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Implementing Stylistics in IELTS Writing Preparation Focusing on Noun Phrases

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Abstract

In the IELTS writing preparation class, the teacher can facilitate the students by integrating the stylistic approach in building students' style in writing. Not only achieving the primary goals in English proficiency by focusing on the style of writing, but students can also comfortably share their ideas with their personal style. The paper aimed to examine the use of the stylistics integrated material in IELTS writing through noun phrase construction. Three research questions were formulated, namely: first, how did the teacher integrate stylistics in lesson materials for teaching noun phrases? Second, how did the students construct the noun phrases in their passages? Third, how were the noun phrase uses in students' test results? To collect data, the researchers used the writing materials and the writing results of twelve students. Results showed that stylistics was used in the form of phrase complexity and ambiguity as a part of writing strategies. It was supported by the three dominant types of noun phrases produced by the students in their writing, which are: determiner + head, determiner + pre-modifier + head, and pre-modifier + head, as the evidence of the implementation of integrated material in IELTS writing. For the noun phrase uses, the students could vary the noun phrases in their complexity, function, and type in their tests, though the variations in each of those aspects were still low.

Keyword: IELTS writing preparation; lesson material; noun phrase; stylistics

Introduction

¹¹ Learning English as a foreign language takes effort. Since the English language became the most widely spoken language around the world, English placed at the top rank learned by many people. To become competent in English, learners should be aware that they are required

to master four ² skills of language, which are listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Brown, 2000). However, from those four skills, writing is considered the most challenging task as it needs a variety of “linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies” (Barkaoui, 2007). In addition, it is in writing that ² Celce-Murcia (2001) claims that “the ability to express one’s ideas in writing in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement” (p. 205).

In response to the statements above, language proficiency tests become an effective tool in assessing people’s language ability. Because of that, the result of the ⁶ language proficiency test in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is determined as one’s process in having competency in English (Rezaei, 2017). As a matter of fact, the ² IELTS exam is a test as for the need of “applying for higher education or professional registration, general training for those migrating to Australia, Canada, and the UK, or applying for secondary education, training programmes and work experience in an English-speaking environment” (www.ielts.org).

To go into more depth, the students’ writing performance in IELTS is not always about the criteria that are related to academic writing skills. The difficulties that students face to perform the best in writing are also related to the lack of competence in guiding the process to produce the language by the teacher (Bagheri, 2017). Effective learning systems should be associated with proper transference rules in the style of writing. The academic writing style itself should be impersonal and conventional, and the foundation that is worth being taught is clarity and conciseness. The practice of curriculum in writing provides the guiding principles “analyzing the work of excellent stylists; introducing principles like sentence focus, sentence variety, and balance; designing exercises that prompt students to imitate the stylistic moves they admire; encouraging students to experiment with style in their own writing” (Bacon, 2013).

The complexity of the writing is referred to as syntactic complexity. Students often face difficulty in writing attempts, and sometimes the process of writing attempts can develop negative outcomes as the undesired result appears. As a matter of fact, students need to be directed in order to produce an excellent grammatical structure which covers syntactic structure such as subordination, coordination, noun phrases in which the students perform a variety of sentence patterns (Lau as cited in Ortega 2003; Wang 2012). To prevent the students from being confused in writing, the teacher needs to demonstrate the stylistic skill by encouraging students to master the sentence structure and the style they are comfortable with (Bacon, 2015).

The previous study has provided some elaboration on the complexity of constructing noun phrases and finding the functions of noun phrases in TESOL academics which help them to accelerate their writing performance to the target field journals they choose. Meanwhile, this study is focusing on how teachers use stylistic-integrated lessons for noun phrases in IELTS class and exploring the result of the students' constructing noun phrases in academic writing. In order to fill the gap, the researchers intended to explore the following research questions. First, how did the teacher integrate stylistics in lesson materials for teaching noun phrases? Second, how did the students construct the noun phrases in their passages? Third, how were the noun phrase uses in students' test results?

