

Lexical and syntactic features of the male and female students argumentative essays

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify the lexical and syntactic features of the male and female freshman college students using textual analysis method. The argumentative essays written by the 50 purposively selected students were used as subjects for analysis. Students were asked to argue about the statement, "Boys are smarter than girls." Findings show that the males' argumentative essays are more complex than those of the girls because males used more words, morphemes, coordinators, and subordinators in their text which, consequently, increased the number of T-units. Also, the study shows that females use lesser words to explain their ideas about the topic.

Keywords: *Lexical Features, Linguistic, Syntactic, Textual.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is not a simple task being done in the classroom. Students must have the knowledge and skill that are actually required in succeeding a writing activity. Murcia and Olshtain (2000) claimed that writing skill requires a high level of language control, problem-solving form, generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring, and assessing what has been produced. Thus, writing skill is still rated to be a hard task for most first and foreign language learners (Ingels, 2006).

Alongside with writing, the term linguistic property is considered. Vaezi (2012) emphasized that the linguistic properties of a piece of writing include syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, and grammatical complexity. He also added that syntactic complexity of the texts can be analyzed through calculation of average sentence length and ratio of subordination. Meanwhile, the lexical complexity of

the written performance of students can be assessed by determining the lexical diversity and lexical density of the texts.

Barrot (2012) cited that one of the constituents of linguistic complexity is lexical complexity which refers to the complex composition of a lexicon or word denoting the total number of morphemes, the total number of different words, and the number of words that are unfamiliar to the readers. According to Distefano and Valencia (1980) as cited by Barrot (2012), "Syntactic complexity relates to the number and type of transformations used in the sentence." They also added that some researchers have maintained that a sentence becomes more complex as more transformations are added or as different types of sentences are adjoined.

In the study of a write-up's linguistic complexity, gender is also highly considered. This is because gender contributes to the language performance of an individual. This is affirmed by Chastain (1988) who posed that one of the factors that can affect learners' performance is their gender. According to him, a carry-over from the past is the belief that females are better second language students than males.

It is worthy to mention that gender, as a biological variable, is the cause of many differences in the learners' reception and production of language. As a matter of fact, numerous gender-based studies with regard to linguistic complexity were already conducted. A number of these focused on the language performance in writing. Jones and Myhill (2007) in Vaezi (2012) sought the effect of gender on linguistic competence in writing. They compared gender differences in linguistic characteristics of writing at word and sentential level. There were some significant differences according to gender at both text and sentence level.

Mulac and Lundell (1994) in Argamon (2006) stressed that there is a significant difference between male and female syntactic features in informal writing such as essays. Also, Halliday (1994) in Argamon et. al (2006) suggested that different foci characterize the way male and female writers signal to the reader what "things" are being talked about.

Knowing these issues, this study analyzed the argumentative essays of the freshmen college students by identifying the lexical and syntactic features. The aim of this study is to determine the linguistic complexity of the essays by determining the lexical and syntactic features. Moreover, the present study also descriptively compared the linguistic complexity of the argumentative essays of

both male and female college students and identified as to whom between the males and females has the most linguistically complex argumentative essay.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study is Descriptive Qualitative since this study only aimed to present descriptively the lexical and syntactic features of the respondents' argumentative essays. Also, this study employed discourse analytic method. According to Talja (1999) as mentioned in Barrot (2012), "Discourse Analytic Method has the purpose of describing, analyzing, and interpreting data." With the written discourse argumentative essays as the primary instrument used in this study, the discourse analytic method is the most appropriate method to be used to come up with a meaningful interpretation of the data.

Research Participants

Participants of this study were the fifty (50) freshmen students who were enrolled in the English 101 Grammar class of the first semester (2015-2016) in the University of Mindanao, Davao City. There were twenty-five (25) males and twenty-five (25) females. The participants were chosen purposively because it is believed that these individuals were already exposed to English grammar and writing mechanics topics that are of great help in constructing a comprehensive argumentative essay.

