

## **A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF NOUN PHRASES IN EFL STUDENTS' ESSAYS**

*Maida Norahmi, Olga Dona Retzi, Susan Ira Nova, Lesly Martha C. Meka, Tutik Haryani, Sovia Rahmaniah, Cendikia Flory Aristia, Siti Munawarah, Windi Fitriyani*  
*Universitas Palangka Raya*

*maida.norahmi12@edu.upr.ac.id, Olga.Retzi@edu.upr.ac.id, susaniranova@edu.upr.ac.id, leslymcmeka@fkip.upr.ac.id, tutikharya@fkip.upr.ac.id, soviarahmaniah@fkip.upr.ac.id, cendikiafa@fkip.upr.ac.id, ssmunawarah@gmail.com, windifitriyani85@gmail.com*

Submitted: 2025-10-23

Accepted: 2026-04-21

---

**Abstract:** This study explores the structure and function of noun phrases (NPs) in English essays written by undergraduate EFL students at Universitas Palangka Raya. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, it analyzed 78 essays to identify and classify types and frequencies of noun phrase modifiers based on Biber et al.'s (2021) syntactic framework. The findings revealed that students predominantly used premodified noun phrases (85%), with determiners and adjectives as the most frequent modifiers, while postmodified noun phrases (15%) were less common and mostly realized through prepositional phrases. More complex postmodifiers, such as adjectives, participle clauses, infinitive clauses, adverbs, and appositives appeared infrequently, indicating limited syntactic variety. The dominance of simpler noun phrase structures suggests that students demonstrate intermediate syntactic competence, emphasizing clarity and economy in expression. These tendencies are attributed to pedagogical focus on basic grammar and first-language influence, particularly from Bahasa Indonesia. The study recommends enhancing grammar instruction by integrating activities that promote the use of complex noun phrase constructions in academic writing.

**Keywords:** Noun phrase; EFL students, academic writing; Modifier types; Premodifiers; Postmodifiers

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Effective language development in EFL contexts requires the integration of both receptive and productive skills, as learners must not only comprehend language input but also actively produce meaningful output. This process is further complicated by the internal competition between previously acquired languages, which often dictates the initial mental representations a learner forms. According to Alonso and Rothman (2017), understanding these developmental trajectories requires robust models of transfer that can predict how specific grammatical properties from a learner's first or second language influence the acquisition of a third. While reading plays a crucial role in fostering vocabulary growth and facilitating implicit grammar acquisition (Ahmadi, 2017; Kaya, 2015), writing demands a more deliberate and conscious application of linguistic knowledge. As a productive skill, writing requires learners to organize ideas, select appropriate vocabulary, and apply grammatical rules accurately in order to produce coherent and meaningful texts. It enables learners to express complex ideas logically and persuasively, while also serving as a reflection of their grammatical awareness, lexical development, and critical thinking abilities (Aini et al., 2023; Azimi, 2022). Consequently,

achieving proficiency in academic writing entails not only fluency in expression but also the ability to construct cohesive texts that demonstrate control over a range of grammatical structures.

Among these structures, the noun phrase (NP) represents a fundamental unit of clause construction, functioning as subject, object, or complement within sentences. The complexity of noun phrases plays a particularly significant role in shaping the quality of academic writing, as it enables writers to organize and present information efficiently (Alrashed 2024; Frempong et al., 2023). As noted by Biber et al. (2021), noun phrase complexity can be realized through premodification—including determiners, adjectives, and noun modifiers—and postmodification, such as prepositional phrases, relative clauses, participial clauses, and infinitive clauses. Through these mechanisms, writers are able to condense information and integrate multiple layers of meaning within a single grammatical unit.

This capacity for compression allows for the production of more compact and information-dense expressions, which are essential characteristics of effective academic discourse. Hyland (2004) emphasizes that advanced academic writing is marked by the ability to construct dense nominal structures that efficiently package information and support precise argumentation. In this sense, noun phrase complexity is not merely a grammatical feature, but a key resource for achieving clarity, conciseness, and rhetorical effectiveness in academic texts. Consequently, the ability to manipulate noun phrase structures effectively can be seen as an important indicator of both linguistic proficiency and the development of academic writing competence.