Literature Review

Stylistics is the study of style. Each individual with different cognition creates different styles in presenting ideas. Lehman (1996) argues that the term 'style' is applicable for people, genres, or languages. The term 'style' in stylistics is the common use of language by a writer for specific areas, like the function, genre, context, etc. (Leech and Short, 1981; Chapman, 1973). Thus, stylistics, as the study of style studies, is the use of language for idea expressions along with its significances for the work (Verdonk, 2002). It also bridges the literary and linguistic approaches (Widdowson, 1975) since it takes aesthetics and creativity into account (Simpson, 2004).

A noun phrase (NP) is one of the phrase types. A phrase is a group of words which represents an individual part of speech (House and Harman, 1950; Roberts, 1964). Phrases can be noun, adjective, adverb, prepositional, and verb phrases (House & Harman, 1950). Each type of phrase has a head, which is from the lexical category (nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositions), and modifier(s) from the non-lexical category (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Katamba, 1997). In NP, the head acts as a noun (Matthews, 1981; Wright and Hope, 1996), and it may have modifier(s) to describe the noun (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999; O'grady et al., 1997; Poole, 2002). The construction of an NP is presented in Figure 1. In sentences, an NP also has various functions. Those functions include subject, the party who does the action, subject complement, which follows linking verbs, object, which follows action verbs, object complement, which describes objects, objects of prepositions, which follows prepositions, appositive, the additional description for nouns, and adverbial adjunct, which tells time, place, or manner settings (Pratama & Isti'anah, 2017).

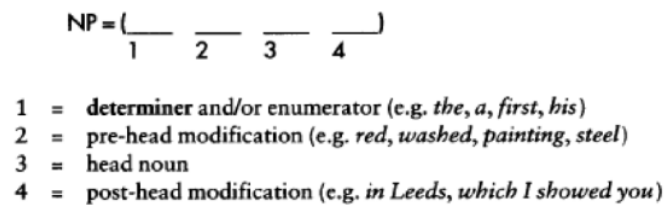


Figure 1. Construction of Noun Phrase (Wright & Hope, 1996)

Schools have started to integrate a stylistic approach in learning activities. Aside from linguistic construction, stylistics also explains various ways to convey an idea and its messages. That way, the use of stylistics can improve the creativity of language use in writing (Hall, 2014). Stylistics is commonly used for EFL students as an effective method in teaching text construction (Zyngier, 2001). In this study, the researchers wanted to see how the students styled the keywords of their short descriptive texts. There are several ways to identify a writer's style used in the work, either from the choice of vocabulary, figurative language, syntactic components, and sentence construction (Abrams, 1981). This study analyzed the syntactic component *phrase*, especially the NP.

This study also analyzed how the teachers integrated stylistics in teaching the use of NP to shape the information from diagram components. Studies have already implemented the use of stylistic analysis on various types of passage in different focuses (Agu, 2015; Ejupi, Iseni, Siljanovska, & Hossain, 2014; Maulida, 2020). Some studies used stylistics specifically on NP in cosmetic names (Radzi and Musa, 2017), novels (Pratama and Isti'anah, 2017), and newspapers (Biber, 2004). IELTS students, who are already familiar with the use of English, face another challenge with the way they style their thoughts in their writing. As stylistics is an effective method to help the students to improve their language use in more fluid contextual and situational uses, the researchers saw it fit to conduct a stylistic study on students' NP uses.

Methodology

This research was about the integration of stylistics in teaching IELTS writing class students. In this study, a stylistic analysis was used. The stylistic analysis explores the use of language variations according to the contextual and situational language uses (Onwukwe, 2012; Varghese, 2012, Coyle et al., 1993). The data were gathered from the lesson materials (purposive sampling) and students' writing tests (cluster sampling) (Lambert, 2012). The teaching materials included NP constructions and writing strategy directions. After the students

were given the materials, they had a writing test from which the NP uses were analyzed. In that test, the students made a short passage describing a diagram. The test criteria included: a) writing a minimum of 150 words, b) using the keywords in the diagram, c) avoid repeating the sentence starter more than three times, d) avoid creating ambiguities, e) not using dictionaries, f) not copying from other sources, and g) finishing the test in 20 minutes.

