

Original Article

# Linguistic Competence and Academic Essay Writing Ability of Grade 9 Students

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**Abstract.** This study examined the linguistic competence of Grade 9 students and its relationship to their academic essay-writing ability. Anchored in Noam Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence, the research examined sentence structure, transitional devices, and parallelism as key components of effective written communication. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was employed, with 107 students selected through one-stage cluster sampling from a public secondary school. Data were collected through validated instruments and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results showed that students demonstrated Proficient competence in sentence structure ( $\bar{x} = 13.39$ ) and Satisfactory performance in transitional devices ( $\bar{x} = 8.61$ ) and parallelism ( $\bar{x} = 10.44$ ). Female students outperformed male students, and those exposed to English at earlier stages achieved higher scores than those exposed later. All components of linguistic competence were positively and significantly correlated with essay-writing ability, with overall competence showing the strongest association. The findings underscore the importance of early language exposure and targeted instruction and contribute empirical evidence linking linguistic competence to academic writing performance among secondary learners.

**Keywords:** *Academic writing proficiency; Age of first English language exposure; Gender differences in education; Linguistic competence; Transitional devices.*

Academic writing skills are central yet challenging for learners, requiring them to generate, organize, and refine ideas into coherent texts. Writing difficulties have been widely documented across contexts. For example, Grade 9 students in South Africa struggled with spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, which hindered their performance in English-medium subjects (Bal & Öztürk, 2025; Kubuzie et al., 2025). Similar challenges in idea development, organization, and linguistic accuracy have been reported in broader studies on academic writing (Akhmedova, 2025). In higher education, persistent weaknesses in thesis clarity, organization, and referencing have been noted (Aini et al., 2022; Nenotek et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies indicate that writing difficulties persist across educational levels; however, limited research has examined how specific grammatical competencies influence writing development in early secondary education. These patterns highlight the continuing need for targeted instruction to strengthen students' writing skills.

In the Philippine context, research on student writing has largely focused on the senior high school level. Mabasa and Protacio (2025) found that Grade 12 students experienced difficulties in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, organization, and idea development, often accompanied by writing anxiety and reliance on peers. While these findings underscore the importance of structured support in developing linguistic competence, far less is known

about how these skills develop during junior high school. This gap is critical, and Arcilla, Cuyamen, Lamoste, and Montebon (2025) further illuminate it by examining grammatical errors among Junior High School students and identifying key contributing factors, including insufficient practice, limited feedback, and difficulties in transferring spoken-language skills to writing. Their findings highlight that grammatical weaknesses, insufficient practice, and limited feedback in early secondary education can persist if unaddressed, potentially affecting students' overall writing performance.

Another concern is the limited emphasis on key grammatical competencies in the Grade 9 English Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs). Sentence structure, transitional devices, and parallelism are not consistently foregrounded as distinct and teachable components, resulting in fragmented or implicit instruction. This lack of systematic focus may contribute to students' difficulty in producing coherent and well-organized texts. Research demonstrates that explicit instruction in these areas significantly improves writing outcomes. Studies show that teaching sentence patterns enhances syntactic accuracy, while instruction in transitional and parallel structures improves cohesion and logical flow (Alawerdy & Alalwi, 2022; Trang & Barrot, 2024). These findings suggest that strengthening specific grammatical competencies is essential for developing academic writing skills at the secondary level.

This study is grounded in Noam Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence, which views language performance as a reflection of learners' internalized grammatical knowledge. Linguistic competence manifests in writing through the ability to construct grammatically accurate sentences, organize ideas logically, and maintain coherence across texts. Within this framework, sentence structure reflects syntactic control, transitional devices support cohesion and logical flow, and parallelism ensures consistency and clarity of expression. These components serve as observable and measurable indicators of students' underlying linguistic competence in academic writing.