Instruments

The participants were prompted to write an argumentative essay with regard to the topic "Boys are smarter than girls." The participants were not given any limit in time and number of words so that there will be a natural flow of the language on the course of writing. Fifty (50) argumentative essays were critically analyzed to determine their lexical and syntactic features.

Procedures

The following steps were undertaken in the conduct of the study. To be more systematic, the procedure was divided into two phases.

Phase 1: Asking Permission. The researcher wrote a letter addressed to the College of Criminal Justice Education dean or program head asking permission to conduct the study. And student briefing or study orientation on the purpose and aims of the study to make sure that the participants would give their utmost cooperation in the conduct of the study.

Phase 2 includes three stages: Essay Writing Session. Students wrote an argumentative essay affirming or negating the statement “Boys are smarter than girls.” There was no limit on the time and number of words/sentences so that there would be no pressure to the side of the students. Identification of the Lexical and Syntactic Features of the Essays. The following were identified. First are the lexical features which include the mean total number of words (TNW), mean total number of morphemes (TNM), and the derivational and inflectional morphemes used in the essays. Second are the syntactic features which include the average T-units (ATU) used respectively by the males and females, the mean length of T-units in words (MLT-W), the mean length of T-units in morphemes (MLT-M), and the mean of the total coordinating conjunctions (COORD) and subordinating conjunctions (SUBORD). Also, the subordinating conjunctions used by the male and female respondents were identified. Data for males and females were separated for comparative purposes. And tabulation, Analysis, and Interpretation of the Data. Identified lexical and syntactic features of the argumentative essays were carefully analyzed and were connected to related readings that led to the formulation of the meaningful interpretations of the results.

Analysis

In the conduct of the present study, the average mean which is computed using this formula : $\sum_{i=1}^n \mathbf{x}_i / \mathbf{n}$ and the overall mean were used in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Lexical features of the male and female students’ essays

In the present study, lexical features include the average of total number of morphemes (TNM), average total number of words (TNW), and the derivational and inflectional morphemes used by the participants.

Table 1. Mean of male and female lexical features

Participants	Ave. Total Number of Morphemes (TNM)	Ave. Total Number of Words (TNW)
Males	135.32	114.32
Females	109.96	88.36

Table 1 show that males have a higher mean in terms of the total number of morphemes and words used in the argumentative essays. Results reveal that females used less number of words which affect the number of morphemes in their essays. However, there is no big difference between the gap of the TNM and TNW of the males and of the females.

Considering the average total number of morphemes used by the males, it is inferred that males used complex words composed of more than two morphemes which are either inflectional or bound. Meanwhile, females used lesser inflectional morphemes in their essays. One major reason for this is the difference between males and females. With the type of paragraph development used in the present study; i.e. argumentative, males tend to insist their opinion more assertively than the females. With this intention, males used more words which affected the morpheme count.

It is believed that the characteristic of a person, such as gender, is a factor in the linguistic complexity of a write-up. Based on the findings of many researchers such as Brown (2000) and Chastain (1988) as cited by Vaezi (2012), a powerful relationship between characteristics of writers and characteristics of their productions is expected. Therefore, if a writer is characterized as a strong person, he/she is quite assertive. In the contrary, if a person is weak and submissive, his/her writing language is simple and less assertive.