Despite this established importance, existing research reveals a notable conceptual and empirical imbalance. While previous studies have consistently demonstrated a strong relationship between noun phrase complexity and writing proficiency (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014), much of the literature tends to focus on developmental comparisons across proficiency levels or broad generalizations about learner performance. Although these studies provide valuable insights into overall trends, they often overlook how noun phrase structures are actually realized in authentic student writing, particularly in terms of accuracy, functional use, and rhetorical contribution. As a result, there remains a lack of fine-grained, context-sensitive evidence that explains not only whether learners use complex noun phrases, but also how effectively and appropriately these structures are deployed in real writing tasks.

This gap becomes especially significant within instructional contexts, where grammar teaching is expected to translate into observable writing performance. In many EFL settings, including those adopting an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) framework, curricular design explicitly emphasizes the integration of grammatical knowledge into communicative competence. Courses in grammar and writing are structured to equip learners with both theoretical understanding and practical skills necessary for producing well-formed academic texts. However,

despite these instructional efforts, there is still limited empirical evidence demonstrating the extent to which such knowledge is successfully transferred into students' actual written output. In other words, it remains unclear whether formal instruction on grammatical structures—particularly noun phrases—leads to meaningful and functional use in authentic writing contexts.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the use and functions of noun phrases in English essay texts written by students of the English Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Palangka Raya. Situated within an OBE-oriented curriculum where grammar and writing courses are designed to support integrated language development, this study provides a descriptive analysis of noun phrase usage, focusing on modifier types, frequency, accuracy, and their syntactic and rhetorical roles. By identifying patterns of use, underuse, and misuse, the study aims to offer empirically grounded insights into students' grammatical performance in writing. Ultimately, the findings are expected to contribute to the refinement of pedagogical practices, particularly in enhancing the alignment between grammar instruction and the development of academic writing proficiency.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive content analysis design to examine the structure and use of noun phrases in English essays written by undergraduate EFL students. The study was conducted at the English Education Study Program, Universitas Palangka Raya, focusing on students from class of 2024. This design was selected as it allows for a systematic and context-sensitive analysis of linguistic features as they naturally occur in authentic student writing. The participants consisted of 78 undergraduate students who had successfully completed Intermediate English Grammar and Writing courses. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that participants possessed the requisite foundational knowledge of grammatical structures and academic writing. This criterion-based selection was intended to provide a relevant dataset in which noun phrase usage could be meaningfully observed and analyzed, particularly in relation to instructional outcomes. The sample size was considered adequate for qualitative content analysis, as it allowed for the identification of recurring linguistic patterns while maintaining depth of analysis.

The data comprised students' essay texts, which were collected as part of their academic coursework. These documents were selected because they represent authentic instances of students' written production in an academic context. Prior to analysis, all essays were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Data analysis followed a systematic multi-stage procedure. First, all essays were carefully read to identify noun phrases within the texts. In the second stage, each identified noun phrase was extracted and recorded in a structured coding sheet. In the third stage,

the noun phrases were categorized based on their structural components using the analytical framework proposed by Biber et al. (2021), which distinguishes between premodifiers (e.g., determiners, adjectives, nouns, participles, and adverbs) and postmodifiers (e.g., prepositional phrases, relative clauses, participial clauses, infinitive clauses, adjectives, adverbs, and appositives). In the final stage, the categorized data were analyzed to examine patterns of frequency, variation, and accuracy, as well as syntactic and rhetorical functions within the essays.

To ensure methodological consistency, the study maintained alignment between its qualitative design and analytic procedures by applying a uniform coding framework across all data and focusing on interpretive pattern identification rather than statistical generalization. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, an inter-rater reliability procedure was implemented. A second trained rater independently coded a subset of the data (approximately 20% of the essays) using the same coding scheme. The results were then compared, discussed, and resolved through consensus to refine the coding categories and ensure consistency in interpretation. This process contributed to the dependability of the findings. Overall, the analysis aimed to provide a detailed description of how noun phrases are constructed and used in student writing, and to interpret emerging patterns as indicators of learners' syntactic awareness and development in academic writing.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

This section reports the distribution and functional realization of noun phrase (NP) modifiers in students' essays, focusing on patterns of syntactic complexity reflected through premodification and postmodification (Biber et al., 2021). Beyond identifying their frequency, the analysis considers how these structures function to shape meaning and informational density in students' writing. Rather than presenting exhaustive raw counts, the analysis foregrounds the most salient distributional patterns across the dataset. This approach highlights dominant and underused forms, providing a clearer understanding of how learners deploy noun phrase modifiers in authentic writing and what these patterns reveal about their developing syntactic competence.