While previous studies have examined writing difficulties and instructional interventions, most have focused on older learners or generalized writing skills. This study extends existing research by focusing on Grade 9 students and by examining specific grammatical components—sentence structure, transitional devices, and parallelism—as predictors of academic writing proficiency. By providing a fine-grained analysis of how these competencies influence writing performance, the study addresses a significant gap in both local and international literature. It offers evidence-based insights for early secondary instruction.

The inadequacies in students' writing skills highlight early secondary education as a crucial period for developing foundational writing abilities. By examining Grade 9 students' linguistic competence and academic writing proficiency, this study provides diagnostic insights that can inform targeted instructional interventions and prevent the persistence of writing difficulties. In alignment with global educational priorities, the study supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.1 on effective learning outcomes and Target 4.6 on literacy proficiency (UN, 2015). Ultimately, the study contributes to improved academic writing proficiency and evidence-based instructional practices in secondary education.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The study utilized a quantitative, descriptive–correlational research design. It is descriptive because it determined the extent of Grade 9 students' linguistic competence in three components: (a) types of sentence structure, (b) transitional devices, and (c) parallelism, as well as the extent of their ability to write academic essays. It is also correlational, examining whether there is a significant relationship between students' linguistic competence and their performance on academic essay writing. Moreover, the comparative component examined whether students' linguistic competence differed significantly across age and sex groups.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted at Valencia National High School (VNHS), a public junior high school in Bong-ao, Valencia, Negros Oriental, Philippines, under the Schools Division of Negros Oriental. At the time of the study, VNHS had approximately 65 faculty members and a combined junior and senior high school enrollment of about 1,923 students from Valencia and nearby communities. English is used as a medium of instruction and taught as a core subject across grade levels. Curriculum blueprinting showed that the Grade 9 English Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) provided limited explicit coverage of sentence structure, transitional devices,

and parallelism—key linguistic areas examined in this study.

### **Research Participants**

The respondents of the study were Grade 9 learners of Valencia National High School in the Valencia District, Schools Division of Negros Oriental, Negros Island Region, during School Year 2025–2026. From an estimated population of 299 learners across seven sections, a one-stage cluster sampling technique was employed. Three sections (C, D, and E) were randomly selected as clusters, and all students in the selected sections were included as respondents, yielding a total sample of 133 learners (Section C = 44, Section D = 45, Section E = 44). However, during actual data collection, only 107 learners participated. The exclusion of 26 students was due to absences on the test days, prior athletic training commitments, school transfers, parental non-consent, or dropout, as identified in the study's limitations. These factors were accounted for and acknowledged to ensure transparency and contextualize the scope of the findings.

### **Research Instrument**

The study used a questionnaire consisting of four parts. Part I, the Disclosure Statement, informed respondents that the instrument formed part of a research study on students' linguistic competence and their academic essay-writing ability. It explained the purpose of the study, clarified that participation was voluntary, and assured confidentiality. Completion of the questionnaire served as evidence of informed consent. Part II collected respondents' profiles, including age of first English exposure and sex, necessary to address research questions related to demographic variables. Part III comprised the Linguistic Competence Test, which assessed students' grammatical skills. It was subdivided into Part III-A (Types of Sentences According to Structure), Part III-B (Transitional Devices), and Part III-C (Parallelism). Part IV involved the Academic Essay Writing Task, a three-paragraph expository essay responding to a common Grade 9 content prompt, such as a social issue like poverty. Each paragraph consisted of five sentences. The essay was scored using a 5-point criterion-referenced rubric that operationalized abstract concepts of linguistic competence into measurable indicators, including correct sentence structures, logical transitions, and consistent parallelism.