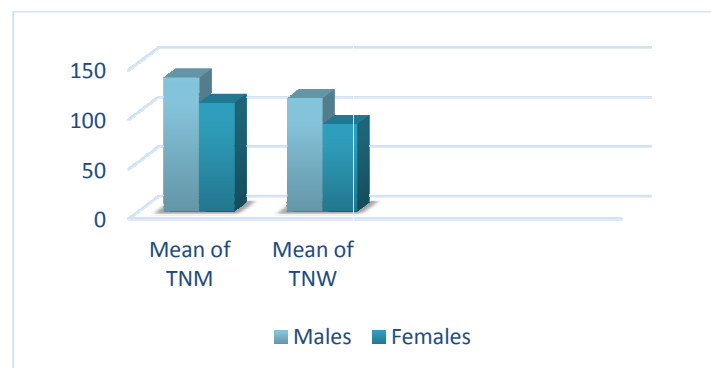


Fig 1. Comparison of the male and female students' lexical features

Meanwhile, Figure 1 shows the comparison between the male and female students' lexical features present in the argumentative essays. Findings reveal that males have a higher mean in terms of the total number of morphemes and words used in the essays. This denotes that males used more complex words than females did. The average number of morphemes implies the word complexity which means that a word is complex in terms of its formation since it has two or more morphemes.

Also, inflectional morphemes used by the males and females vary. According to Gunning (2003) as mentioned by Barrot (2012), "Inflectional morphemes are morphemes that denote familiar words in any linguistic output." Table 2 presents the various inflectional morphemes used by the males and females. It is shown that the commonly used inflectional morphemes are the-s morphemes which were used by the participants for different purposes. First, they were used to pluralize or change the number of a noun. Second, they were used to show a noun's possessive case. And lastly, they make sure that a singular subject agrees with a singular verb. Other inflectional morphemes include -d or -ed which were used for the past tense form of a regular verb, -ing for the progressive state of an action, and the comparative and superlative suffixes of adjectives such as -er and -est. Furthermore, based on the essays, -ing morpheme was commonly used because participants stated the verbs in a progressive state.

Table 2. List of words and their inflectional morphemes in students' essays

Inflectional Morphemes	Males	Females
(-s) plural form	boys, things, artists, scientists, boyfriends	girls, skills, degrees, students, problems
('s) possessive form	student's	girl's, family's
(-s) subject-verb agreement	A boy dominates a specific place.	A girl takes problems seriously.
(-d/-ed) simple verb past tense	based, faced, dominated, achieved, avoided	believed, observed, tried, allowed
(-ing) progressive verb form	thinking, keeping, playing, shouting, planning, working	cutting, making, analyzing, getting, playing, studying
(-er) comparative degree adjective	smarter, lesser, faster, bigger, greater	smarter, wiser, stronger, wider, faster
(-est) superlative degree adjective	fastest, greatest, strongest	highest

Another component of lexical density are the derivational morphemes. These are morphemes that are added to a specific word which change the word's meaning or part of speech. In other words, derivational morphemes denote change of word taxonomy. Yule (1997) highlighted that derivational morphemes generally change the grammatical category of words while inflectional morphemes do not.

Table 3. List of words and their derivational morphemes in students' essays

Derivational Morphemes	Males	Females
-ion	decision, generation, situations, emotion, dedication, invention , equation	generation, profession, attention, situation, discrimination, decision.
-al	national, critical, emotional, physical, logical	professional, political
-ly	creatively, probably, totally, technically, monthly, usually, really, extremely, logically, clearly	certainly, whole-heartedly, lastly, emotionally, usually, mostly, really,
-ation/-tion	observation, position, recitation, imagination	observation, obligation, solution, determination, administration,
-ily	Easily	easily
-ize	Organize	empathize
-ive	creative, addictive, sensitive, initiative, productive, aggressive	creative, active
-ible/-able	responsible, noticeable	responsible, irresponsible
-ior		behavior
-ious		mysterious, studious
il-		illegal
-er	topnotcher, learner, player	teacher
-ment	statement, management, government	
-ite	Opposite	

-ful	helpful, respectful	
-ity	activity, creativity	
-ent	president, dependent, different	
-ship	Leadership	
-or	contributor, inventor, creator	
-ic	Academic	
-ling	Earthling	
-ish	Childish	
dis-	disorganized	

Table 3 reveals a comprehensive list of the derivational morphemes used by the participants. Based on the findings, a total of twenty one (20) derivational morphemes were used by the male respondents. Meanwhile, females used only twelve (12) derivational morphemes. It is understood that males have more knowledge of the word structures. Males have the most number of derivational morphemes attached to a word to form an adjective or an adverb. On the other hand, females used minimal derivational morphemes for they only used suffixes.