The results reveal a marked asymmetry between premodifiers and postmodifiers. Premodifiers account for 1,530 instances (85%) of all identified modifiers, whereas postmodifiers constitute only 270 instances (15%). This disproportion suggests that students' noun phrase construction is heavily oriented toward pre-head modification, with relatively limited reliance on structurally more complex post-head expansions. A closer examination indicates that this preference is largely driven by the frequent use of determiners (51%) and adjectives (32%), which together dominate the premodifier category. Noun modifiers appear less frequently (13%), while participial and adverbial premodifiers remain marginal (below 5% combined). This distribution

points to a reliance on low-complexity, high-frequency forms, which enable basic specification and description but offer limited capacity for syntactic elaboration.

Postmodification, by contrast, exhibits both lower frequency and more restricted structural variability. Within this category, prepositional phrases clearly predominate, indicating that students tend to rely on relatively accessible forms to extend meaning beyond the head noun. These structures are commonly used to express relationships such as possession, location, or classification, as illustrated in examples from the data such as the importance of cleanliness, the middle of the Borneo island, and contamination from waste disposal pipes. Such constructions suggest a functional preference for explicit and semantically transparent expressions, which allow students to add information without increasing syntactic complexity. In comparison, more complex, clause-based postmodifiers—such as infinitive clauses and reduced relative clauses—occur considerably less frequently. When they do appear, they tend to be limited in range, as seen in examples like the ability to learn and pass knowledge and a substance known to contribute to climate change. These instances demonstrate that students are capable of producing clause-based modification; however, their relatively low frequency indicates limited engagement with syntactic embedding and reduced clause formation.

Overall, these patterns suggest that, although students demonstrate a basic awareness of postmodification as a grammatical resource, their use remains structurally constrained to a narrow set of forms and functionally limited in terms of rhetorical range. The infrequent use of clause-based modifiers indicates that students have not yet fully exploited postmodification as a means of achieving greater informational density, precision, and abstraction in academic writing. As a result, noun phrase constructions tend to remain relatively simple, with fewer instances of elaboration that would otherwise contribute to more sophisticated and compact expression.

To further clarify these patterns, Table 1 presents the distribution of noun phrase modifiers across subcategories.

**Table 1. Distribution of Noun Phrase Modifiers**

No.	Type of Modifiers	Type of Sub-Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Pre	Determiner	787	51
		Adjective	495	32
		Noun	194	13
		Participle	41	3
		Adverb	13	1
	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1530</b>	<b>85</b>
2	Post	Adjective	4	1.5
		Participle Clause	23	8.5
		Prepositional Phrase	194	72
		Infinitive Clause	41	15
		Adverb	3	1
	Appositive	5	2	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>270</b>	<b>15</b>	

As shown in Table 1, the dominance of premodifiers is clearly reflected in the high proportion of determiners and adjectives, indicating that students rely primarily on structurally simple and readily accessible forms to construct noun phrases. Determiners function to mark definiteness and specificity, while adjectives provide descriptive detail, making these elements efficient for conveying meaning without requiring complex syntactic processing. This tendency is evident in frequently occurring patterns such as a clean environment, a serious global issue, and stagnant water, where meaning is built through straightforward pre-head modification.

While noun modifiers appear with moderate frequency, reflecting some ability to form compound structures, their use remains less dominant. Examples such as waste management programs, environmental pollution, and water quality standards show that students are beginning to employ more compact nominal constructions; however, these forms are not yet used extensively. In contrast, more complex premodifying forms—such as participles and adverbs—are used only minimally. The limited presence of such forms suggests that students have not yet fully developed the ability to incorporate more syntactically and stylistically marked modifiers, which typically require greater grammatical control and lexical flexibility.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that students' use of premodification remains largely confined to core, low-complexity structures, with only emerging use of more advanced forms that could enhance variation and sophistication in noun phrase construction. In contrast, postmodifiers show limited diversity, with prepositional phrases accounting for the majority (72%). These are typically used to express relationships such as possession or location (e.g., the beauty of Central Kalimantan), suggesting that students favor functionally transparent structures. Infinitive clauses (15%) and participle clauses (8.5%) are present but relatively infrequent, while other forms remain marginal. This pattern indicates that students' engagement with postmodification is largely restricted to less syntactically demanding constructions, with limited use of embedded or clause-based modifiers.