The rubric evaluated five criteria: types of sentence structures, use of transitional devices, use of parallelism, thesis statement, and content development. Each criterion was rated on a scale from 1 (Needs Improvement) to 5 (Excellent). For instance, an "Excellent" score for sentence structure indicated zero lapses, with all sentences varied, correct, and effective. In contrast, a "Needs Improvement" score reflected frequent grammatical errors and predominantly simple or incorrect sentences. Overall scores were interpreted using cumulative ranges, where 21–25 indicated Excellent performance, 16–20 Proficient, 11–15 Satisfactory, 6–10 Developing, and 1–5 Needs Improvement. The criterion-referenced design ensured that each student's performance was evaluated against established standards rather than compared to peers, making it appropriate for formative assessment and targeted instructional feedback. To ensure consistency in scoring, the essays were evaluated using a standardized analytic rubric with clearly defined criteria and performance descriptors. Although a single scorer rated the essays, the detailed rubric minimized subjectivity and promoted consistent evaluation across all responses.

Time allotment for the tasks was 40–45 minutes for the Linguistic Competence Test (Part III) and 60–70 minutes for the academic essay writing task (Part IV). These durations were selected to balance assessment rigor with students' attention span and cognitive load, providing sufficient time for thoughtful responses without inducing fatigue. All tasks were conducted in a supervised classroom setting, without access to online grammar aids, to ensure the authenticity of performance.

To establish validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three English teachers, including two with Doctoral degrees and one with a Master's degree, who evaluated item clarity, alignment with learning competencies, appropriateness of difficulty level, and relevance to Grade 9 learners. Their recommendations were incorporated into the final version of the instrument. A dry run was conducted with a randomly selected Grade 9 section comprising 30 students who were not included among the actual respondents. The results confirmed the clarity, appropriateness, and discriminatory power of the test items.

To further establish the instrument's reliability, a test-retest procedure was employed for the Linguistic Competence Test, specifically Parts III-A (Types of Sentences According to Structure), III-B (Transitional Devices), and III-C (Parallelism). A two-week interval between the two administrations minimized recall effects while maintaining the stability of the construct being measured. Using the dry-run and test-retest data, internal

consistency reliability was computed using Cronbach's alpha for each subscale. Results showed acceptable-to-good reliability across components: Part III-A ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ), Part III-B ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), and Part III-C ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The overall reliability coefficient of the Linguistic Competence Test was  $\alpha = 0.78$ , indicating that the instrument, as a whole, consistently measured students' linguistic competence. The relatively consistent scores between the initial and second administrations further support the instrument's stability. Supporting materials, such as answer keys and standardized scoring guides, were also used to minimize measurement error and ensure consistent scoring. After expert validation, a dry run, and test-retest procedures, the finalized instrument was administered to 107 Grade 9 students.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Formal permission to conduct the study was then secured from the Schools Division of Negros Oriental and Valencia National High School, with the endorsement of the Dean of the Graduate School of Foundation University. The Schools Division Superintendent granted authorization upon the school administration's endorsement. After approval, parental consent forms were distributed, and only students with signed consent from a parent/guardian were allowed to participate. Prior to administration, the researcher explained the purpose, significance, and procedures of the study to the respondents. The questionnaire, Linguistic Competence Test, and academic essay-writing task were administered in a supervised classroom setting, and all completed instruments were collected immediately after completion. The respondents' raw scores from the Linguistic Competence Test, component scores, and essay rubric ratings were encoded for analysis. Demographic data, including the age of first exposure to the English language and sex, were likewise recorded from the respondents' profile sheets.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data were coded, tabulated, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation, were employed to describe students' levels of linguistic competence in terms of sentence structure, transitional devices, and parallelism, as well as their academic essay-writing performance. Frequencies and percentages were used to determine the distribution of students across performance levels, while mean scores and standard deviations summarized overall performance and variability.