The reviewed theories about stylistic integration in a classroom and NP construction were used to construct instruments and analyze the data. The researchers used the theories from Zyngier (2001) for the lesson plan, while Wright and Hope (1996) and Pratama and Isti' anah (2017) for the NP use by the students in their passages. The instruments were structured observation sheets to annotate the occurrence of the observed data (Lambert, 2012). To analyze the data, the researchers used percentages and discussed the results descriptively.

Findings

A. Stylistic-integrated Learning Materials

Before teaching, the teachers made the materials for the students. The materials used stylistics: both linguistic and literary approaches. The materials provided the explanations in both English and Bahasa Indonesia, five examples for each subtopic for the students to observe and discuss, and exercises for them to practice.

In the linguistic approach, the materials included construction and the function of NP. Below are the material descriptions:

a. NP construction

The NP construction consisted of determiners and modifiers. The explanation about determiners included the definitive (*the* except for names and most languages/countries), non-definitive (*a/an*), demonstrative (*this/that*), quantifier (*some*), number (*three*), possessive pronoun (*my*), and pre-determiner (*such*) subtopics. The explanation about modifiers included the ¹⁰pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. The discussed pre-modifiers were nouns (*fire alarm*), possessive nouns (*Jean's house*), and adjectives (*hot cocoa*). The post-modifiers included prepositional phrase (*tree in my backyard*), clause (*cats that were eating*), gerund (*men standing over there*), and past participle verb (*dolls made by that kid*) subtopics.

b. NP function

The discussion about function included the subject (*those birds are cute*), subject complement (*Brandon is an athlete*), object (*that girl washes her hands*), object complement (I

consider him *my rival*), the object of a preposition (by *the lake*), adjunct adverbial (*last night* I watched a video), and appositive (Sussie, *the maid*, is making tea) functions.

For the literary approach, the teachers gave materials about variation and ambiguity. They were less elaborated than the linguistic approach but were used in every writing material (clauses, sentence types, etc.). Below are the material descriptions:

c. Variations

The discussion about variations emphasized one of the IELTS writing strategies given in this course. The students were guided to avoid using the same words (especially noun, adjective, adverb, and verb) more than three times. The subtopics were simplicity (*my book*), complexity (*the shirt hanging in the wardrobe over there*), lexical variation (the *picture/painting/drawing* there), and modifier emphasis (the *wet* newspaper/the newspaper *that is wet*).

d. Ambiguity

Avoiding ambiguity emphasized another IELTS writing strategy. The students were guided to create the NP, which would not cause ambiguity within a sentence. This topic included two subtopics: modifier ambiguity (the *light* box) and NP placement (call me *an escort*).

B. Students' Noun Phrase Constructions

By identifying the types of noun phrases that the students' constructed in IELTS writing, the researchers found six distinctive noun phrases from the twelve writings. The types of noun phrases that the students construct are based on the parts of the noun phrases, such as determiners, pre-modifiers, and post-modifiers. From the analysis, the types of noun phrases are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Noun Phrase Types on Students' Test Results

No.	Structure	Number	Percentage
1.	Determiner + Head	182	49.59%
2.	Determiner + Pre-modifier + Head	114	31.06%
3.	Pre-modifier + Head	32	8.71%
4.	Determiner + Head + Post-modifier	13	3.54%
5.	Determiner + Pre-modifier + Head + Post-modifier	22	6.00%
6.	Pre-modifier + Head + Post-modifier	4	1.10%
Total		367	100%

Table 1 shows some different structures of noun phrases in students' IELTS writing. The total number that the researchers collected from the analysis were 367 noun phrases in the students' writing. Each of the structures has a different level of percentage in the writings. The table also shows that there are three structures in the table that significantly dominate the writings, such as determiner + head, determiner + premodifier + head, and premodifier + head.

C. The Noun Phrase Use in Students' Test Results

The students used NP in several ways to construct their diagram description. The researchers combined the NP constructions, functions, and lengths to see the way students styled the keywords in the diagram. Those keywords were: diagram, cycle, fish, life stage, and location.

As for the functions, there are seven NP functions used in this research. They are the subject, subject complement, object, object complement, object of preposition, appositive, and adverbial adjunct. Table 2 shows each function in the students' tests. Overall, the object of preposition was the most used NP function (48.6%), followed by the subject (25.6%). The object was the third most used function (16.8%), followed by the subject complement (8.1%) and appositive (0.6%). Adverbial adjunct was the least used function (0.3%), while object complement was never used.