Syntactic features of the male and female students' essays

Syntactic features refer to the syntactic elements present in the students' essays. These elements include the average T-units per composition, the average length of T-units in words (MLT-W), the average length of T-units in morphemes (MLT-M), and the average number of coordinating (COORD) and subordinating (SUBORD) conjunctions.

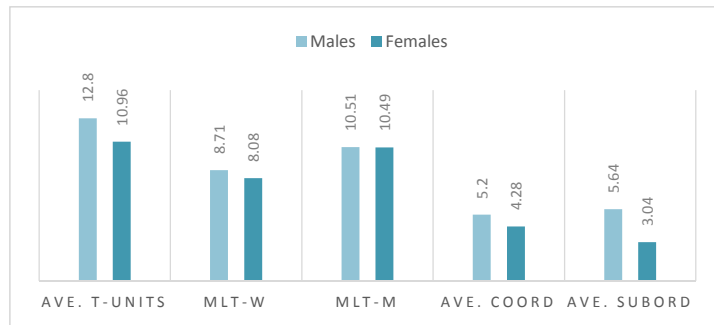


Figure 2. Means of male and female students' syntactic features

Difference in syntactic features between the males and the females is shown in Figure 2. The average T-units results show that males used more T-units in their essays than the females. According to Hunt (1970), "The Minimal Terminable Unit or T-unit is the shortest unit of a specific passage that contains one independent clause with its dependent clause/s and can be segmented without leaving any sentence fragments as residue."

Findings show that males used more T-units. This is due to the absence of punctuation marks between clauses which should have been separated. Male participants rarely used punctuation marks like period, comma, or semicolon in separating clauses. Instead, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions were used to connect sentences. Meanwhile, females have lower number of T-units because they used simple declarative sentences instead of complex sentences. Consequently, the length of the essay in terms of words and morphemes was affected. Since more T-units were used in the essays, more words and morphemes were also used.

Another observation is that males had the tendency to overuse coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in connecting ideas. However, there is an inappropriate use of these connectors. Two results were seen because of the overuse of connectors. First, males have more T-units because of the several connectors used in the essay. This affected the complexity of the entire paragraph structure. Second, due to the inappropriate use of the conjunctions, more run-on sentences were seen in the essays.

Male and female students also vary in terms of the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Findings reveal that males used more coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in their write-up. Primary reason for this is that males expressed their arguments more elaborately than females. Thus, males used more conjunctions to connect ideas. On the contrary, females used fewer conjunctions because they presented their arguments in short and simple declarative sentences.

Repetitive use of conjunctions is evident in the study. Coordinating conjunctions like and, but, and so were repeatedly used by the participants. In effect, T-units were presented in a single construction. The use of these three conjunctions explains that both males and females were able to continuously express their ideas. Through coordinating conjunctions, supporting ideas were added to bolster a statement.

It must also be noted that coordinating conjunctions that are used to connect two words or two phrases were not included in the computation of the mean coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in the essays. Below are examples of sentences (parsed into T-units) that were taken from the participants essays:

Male : Boys have more ideas than girls/and boys are good/but many boys are not really smart/ but many girls are also smarter than boys/but many boys have more strategy than girls/and there are many things to be done than girls./ (6 T-units)

Female: Boys and girls are both smart/And sometimes, there are things that boys can't make/ And the girls can't make too/But girls are active than boys/ And there are boys who are smarter/ And sometimes, boys get lazy/ And boys are wiser than girls./ (7 T-units)

As shown above, both males and females used several coordinating conjunctions to connect one T-unit to another. Males used more but's while females used more and's. However, both male and female students have the inability to know the proper use of these conjunctions. This is affirmed by Barrot (2012) who found out in his study that the repetitive use of the coordinating conjunctions in the sentence constructions implies the pupils' inability to determine meanings of connectors appropriate in conjoining connected clauses.