Inferential statistics were applied to examine relationships and group differences. Prior to conducting parametric tests, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were verified. The data were found to be normally distributed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and to be homoscedastic using Levene's test, thereby justifying the use of parametric statistical techniques. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between linguistic competence and academic essay-writing ability. An independent-samples t-test was used to compare linguistic competence between male and female students. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in linguistic competence by age of first exposure to English. When significant differences were found, the Tukey post hoc test was conducted to identify specific group differences. All inferential tests were analyzed at the .05 significance level.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Institutional approval to conduct the research was obtained from Valencia National High School, the Department of Education, and the Schools Division of Negros Oriental prior to data collection. All respondents were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and conditions, and participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty or coercion.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through secure data-handling procedures. Research documents and datasets were accessible only to the researcher and were used solely for research purposes. Parental consent forms were securely stored in the school administration office in accordance with institutional directives. Upon completion of data collection and analysis, all personal identifiers were removed, and research materials were retained for a limited period before proper disposal. Ethical responsibility was also upheld in the research's overall conduct. The researchers maintained objectivity, avoided bias, and ensured that the study was relevant and ethically sound through prior consultations.

## Results and Discussion

### Extent of Students' Linguistic Competence

Table 1 reveals that students demonstrate stronger competence in sentence structure than in transitional devices and parallelism, indicating a gap between sentence-level accuracy and discourse-level cohesion. While sentence structure is rated Proficient ( $\bar{x} = 13.39$ ), both transitional devices ( $\bar{x} = 8.61$ ) and parallelism ( $\bar{x} = 10.44$ ) remain at the Satisfactory level, suggesting that learners can form grammatically acceptable sentences but struggle to organize ideas cohesively.

**Table 1.** Extent of students' linguistic competence (n=107)

Rating	Verbal Description	Sentence Structure		Transitional Devices		Parallelism	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
17-20	Excellent	32	29.91%	1	0.93%	12	11.22%
13-16	Proficient	34	31.77%	15	14.02%	20	18.69%
9-12	Satisfactory	30	28.04%	36	33.64%	37	34.58%
5-8	Developing	7	6.54%	45	42.06%	31	28.97%
1-4	Needs Improvement	4	3.74%	10	9.35%	7	6.54%
<b>Mean</b>		<b>13.39</b>		<b>8.61</b>		<b>10.44</b>	
		<b>(Proficient)</b>		<b>(Satisfactory)</b>		<b>(Satisfactory)</b>	
<b>SD</b>		<b>4.26</b>		<b>3.39</b>		<b>4.22</b>	

This disparity is clearly reflected in the data. Over 60% of students achieved Proficient or Excellent levels in sentence structure (31.77% Proficient; 29.91% Excellent), whereas only 0.93% reached the Excellent level in transitional devices, with the majority clustered in Developing (42.06%) and Satisfactory (33.64%) levels. Similarly, parallelism shows uneven mastery, with 34.58% at the Satisfactory level and 28.97% at the Developing level. These findings indicate that while students possess emerging syntactic competence, their control of cohesion and structural balance remains inconsistent.

These results align with previous studies showing that learners often acquire basic sentence construction skills but struggle to apply more complex structures consistently (Divina, 2025; Hidayah et al., 2024; Mubshirah et al., 2023). The limited use of transitional devices is consistent with Ismi et al. (2025) and Ramzan et al. (2023), who found that students tend to rely on repetition rather than logical connectors, resulting in weak textual flow. Similarly, difficulties with parallelism are consistent with findings by Kallaba (2025) and Dhimal and Timalisina (2024), which highlight challenges in maintaining structural consistency.

The contrast between strong sentence-level performance and weaker discourse-level skills reinforces the view that grammatical knowledge alone does not ensure effective writing. As shown in the data, high proficiency in sentence construction does not correspond to high performance in cohesion-related skills. This supports Andleeb et al.'s (2025) argument that isolated grammar instruction improves structural accuracy but is insufficient for developing coherence.

From a broader perspective, these findings suggest that linguistic competence is multidimensional, requiring the integration of syntactic knowledge, discourse skills, and cognitive processes such as organization and reasoning (Bankole, 2025; Naini & Ulya, 2025). Differences in performance may also relate to gender-based learning patterns. Female students tend to demonstrate stronger use of cohesion and organizational strategies due to higher engagement and consistent application of learned skills (Zhao et al., 2024; Noroozi et al., 2023), while male students may exhibit strengths in sentence-level complexity but less consistent discourse organization (Tankó, 2021; Wiyanto & Asmorobangun, 2020).