Table 2. Noun Phrase Functions on Students' Test Results

No.	Function	Diagram	Cycle	Fish	Stage	Location	Other
1.	S	12	10	56	9	3	1
2.	SC	-	1	11	11	6	-
3.	O	-	10	24	20	3	3
4.	OC	-	-	-	-	-	-
5.	OP	-	12	43	28	79	11
6.	A	-	-	-	-	2	-
7.	AA	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total		12	33	134	68	93	16

Note: subject (S), object (O), subject complement (SC), object complement (OC), object of preposition (OP), appositive (A), adverbial adjunct (AA)

In students' test results, their NP lengths varied into short, moderate, and long categories. Short ones were 2-3 words (DH, PH, or DPH with one-word pre-modifier),

moderate ones were 4-6 words (DPH or DPHP with a couple of pre-modifiers and a simple post-modifier), and long ones were more than 6 (DPHP with complex modifiers). The results regarding the length are presented in Table 3. The researchers found that students mostly used short NP (84.8%), followed by moderate length NP (12.4%) and complex (long) NP the least (2.8%).

Table 3. Noun Phrase Length on Students' Test Results

No.	Length	Diagram	Cycle	Fish	Stage	Location	Other
1.	Short	12	15	118	54	88	15
2.	Moderate	-	14	15	11	3	1
3.	Long	1	4	1	3	2	-
Total		13	33	134	68	93	16

The students were free to construct the NP in their texts. However, there were two main requirements, word variations, and minimum word count, that the students should consider. By varying the words, phrases, clauses, or even sentences, students might achieve both requirements while avoiding ambiguity in their passage construction.

Discussion

A. Stylistic-integrated Learning Materials

Results from the materials showed that the teachers already implemented stylistics in their classes. Though the main discussion was still about the linguistic aspect of NPs, the materials also explicitly consider stylistics in creating NP to aid students' own styles, make variations, and avoid ambiguity.

The linguistic aspect included NP construction and function. According to Wright and Hope (1996), there are four possible elements of a noun phrase: determiners, pre-modifiers, head, and post-modifier. The determiners have their specific rules: cannot proceed *names* (Krohn, 1971) and determiner *a/an* is for a singular countable noun (Radford, 1988). Regarding the functions, they concern with the NP placement in the sentence, thus determining the role the NP plays (Pratama & Isti'anah, 2017). The teacher had explained the usage and rules for both NP construction and function in the materials for students with to-the-point introductions, adequate examples, and lots of exercises.

The stylistics integration could be seen from the NP variation and ambiguity topics. In expressing the detail of the head, the combination of determiners and modifiers may distinguish

the NP forms from one student to another (Wright & Hope, 1996; Biber, 2004). The way students styled an NP could also be affected by the target readers they intended. The long, more complex NP is commonly used in academic literature with high literacy readers, while the short, simpler NP targets both high and low literacy readers (Biber, 2004). The students also needed to learn how to avoid ambiguity (Ruhl, 1989; Bach, 1994; Kripke, 1997), especially in selecting the modifiers and placing the noun phrase. Though the amount of explanation and depth could be more elaborated, the materials had entirely integrated the use of stylistics in language learning.

B. Students' Noun Phrase Constructions

The structure determiner + head shows the highest percentage, which is 49.59%, with the number of occurrences is 182. The percentage of determiner + premodifier + head is 31.06%, with the number of occurrences is 114. The third-highest percentage is pre-modifier + head. The percentage is 8.71%, with the number of occurrences being 32. Those are the three structures of noun phrases that occurred the most compared to other structures. The analysis of each distribution will be discussed in the following section.

a. Determiner + Head

This type of noun phrase is the most frequent type that happened in the students' writing. It has a percentage of 49.59%, with the number of occurrences being 182. This type of noun phrase has at least one determiner as to the head of the noun phrase.