Taken together, these findings indicate that students' writing reflects a developing but constrained level of syntactic complexity. The predominance of premodification and the limited deployment of clause-based postmodifiers suggest that learners have not yet fully appropriated the grammatical resources required for producing densely packed, information-rich noun phrases, which are characteristic of advanced academic writing (Hyland, 2004; Biber et al., 2020). Instead, their constructions tend to favor linearity and clarity, potentially at the expense of syntactic sophistication.

These results broadly corroborate earlier research. Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) emphasize that progression toward advanced academic writing is marked by increased reliance on postmodifying structures, particularly phrasal and clausal embeddings. Similarly, corpus-based

studies have shown that less proficient EFL writers tend to depend on premodification, especially adjectival forms, while more advanced writers exploit a wider range of postmodifiers to achieve compression and precision (Peng & Azmi, 2022; Díez-Bedmar & Pérez-Paredes, 2020). The present findings align with this developmental trajectory, positioning the participants at an intermediate stage of syntactic development.

However, the contribution of this study lies in highlighting a gap between instructional exposure and functional deployment. Given that the participants had completed grammar and writing courses within an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) framework, a more diversified use of noun phrase structures might be expected. The observed reliance on basic forms therefore raises questions about the extent to which grammatical knowledge is transferred into actual writing performance (Alrashed, 2024; Timyam, 2024; Lan et al., 2022). It appears that such knowledge may remain largely declarative, rather than being fully operationalized in authentic writing contexts.

This discrepancy may also be influenced by cross-linguistic factors, particularly the structural differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia. In Bahasa Indonesia, noun phrases tend to rely less on syntactic embedding and more on relatively linear and loosely structured modification, often realized through simpler descriptive elements rather than layered or clause-based constructions. Moreover, several English postmodifying structures—such as reduced relative clauses, participial clauses, and infinitive clauses—do not have direct or frequently used equivalents in Indonesian. As a result, learners may experience difficulty internalizing these forms and instead default to constructions that align more closely with their first language. Such patterns reflect L1-based processing strategies, where learners draw on familiar grammatical frameworks when producing language in a second or foreign language (Putri & Cahyono, 2020; Septiana, 2020). This tendency is evident in their preference for pre-head modification and prepositional phrases, which are more transparent and cognitively less demanding.

At the same time, instructional factors may further reinforce this tendency. In many EFL classrooms, grammar instruction often emphasizes sentence-level accuracy, focusing on rule mastery, error correction, and the production of grammatically correct sentences. While this approach supports foundational competence, it may not sufficiently encourage learners to explore phrase-level elaboration or the functional use of complex grammatical structures in extended writing (Hopp, 2019; Septiani, 2018). Consequently, students may develop a cautious writing style that prioritizes correctness over syntactic experimentation, limiting their exposure to and practice with more complex noun phrase constructions. As argued by Sujarwati and Suningsih (2025), instructional practices that do not explicitly integrate grammar with discourse-level writing tasks may constrain learners' ability to apply grammatical knowledge flexibly and

effectively. Together, these cross-linguistic and pedagogical influences help explain why students' noun phrase usage remains structurally simple and why more advanced forms of postmodification are underrepresented in their writing.

Importantly, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The dominance of premodification does not necessarily indicate deficiency; rather, it reflects a developmentally appropriate strategy for maintaining clarity and control in writing. Nevertheless, the limited use of diverse postmodifiers suggests that students may benefit from more explicit pedagogical attention to phrase-level complexity and its rhetorical functions in academic discourse. Without such emphasis, learners may remain confined to structurally simple patterns that restrict their ability to produce more sophisticated academic texts.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the structure and function of noun phrases in English essays written by undergraduate EFL students at Universitas Palangka Raya. The results showed that while students employed various noun phrase constructions, they predominantly favored simpler structures. Determiners and adjectives were the most frequently used premodifiers, whereas complex premodifiers such as nouns, participles, or adverbs were rarely used. Among postmodifiers, prepositional phrases were the most common, while participle and infinitive clauses appeared infrequently, indicating limited syntactic complexity. These findings suggest that students are at an intermediate stage of syntactic competence, relying mainly on straightforward, linear constructions. To address this, teachers are encouraged to integrate focused grammar instruction emphasizing complex noun phrase structures, particularly participial and infinitive clauses, and to design writing tasks that promote syntactic expansion. Collaborative teaching and formative feedback are also recommended to strengthen the integration of grammar and writing for improved academic writing proficiency.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmadi, M. R. (2017). The impact of motivation on reading comprehension. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 2(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.18869/acadpub.ijree.2.1.1>
- Aini, N. Q., Hadi, M. S., & Hazzaidi, H. A. A. B. (2023). Students' impression of mind mapping technique mixed with freewriting influence their writing ability. *Journal of English Educational Study (JEES)*, 6(2), 192–199. <https://doi.org/10.31932/jees.v6i2.2729>
- Alonso, J. G., & Rothman, J. (2017). Coming of age in L3 initial stages transfer models: Deriving developmental predictions and looking towards the future. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 21(6), 683–697. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006916649265>
- Alrashed, A. (2024). Noun Phrase Complexity in Saudi University Students' Academic Writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 52(11), 351–373. <https://doi.org/10.21608/aafu.2024.380952>