These findings imply that instruction should move beyond sentence-level accuracy to develop cohesion and organization explicitly. Integrating transitional devices and parallel structures into meaningful writing tasks, alongside guided practice and feedback, may help students produce more coherent texts. However, these findings should be interpreted within the context of certain limitations, as the study was conducted in a single school and focused only on selected grammatical components, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in linguistic competence over time.

### Extent of Students' Ability in Writing Academic Essays

Table 2 shows that students demonstrate generally moderate to strong academic writing proficiency, although

their performance reflects uneven mastery of higher-order discourse skills. While most learners are classified as Proficient (31.77%) and Excellent (29.91%), a substantial proportion remains at the Satisfactory (28.04%) and Developing (6.54%) levels, resulting in an overall mean score of 11.39 (Satisfactory). This distribution suggests that although students possess foundational competence in essay writing, they struggle to consistently produce well-organized, coherent, and analytically developed texts.

**Table 2.** Extent of students' ability in writing academic essays (n=107)

Rating	Verbal Description	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
21 - 25	Excellent	32	29.91%	11.39 (Satisfactory)	3.88
16 - 20	Proficient	34	31.77%		
11 - 15	Satisfactory	30	28.04%		
6 - 10	Developing	7	6.54%		
1 - 5	Needs Improvement	4	3.74%		

These patterns indicate that writing proficiency extends beyond sentence-level accuracy to include discourse-level skills such as organization, cohesion, and clarity of argument. The presence of students across all performance levels – from Excellent to Needs Improvement (3.74%) – highlights variability in syntactic and rhetorical control. Learners in the lower proficiency bands likely struggle to structure ideas and maintain coherence, contributing to inconsistencies in overall writing quality. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that effective academic writing requires integrating grammatical accuracy with higher-order skills. As noted by Schillings et al. (2023), strong writing involves coherence, logical organization, and clarity of argument, while Subandowo and Sárdi (2023) underscore the importance of explicit instructional support in developing these competencies. Similarly, challenges in organization, vocabulary range, and grammatical precision observed among students in the Satisfactory and Developing categories are consistent with those reported by Oeun and Heng (2025), who identified these as common barriers in EFL writing contexts.

Moreover, the variation in performance underscores the role of metacognitive regulation in writing development. As Teng and Yue (2023) argue, planning, monitoring, and revising strategies significantly influence the quality of written output. Learners who lack these strategies may struggle to refine their ideas and improve coherence, which partly explains the distribution of scores across proficiency levels. Despite these challenges, the relatively high proportion of students achieving proficient-to-excellent ratings suggests strong writing potential within the cohort. This contrasts with findings from Alsariera and Yunus (2023), who reported generally low writing performance among EFL learners, indicating that the present group demonstrates comparatively higher levels of competence, albeit with remaining gaps in higher-order skills. These findings imply that instruction should focus not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the development of discourse-level skills and metacognitive strategies. Structured writing tasks, guided feedback, and explicit instruction in organization and revision may help learners achieve more consistent and advanced writing performance.

### Relationship Between Students' Linguistic Competence and Their Ability in Writing Academic Essays

Table 3 indicates a strong, statistically significant relationship between students' linguistic competence and their ability to write academic essays, suggesting that higher levels of linguistic proficiency are closely associated with better writing performance. Among the components, parallelism demonstrates the strongest relationship ( $r = .78, p < .001$ ), followed by sentence structure ( $r = .73, p < .001$ ) and transitional devices ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ). At the same time, overall linguistic competence shows a very strong correlation with essay writing ability ( $r = .85, p < .001$ ). These consistently high coefficients indicate that multiple dimensions of linguistic competence contribute meaningfully to writing quality.