[1] *The* + *estuary*

D art H

The word '*the*' here is indicated as the definite article. The definite article '*the*' in example [1] is a determiner to the noun phrase head '*estuary*'. Based on Downing and Locke, the use of the definite article is helped to identify the referent within the text and outside the text (2006: 419).

b. Determiner + Pre-modifier + Head

This type of noun phrase is the second highest that the researchers found based on the number of percentages and occurrences in the writings. It has 114 occurrences with a 31.06% percentage. The use of a determiner in this type of noun phrase functions as articles, possessives, quantifiers, and cardinal numbers (Pratama & Isti'anah, 2017).

[2] *The* + *immature* + *salmon*

D art Adj H

This noun phrase in example [2] shows that the word ‘the’ is a determiner of the noun phrase head ‘salmon’. The word ‘immature’ is a pre-modifier that functions to modify the head of the noun phrase.

c. Pre-modifier + Head

The third type that the researchers found in the writings is a pre-modifier followed by the head of the noun phrase. The number of occurrences with this type is 32, with an 8.71% percentage. The pre-modifier here is described as adjectives, nouns, present participle, and past participle (Pratama & Isti’annah, 2017).

[3] *Infant + salmon*

Adj H

This type of noun phrase contains only one pre-modifier and the head. The word ‘infant’ in example [3] is to modify the head of the noun phrase ‘salmon’. This type of noun phrase happens when the pre-modifier is adjective as the head of the noun phrase.

d. Determiner + Head + Post-modifier

Another type of noun phrase found by the researchers in students’ writing contains a determiner that follows the head and post-modifier. The number of occurrences with this type is 13, and the following percentage is 3.54%. The use of determiner in this type is represented by definite article, indefinite article, possessive pronoun, quantifier, cardinal number, and demonstrative. This kind of structure is first modified by the noun phrase head and followed by a post-modifier such as prepositional phrase, noun phrase, and adverb phrase (Pratama & Isti’annah, 2017).

[4] *The + development + of eggs*

Art D H PP

This type of noun phrase, in example [4], shows that the word ‘the’ as the definite article becomes the determiner which follows by the head of the noun phrase ‘development’. The word that comes after the head becomes the post-modifier which is used to modify the head of the prepositional phrase that started with the word ‘of’.

e. Determiner + Pre-modifier + Head + Post-modifier

This type of noun phrase’s structure is the most complex one. This type of noun phrase contains determiner, pre-modifier, head, and post-modifier to modify the noun phrase. From the data analysis, the researchers found that the number occurrence of this type is 22 with the 22% percentage.

[5] *The + many + stages + of development*

D art Adj H PP

This kind of noun phrase contains the ¹definite article '*the*' as the ⁸determiner of the noun phrase. The word '*many*' in example [5] is to modify the head of the noun phrase, which is '*stages*'. The following post-modifier is described with a prepositional phrase '*of development*' that indicates the use of prepositions followed by nouns.

f. ⁴Pre-modifier + Head + Post-modifier

This last type of noun phrase that is found in the writings is the least type of noun phrase that is used by the students. It has the smallest number of occurrences which is only 4, with a 1.10% percentage of the occurrence. The pre-modifier in this type is described by an adjective, noun, and present participle. While the post-modifier here is presented by the prepositional phrase, finite clause, and non-finite clause (Pratama & Isti'anah, 2017).

[6] *Final + rearing + process + in certain areas*

Adj Pres part H PP

This type of noun phrase has two pre-modifiers, as in example [6], such as an adjective '*final*' and present participle '*rearing*', which functioned as modifying the head of the noun phrase '*process*'. Then the post-modifier here is presented by the prepositional phrase '*in certain areas*'.