It can also be noted that the number of T-units is an effect of the frequent use of these coordinating conjunctions. Aside from and and but that were used in the essays, coordinating conjunctions so and or were also used. It could be said that the more coordinating conjunctions used in a text, the more the text becomes complex.

Also, Barrot (2012) emphasized in his study that the frequent use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions denote increase in the number of complex sentences which also lead to syntactic complexity. It is also worthy to mention that subordinating conjunctions are factors that lead to the increase in the number of the complex sentences. Shown in Table 4 are the subordinating conjunctions used by the male and female students.

Table 4. Subordinating conjunctions in male and female students' essays

Males	Females
because, while, that, when, if, even though, what, who, in order,	because, even if, therefore, so, if, then, that, if, when, while, what, even

Table 4 shows the subordinating conjunctions used by the participants. Commonly, participants used one-word subordinating conjunctions. This clearly mirrors the grammatical length of subordinators used by the participants. The most common subordinators used are because, if, while, what, even, that, and when. Since an argumentative essay asserts opinion or view, these conjunctions were used.

Based on the essays, it can be inferred that subordinating conjunctions function as cohesive devices. These conjunctions help achieve cohesion and unity in the paragraph. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) as cited by Barrot (2012) mentioned that subordinating conjunctions are types of cohesive devices, lexical expressions that add little or no propositional content by themselves but that serve to specify the relationships among sentences in oral and written discourse; thereby, leading the reader or listener to the feeling that the sentences make sense. Syntactically speaking, these subordinating conjunctions increase the number of dependent clauses which make the text more linguistically complex.

Based on the overall results, it is revealed that males have more linguistically complex essays than the females. Primarily, factors that contributed to this include the frequent use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Also, because of these conjunctions, the Minimal Terminable Units count increased, and text became complex.

In the present study, it can be concluded that males have more linguistically complex write-ups than the females. Thus, the sex of a person can also be a factor that determines the linguistic complexity of a text. Mulac and Lundell (1994) in Argamon et. al (2006) stressed that there is a significant difference between male and female syntactic features in informal writing such as essays. Therefore, males and females greatly differ in the way they write. Since the way of presenting the ideas through an essay differs, it follows also that male and female linguistic complexity differs because they have also different attacks in presenting their arguments. The present study's results are also verification of the research outcome of Jones and Myhill (2007) in Vaezi (2012) who sought

the effect of gender on linguistic competence in writing. They compared gender differences in linguistic characteristics of writing at word and sentential level. They found out that there were some significant differences according to gender at both text and sentence level.

Furthermore, Chastain (1988) posed that one of the factors that can affect learners' performance is their gender. However, the present study's result debunks his statement that females are better second language students than males because it is found out that male are better in writing since arguments were presented through syntactically and lexically complex texts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings obtained from this study, the following conclusions were drawn: Males' essays are linguistically complex than the females'; lexical features greatly affect the complexity of the texts; It can also be inferred that males are more specific of their ideas, so they tend to use more words in asserting their views; The length of the sentences also affects the complexity of the text; Males use more coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in their text. Also, males use subordinators more frequently to show assertiveness in their arguments; frequent occurrence of subordinators and coordinators affects the length of a text; and Males and females differ in terms of writing features.

It is therefore recommended that future researchers must study the grammatical features of essays that were not included herein; same study must also be conducted but investigating the lexical and syntactic features of other styles of paragraph like narrative, character sketch, and descriptive; and English Department of the locale is encouraged to conduct remedial classes or enhancement programs to address the writing difficulties of the freshmen students.

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