**Table 3.** Relationship between students' linguistic competence and their ability in writing academic essays (n=107)

Variables	r	p	Decision	Remark
Types of Sentence Structure vs. Ability in Writing Acad. Essay	.73	<.001	Reject H <sub>01</sub>	Significant
Transitional Devices vs. Ability in Writing Acad. Essays	.69	<.001	Reject H <sub>01</sub>	Significant
Parallelism vs. Ability in Writing Acad. Essays	.78	<.001	Reject H <sub>01</sub>	Significant
Overall Linguistic Competence vs. Ability in Writing Acad. Essays	.85	<.001	Reject H <sub>01</sub>	Significant

Note: Pearson r at 5% Level of Significance; df = 105

These findings suggest that writing proficiency is not determined by a single linguistic feature but rather by the integrated use of grammatical accuracy, structural balance, and cohesive devices. The particularly strong correlation for parallelism highlights the importance of structural consistency in enhancing clarity and rhetorical

effectiveness. In contrast, the slightly lower yet still strong relationship for transitional devices reflects ongoing challenges in achieving logical flow and cohesion. This pattern reinforces earlier findings (Table 1), in which students showed stronger sentence-level skills but weaker discourse-level control, indicating that improvements in cohesion-related features are critical for advancing writing performance.

The results align with prior studies identifying linguistic competence as a key predictor of writing quality, including fluency, coherence, and structural sophistication (Lu et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). Similarly, difficulties with grammar, cohesion, and structural variation reported in other contexts (Kubuzie et al., 2025; Mabasa & Protacio, 2025) support the present findings, underscoring the role of linguistic resources in shaping effective written communication. In contrast to studies reporting generally low writing performance among EFL learners (Alsariera & Yunus, 2023; Oeun & Heng, 2025), the strong correlations observed suggest that students in this context possess sufficient linguistic foundations to support higher levels of writing achievement.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the view that linguistic competence underlies language performance. In line with Chomsky's framework, the results indicate that students' internalized grammatical knowledge is reflected in their ability to produce coherent, well-structured written texts. However, the varying strength of correlations across components suggests that not all aspects of competence are equally developed, highlighting the need to strengthen discourse-level skills alongside grammatical knowledge.

These results suggest that instruction benefits from an integrated approach targeting sentence structure, cohesion, and structural balance. Incorporating explicit teaching of parallelism, guided practice with transitional devices, and strategy-based writing instruction may enable students to apply their linguistic competence more effectively in academic writing.

#### **Differences in Students' Linguistic Competence by Age of First English Language Exposure**

Table 4 shows statistically significant differences in linguistic competence across groups categorized by age at first exposure to English. The key finding is that students first exposed to English in Junior High School consistently scored lower than those introduced during Kindergarten or Early Grades across all measured components— sentence structure (JHS = 9.82 vs. EG = 14.74), transitional devices (JHS = 5.55 vs. K = 9.83), parallelism (JHS = 7.64 vs. EG = 11.54), and overall linguistic competence (JHS = 23.00 vs. EG = 35.49). Post-hoc analyses confirmed that these differences were statistically significant, particularly between Junior High School and earlier-exposure groups, while differences among early-exposure groups were generally not significant.

This pattern suggests a clear developmental advantage associated with earlier exposure to English. Students introduced to English in Kindergarten or the Early Grades demonstrate stronger control of sentence structure, cohesion, and parallelism, indicating that earlier exposure facilitates both foundational and higher-order language skills. For instance, learners exposed in Junior High School showed limited use of transitional devices and less consistent parallelism, suggesting difficulty producing coherent, stylistically balanced text despite potential grammatical knowledge.

These results align with prior research on age of onset in second language acquisition, which highlights the cognitive and neurological benefits of early language exposure. Melibayeva (2025) and Yaş (2024) note that early learners benefit from greater neural plasticity, supporting more implicit and automatic internalization of syntactic and discourse structures. Similarly, Chomsky's Universal Grammar framework suggests that innate linguistic capacities are more effectively activated when exposure occurs early and is sustained (White, 2020; Bankole, 2025). Conversely, learners who begin English instruction later tend to rely more heavily on explicit rule learning, which may yield accurate but less flexible or automatic control over sentence construction and cohesive devices (Ismi et al., 2025; Ramzan et al., 2023; Kallaba, 2025).