C. *The Noun Phrase Use in Students' Test Results*

The NP used in the texts that the students made described some keywords that existed in the diagram. Those NPs used various structures, from the simplest form (with only two words) to the more complex ones (up to 12 words). The NP constructions, lengths, and placements were used to analyze the additional information the students gave, the NP functions, and how the students styled each keyword from the salmon diagram to their short passages.

a. Diagram

[7] *The presented diagram ...*

This NP is usually used to start the essays because the students were about to describe a diagram. This NP was in a simple, short-form (2-3 words) like in example [7] with DPH, PH, and DHP patterns. It used lexical variations for the modifiers (pre-modifiers: *presented/given*, post-modifier: *given*) and the head (*diagram/picture*). All NPs functioned as subjects.

b. Cycle

[8] *... the life cycle of a species of seawater fish called salmon.*

The NP was used to tell what the diagram is about. The students expressed what they thought the diagram was, and they were free to construct its name/theme. This NP at first had a moderate complexity form (more than 5 words), even one NP with complex form (12 words at most in example [8]). The used patterns were DPHP, DPH, and DHP, and most of them had

post-modifiers. There were lexical variations on pre-modifier (*life/natural*), head (*cycle/process*), and post-modifier (a prepositional phrase *of a salmon*). The following NPs about the cycle were shorter with DH or DPH patterns. It acted as the object, subject, and object of a preposition.

c. The fish

[9] ... *the eggs of a salmon*.

The discussion about the fish was around the name of the fish (*salmon*) and its forms (*egg* or *adult*). This NP usually had a simple form (2-3 words) with DH and DPH patterns, but some were longer (4-5 words) with DHP, like in example [12], or DPH pattern. There were lexical variations on determiner (*the/this/these/its/their*), pre-modifier (*adult/infant/full-grown/mother/young/immature*), and head (*fish/fishes/salmon/eggs*). It acted as the object, subject, subject complement, or object of preposition.

d. Life stage/process

[10] *The incubation period...*

[11] *Their maturity point...*

[12] ... *the spawning area...*

The life stage/process included the salmon's life stages: spawning, incubation, emergence, rearing, migration, and growth/maturation. Most of them were described with short NP with DH and DPH patterns. The first style was those stage keywords acted as the head as in example [10]. Some stages (*incubation/maturity*) were used as the pre-modifier of a head (*session/process/point*) but still explained a life stage (example [11]). Others also became pre-modifiers, but the NP became a location (example [12]). In a sentence, these NPs acted as subject, object, subject complement, and object of a preposition.

e. Location

[13] ... *to the river estuaries...*

[14] ... *the area between ocean and river...*

The locations included the locations where a salmon could live: river/fresh water, ocean, and estuary. Most of them were described with short NPs with DH and DPH patterns (example [13]). Some life stages were changed into locations, as in example [12], and some NPs explain the estuary as in example [14]. The lexical changes were in the form of *river/fresh water* or *ocean/sea*. Mostly acted as objects of preposition and two as appositives.

f. Others

[15] ... *the mouth of the river that meets the ocean...*

[16] ... *the eye and the head...*

[17] *This time...*

The students made some additions that they concluded themselves after seeing the diagram. The complexity of the NPs varied, and they had unique functions or compositions. In example [15], it had a noun clause as the post-determiner. In example [16], it was a compound subject (two nouns with the level position in the sentence): both *the eye* and *the head* acted as the subject in that sentence. In example [17], it was the only adverbial adjunct found in students' works.

The students made varying NP in their works. The way someone styles an NP is according to what he/she wants the text to be and the target readers are (Biber, 2004). The more complex or longer NP is used more frequently in academic writing, while the simpler, shorter NP is more report/newspaper-like. However, the shorter NP targets broader readers with both high and low literacy skills, while the long one has narrowed target readers.

Conclusion and Implication

This paper studied the stylistics integration in an IELTS writing preparation class focusing on the noun phrase. This research used a stylistic analysis of the lesson materials and students' writing results. The stylistics integrated the materials that the teacher provided in helping the students to construct the noun phrase was found effective. From the students' writings, the researchers found six types of noun phrases, of which three of them are: ³ *determiner + head*, *determiner + pre-modifier + head*, and *pre-modifier + head* as the most dominating types in students' writing. Although the three dominating styles are considered the simplest ones, the teacher successfully guided the students to explore seven types of noun phrases in their writings. In implementing the noun phrase to meet students' own style, the students varied the complexity, construction, and function of their noun phrases for each keyword. However, the variations were still dominated with a simple form with certain functions and types. This study was still limited in the source of data since the researchers gathered the sample on the writings of the IELTS post-test only. Future researchers can adopt larger samples in different classes and more than one linguistic or literary component for this topic.

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