثالث اعتمدوا في المقام الأول على الصفات المنسوبة وأسماء الملكية كمعرفات مستخدمة قبل الأسماء، في حين أن سمات العبارات الاسمية الأكثر استخداماً لدى طلاب المستوى الخامس كانت عبارات of- والأسماء كمعرفات مستخدمة قبل الأسماء. وتدعم نتائج الدراسة مؤشر بايبر المقترح من خلال توضيح أن طلاب المستوى الثالث، الأقل كفاءة، يعتمدون بشكل كبير على الصفات المنسوبة. وتتوافق هذه النتيجة مع فكرة أن الصفات المنسوبة يتم اكتسابها في مرحلة مبكرة. علاوة على ذلك، أظهر استخدام سمات الأسماء من قبل طلاب المستوى الخامس، الذين ينتمون إلى المجموعة الأكثر كفاءة، تشابهاً أعلى بكثير مع التكرارات التي لوحظت في الكتابة الأكاديمية مقارنة باستخدام المجموعة الأقل كفاءة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العبارات الاسمية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، المقالات الجدلية.

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Appendix A

The Participants' Samples

An Excerpt from Level-three Students' Writing

Enroll in a *reputable online* university (attributive adjectives) and open a world *reflected in an advanced education* (ed- participle as noun post-modifier). Whether you're delving into a *widely-researched* topic (participial pre-modifier) or residing in a remote area, an *education* platform (noun as nominal pre-modifier) can bridge the gap between knowledge and accessibility.

Through *students' online* discussions (possessive noun as premodifier/attributive adjective), you can engage with learners *having different backgrounds* (ing- participle as noun post-modifier/attributive adjective). The *benefits of learning online* (of- phrase as noun modifier/other prepositional phrases as noun modifier) are various. Furthermore, *online* learning (attributive adjective) offers a *technology-enhanced* program (participial pre-modifier) *that keeps up with the constantly developing field* (relative clause/participial pre-modifier).

The *idea of getting a degree (of- ing)*, once *limited* (ed- participle as noun post-modifier) by *geographical* barriers (attributive adjective), is now within *students' reach* (possessive noun as premodifier) worldwide. *Online* education (attributive adjective), *a game-changer* (appositive noun phrases), breaks down *learners' barriers* (possessive noun as premodifier) and provides *equal opportunities* (attributive adjective) for learners *from all fields of life* (other prepositional phrase as noun modifier). No matter where you are or what your circumstances are, *online* learning (attributive adjective) empowers you to shape your future and reach your *educational* goals (attributive adjective).

Embrace the *online learning* (attributive adjective), where you can find universities, *widely-researched* topics (participial pre-modifier), *students' discussions* (possessive noun as premodifier), and the benefits of *learning online converge* (of- phrase as noun modifier/attributive adjective). Seize the opportunity to be part of this *dynamic* community (attributive adjectives/noun as nominal pre-modifier), and start a *hero's journey* (possessive noun as premodifier) *that will broaden your horizons and open doors to new possibilities* (relative clause/ attributive adjective).

An Excerpt from Level-five Students' Writing

Online learning (attributive adjective) has quickly become a *reality* experience (noun as nominal pre-modifier) in the field of *education* (of- phrase as noun modifier). With the rise of *famous online* universities (attributive adjectives), students now have access to a variety of *covered courses* (participial pre-modifier). The *education* platform (noun as nominal pre-modifier), *a transformative experience*, (appositive noun phrase) opens a world of *possibilities* (of- phrase as noun modifier) and

offers degrees *that can be earned completely online* (relative clause), providing flexibility and convenience *for learners* (other prepositional phrase as noun modifier) *having a number of skills* (ing-participle as noun post-modifier/of-phrase as noun modifier).

The advantages *of pursuing an online* (of-phrase as noun modifier) degree are numerous. Firstly, the *career-focused* curriculum (participial pre-modifier) ensures that students acquire the knowledge and skills *needed in the job market* (ed-participle as noun post-modifier/noun as nominal pre-modifier). Additionally, the *engaging* classrooms (participial pre-modifier) foster *learning* experiences (noun as nominal pre-modifier), creating a sense *of belonging* (of-ing) amongst students and instructors. Another advantage lies in education affordability (noun as nominal pre-modifier) and the flexibility *of online learning* (of-phrase as noun modifier), allowing individuals to study at their own pace *around other commitments* (other prepositional phrase as noun modifier). Moreover, a *university* degree online (noun as nominal pre-modifier) eliminates barriers between places, enabling students to access *high-quality* education (noun as nominal pre-modifier) from anywhere in the world.

In conclusion, *online* learning (attributive adjective) has developed the way *that education is delivered and experienced* (relative clause). *Famous* universities, *covered* courses (*participial pre-modifier*), the *education* platform (noun as nominal pre-modifier), and *internet* classrooms (noun as nominal pre-modifier) have all developed education in *today's* world (possessive noun as premodifier).