The implications for instruction are clear. To bridge developmental gaps, late-entry learners may require targeted interventions, including scaffolded exercises on cohesion and parallelism, guided syntactic practice, and structured grammar instruction. Early and sustained exposure should be prioritized in curriculum design to foster automaticity and higher-order writing skills. At the same time, differentiated support should be provided to students who begin English at later stages. While the findings highlight the importance of age of exposure, future research could conduct longitudinal studies to examine the persistence of early-exposure advantages and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions for late-entry learners.

**Table 4.** Differences in students' linguistic competence by age of first English language exposure

Variables	<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Decision	Remark
<b>Types of Sentence Structure (20 items)</b>						
Kindergarten (K)	29	14.21	5.23	.002	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Early Grades (EG)	35	14.74				
Upper Elem. (UE)	32	12.41				
Junior HS (JHS)	11	9.82				
<b>Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey)</b>						
K vs. EG: <i>p</i> = .952 (not significant)						
K vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .307 (not significant)						
K vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .014 (significant)						
EG vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .089 (not significant)						
EG vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .003 (significant)						
UE vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .261 (not significant)						
<b>Transitional Devices (20 items)</b>						
Kindergarten (K)	29	9.83	5.73	.001	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Early Grades (EG)	35	9.20				
Upper Elem. (UE)	32	7.91				
Junior HS (JHS)	11	5.55				
<b>Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey)</b>						
K vs. EG: <i>p</i> = .861 (not significant)						
K vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .099 (not significant)						
K vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .001 (significant)						
EG vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .350 (not significant)						
EG vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .007 (significant)						
UE vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .154 (not significant)						
<b>Parallelism (20 items)</b>						
Kindergarten (K)	29	11.35	3.82	.012	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Early Grades (EG)	35	11.54				
Upper Elem. (UE)	32	9.38				
Junior HS (JHS)	11	7.64				
<b>Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey)</b>						
K vs. EG: <i>p</i> = .997 (not significant)						
K vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .239 (not significant)						
K vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .055 (not significant)						
EG vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .135 (not significant)						
EG vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .032 (significant)						
UE vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .613 (not significant)						
<b>Overall Linguistic Competence (60 items)</b>						
Kindergarten (K)	29	35.38	6.50	<.001	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Early Grades (EG)	35	35.49				
Upper Elem. (UE)	32	29.69				
Junior HS (JHS)	11	23.00				
<b>Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey)</b>						
K vs. EG: <i>p</i> = 1.000 (not significant)						
K vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .102 (not significant)						
K vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .002 (significant)						
EG vs. UE: <i>p</i> = .071 (not significant)						
EG vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .002 (significant)						
UE vs. JHS: <i>p</i> = .197 (not significant)						

Note: ANOVA at 5% Level of Significance; df1 = 3, df2 = 103

### Differences in Students' Linguistic Competence by Sex

Table 5 reveals statistically significant differences in linguistic competence between male and female students, with females outperforming males across all measured components. Female learners achieved higher mean scores in sentence structure ( $\bar{x} = 14.90$ ), parallelism ( $\bar{x} = 11.52$ ), and transitional devices ( $\bar{x} = 9.26$ ), resulting in a substantially higher overall competence score ( $\bar{x} = 35.67$ ) than males ( $\bar{x} = 28.61$ ). The largest gender gap was observed in overall linguistic competence, followed by sentence structure, parallelism, and transitional devices, indicating that female learners demonstrate greater grammatical accuracy, cohesion, and syntactic control than their male counterparts. Evidence from the study shows that gender differences in linguistic competence are closely tied to learners' engagement, strategy use, and attention to discourse-level features. Female students may outperform males due to consistent application of metacognitive strategies, including planning, monitoring, and revising, which enhances cohesion and structural balance in writing (Zhao et al., 2024; Noroozi et al., 2023). Conversely, male learners may demonstrate strengths in sentence-level complexity and lexical sophistication

(Tankó, 2021; Wiyanto & Asmorobangun, 2020) but often underperform in integrating these features consistently into coherent essays, reflecting uneven mastery of higher-order writing skills.