- Azimi, Z. (2022). An Analysis on Students' Skill in Paragraphs Writing at English Language Education of FKIP UIR [Undergraduate Thesis, Universitas Islam Riau]. Universitas Islam Riau Repository. <https://repository.uir.ac.id/13023/1/176310996.pdf>
- Biber, D., Conrad, S., Leech, G., & Finegan, E. (2021). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (2nd ed.)*. London: Routledge.
- Biber, D., Gray, B., Staples, S., & Egbert, J. (2020). Investigating Grammatical Complexity in L2 English Writing Research: Linguistic Description versus Predictive Measurement. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 46, .  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100869>
- Díez-Bedmar, M. B., & Pérez-Paredes, P. (2020). Noun phrase complexity in young Spanish EFL learners' writing: Complementing syntactic complexity indices with corpus-driven analyses. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 25(1), 4-35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.17058.die>
- Frempong, F., Kayi, A., & Ganu, J. (2023). The Syntactic Complexity of Noun Phrases in Second Language Students' Writing. *Linguistics Initiative*, 3(1), 36-48.  
<https://doi.org/10.53696/27753719.3174>
- Hopp, H. (2019). Cross linguistic influence in the child third language acquisition of grammar: Sentence comprehension and production among Turkish German and German learners of English. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 23(2), 567-583.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006917752523>
- Hyland, K. (2004). *Genre and Second Language Writing*. University of Michigan Press.
- Kaya, E. (2015). The Role of Reading Skills on Reading Comprehension Ability of Turkish EFL Students. *UNIVERSITEPARK Bulten*, 4(2), 37-51. <https://doi/10.12973/unibulletin.412.4>
- Lan, G., Zhang, Q., Lucas, K., Sun, Y., Gao, J. (2022). A corpus-based investigation on noun phrase complexity in L1 and L2 English writing. *Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, 67, 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2022.02.002>
- Parkinson, J., & Musgrave, J. (2014). Development of noun phrase complexity in the writing of English for academic purposes students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 14, 48-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2013.12.001>
- Peng, L., & Azmi, N. (2022). Noun Phrase Complexity in Academic Writing: A Comparison of Research Proposals Written by Chinese EFL and Malaysian ESL Postgraduates. *English Language Teaching*, 15(5), 77-83. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n5p77>
- Putri, H.Z., Cahyono, B.B. (2020). Indonesian EFL Students' Tendencies in Writing Academic Essays. *Celt A Journal of Culture English Language Teaching & Literature*, 20(2):309-326. <https://doi.org/10.24167/celt.v20i2>
- Septiani, E. (2018). The correlation between grammar mastery and reading comprehension achievement of the eighth graders at smp negeri 13 Palembang [Undergraduate Thesis, Universitas Sriwijaya]. Universitas Sriwijaya Repository. <http://repository.unsri.ac.id/id/eprint/439>.
- Septiana, A.R. (2020). The Indonesian grammatical interference on EFL students' writing. *Journal of Research on English and Language Learning (J-REaLL)*, 1(1), 46-52.  
<http://doi.org/10.33474/j-reall.v1i1.5610>
- Sujarwati, I., Suningsih, S. (2025). Cultural Influences on English Writing Styles: A Review of Studies on Indonesian ESL Learners. *Journal of Linguistics and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 23-29. Retrieved from <http://ejournal.radenintan.ac.id/index.php/JLSS/index>
- Timyam, N. (2024). Noun Phrases in ELF Authors' Academic Writing. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 17(2), 320-343.  
<https://doi.org/10.70730/YEBO5586>