**Table 5.** Differences in students' linguistic competence by sex (n=107)

Variables	n	$\bar{x}$	t	p	Decision	Remark
<b>Types of Sentence Structure</b> (20 items)						
Male	49	11.61	4.284	<.001	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Female	58	14.90				
<b>Transitional Devices</b> (20 items)						
Male	49	7.84	2.199	.030	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Female	58	9.26				
<b>Parallelism</b> (20 items)						
Male	49	9.16	2.977	.004	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Female	58	11.52				
<b>Overall Linguistic Competence</b> (60 items)						
Male	49	28.61	3.734	<.001	Reject H <sub>02</sub>	Significant
Female	58	35.67				

t-Test for Independent Data at 5% Level of Significance; df = 105

These findings align with prior studies indicating that female learners generally produce more coherent, well-organized writing and engage more consistently in strategy use (Noroozi et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024; Tankó, 2021). However, some research reports no significant gender differences under highly standardized instructional conditions (Alharthi, 2025), suggesting that gender effects are context-dependent and influenced by factors such as teaching quality, classroom climate, and exposure to English. From a theoretical perspective, while Chomsky's concept of innate language capacities (White, 2020) provides a foundation for understanding linguistic competence, the observed gender differences underscore the critical role of sociocognitive and educational factors, including engagement patterns, strategy use, and writing habits (Khan & Maji, 2025). Female learners' stronger metacognitive engagement appears to facilitate effective mastery of grammar and discourse strategies, translating into higher academic writing proficiency.

These results underscore the need for gender-responsive instruction. Male learners may benefit from targeted support in sentence construction, use of cohesive devices, and parallelism, while female learners should continue to be challenged with higher-order writing tasks. Structured writing frameworks, guided practice, explicit modeling, and formative feedback can help all learners improve, particularly in integrating linguistic accuracy with discourse-level cohesion. It is important to note that the study does not capture changes in writing development over time, nor does it consider extracurricular writing activities that may influence gender-related differences. Consequently, observed performance gaps may be shaped by factors beyond classroom instruction, such as independent writing practice, peer collaboration, or engagement with authentic texts.

## Conclusion

The study demonstrates that mastery of sentence structure, transitional devices, and parallelism underpins the coherence and clarity of essays, highlighting the central role of linguistic competence in academic writing. Students first exposed to English in Kindergarten or the Early Grades outperformed later-entry learners, illustrating the developmental advantages of early language acquisition, while female students consistently surpassed males, reflecting the influence of engagement, strategy use, and metacognitive regulation. Strong correlations between linguistic competence and essay-writing ability confirm that grammatical accuracy, cohesion, and structural balance are critical predictors of writing quality; however, many students remain at the Satisfactory or Developing level, indicating uneven mastery of higher-order skills. These results suggest that secondary English instruction should integrate sentence- and discourse-level skills through explicit teaching of cohesion, parallelism, and structural variety, provide targeted support and guided practice for late-entry learners and male students, and embed metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and revision within authentic, genre-based writing activities. The study is limited by its single-site design, reliance on cross-sectional data, and constrained generalizability. Future research could track linguistic competence longitudinally to assess the persistence of early-exposure advantages, investigate the impact of explicit grammar and discourse interventions, and conduct comparative analyses across grade levels to identify developmental trends. Aligning instruction with these findings also contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 by promoting quality education that equips learners with foundational language competencies essential for academic and professional success.

## Contributions of Authors

**Minche B. Darong:** conceptualization, research design, data gathering, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript

**Teofan C. Gallosa:** supervision of the research, critical review

**Maria Chona Z. Futalan:** interpretation of results, validation of methodology

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## Conflict of Interests

This study has no conflict of interest of any sort.

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