

Syntactic Priming: Improving Senior High School Learners' Writing Proficiency

MERAFLO MONTAJES ALOJADO

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6334-9021>

maimuffins32@gmail.com

Tongantongan National High School
Tongantongan, Valencia City

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ABSTRACT

Syntactic priming is a tendency for a speaker or writer to repeat of a recently produced or heard in a language structure by processing and sharing the same underlying syntactic structure which serves as the intervention for the students who were having difficulties in writing specifically on coordinating conjunctions. It would enhance the secondary students' writing proficiency in sentence construction to produce better-written outputs not only in educational context but also to the corporate world as well. This experimental research investigated the significant difference on the Grade 11 students Section Tulip before and after using syntactic priming as an intervention in writing. The researcher made use of structured test like pre-test and post-test to measure the effectiveness of syntactic priming in students' writing performances. Statistical techniques such as mean and t-test were also used. Analyzed data revealed that there was an increased on their scored mean from pre-test to post-test among thirty identified participants as poor writers. Furthermore, there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test since the P-Value (0.000) was lesser than 0.5, the null hypothesis was rejected with 95% level of confidence based on the students' scores before

and after taking the intervention which was not the same.

Keywords – Linguistic, syntactic priming, writing proficiency, experimental design, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Syntactic priming is an approach to minimize syntax difficulty of the learners' writing following the appropriate manner in producing proper grammar in constructing sentences. Since writing is one of the important aspects language which needs to be given attention, Noam Chomsky conceptualizes an idea on grammatical properties to make it simpler in making sentences represented by symbols with binary values and these grammatical theories generate rules, forms, and patterns to be followed in creating "formalized theory of linguistic structure."

Nowadays, the writing ability of the students still has been faced due to the high percentage of errors committed by secondary learners in terms of syntax. These learners are well versed in writing supposedly, but they are empowered with advanced tools and results to weaken their interests to write in the class. In a real setting, though teachers provide varied performance tasks, still learners find apprehension in sentence construction wherein the functions of the English language eventually are significant in both written and spoken forms. In linguistic theory, Chomsky describes grammar as a tool in producing all sentences at all levels of language analysis because writing is incredibly essential in education, business, and communication.

To bridge the gap of the learners and lift their academic performances which are affected, the syntactic priming approach serves as an intervention in producing better language outputs not only in educational context but in the corporate world. Pickering, Branigan, Cleland, and Stewart (2000) defines syntactic priming as the tendency for a speaker or writer to repeatedly produce on what he heard and seen in a language structure which recognizes a syntactic representation by processing of another and sharing with the same underlying syntactic structure. It aids as mediation to solve sentence writing difficulty.

To prove the efficacy of this syntactic priming in developing language instruction and lessen the problems on syntax is Kuerten's theory (2007) explains that syntactic priming has a good effect not only in behavioural aspect but in output production among students in the field of language which reduces their writing problems in both active and passive verbs. Also, McDonough

and Mackey (2008) in United States America scrutinize the usefulness of this method as an alternative tool between language production and second language development which have largely encouraged on learners' immediate reactions to interactional feedback. Scheepers (2003) also explores on priming activities in second language acquisition research applicable to the other researches but limited only with the dealt of modality still, shows that experimental groups make more target structures in their written forms than the control group. Learners tend to repeat the types of sentences during language production due to syntactic priming as the phenomenon whereby the act of processing in the form of utterance facilitates processing the subsequent utterance in the same form, Segaert, Menenti, Weber, and Hagoort (2011). They adopt Bock's experiment in which it uses a picture description to let the speakers' repeated prime sentences and describe semantically unrelated target pictures.

In Asia, like Indonesia, Rahman and Asfah's (2018) investigation on explicit grammar instruction has been exposed to English structures and ends up with automatization on students' written language production. This research eventually comes up with similar structures have been conveyed from students' essays and their language discourses. As an effect, this priming approach with unambiguous instruction leads the learners to use similar syntax in their writing and provide an excellent impact on students' grammatical knowledge for immediate use. In Japan, Tamaoka (2009), examines the effect on syntactic priming in sentence comprehension in which primed sentences match with the target sentences and somehow partial overlaps in some structures but over-all, the learners are syntactic in nature and independent of lexical/ semantic priming. Chen, Xu, Tan, Zhang, and Zhong (2013) reanalyses the structure as a relative clause in English of the Chinese readers in which demonstrated on the verb repetition but not similarity in meaning produced a syntactic priming effect in Chinese.

However, those researches give positive feedback on syntactic priming, still there are researchers argue and doubts the priming method like Shin, J. (2010) study's in Korea on bilingual syntactic production and Shin and Christianson (2009) with dative structures in English and Korean both experiments show that cross-linguistic structural priming from the second language to the first language does not occur; instead target sentences are found. Moreover, the results indicate no effect on second language proficiency in first language production, while second language proficiency has an effect on language production considering English as the medium. Ledoux, K. (2007) also claims that the priming effect has been less demonstrated in comprehension than production and only depended

upon the repetition of verbs across sentences. As a conclusion, syntactic priming is dissociated from the effects of lexical repetition at the verb. In the Philippines, Cabansag (2013) also stresses that writing proficiency of the Filipino students in Cagayan Valley reveals in the data the persistent errors committed by the participants in their written compositions namely: uses of verbs, tenses, proper use of capitalization and other mechanics. And thus, the researcher explores linguistic concepts and actions further to overcome the problems.

Writing proficiency is one of the major problems among five micro skills in which learners find trouble in producing written outputs especially in terms of the grammatical structure of the sentences. It is more than 60% of the students according to the survey 2017 in Department of Education mainly in public schools struggle for written communication though they are given written activities from their teachers for enhancement and practice purposes still sentence construction is the most difficult to deliver. Though the English language is formally introduced during elementary years, still the said department urges teachers to continue exerting efforts which instil the value of learning English not only in reading, speaking and so with the writings to be globally competitive not just in sports, arts but also to academics.

But in Tongantongan National High School, one of the public secondary schools in the City of Valencia in the province of Bukidnon, Philippines mainly in Grade 11 students have been challenged much more on using appropriate connectors in sentence writing. Students' difficulty in writing a sentence can be seen from their written activities while others are unable to write even simple text. Yes, they can express their thoughts, but improper usage of tenses, transitions, and connectors are highly observed. Probably, those happen because of less practice or boring method of learning activity. It is true that teaching-learning method can influence students' success failure in learning subject. They usually produce the written outputs erroneously like using between "but" and "yet," "nor" and "or."

In Senior High School Curriculum, one of the writings must be mastered by students is the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "for," "and," "nor," "but," "or," "yet," "so." These coordinators display as significant roles in connecting two or more sentences to shorten sentences but still expressing one idea or thought without repeating the other words either the case of the subject or predicate as connectors link to words, phrases, and clauses (Mayall & Hall, 2005).

In addition, the present researcher has been observed these senior students have great problems when assigned to produce outputs even simple sentences. They are unable to select appropriate words and put them into grammatical

sentences which are mostly contained with incorrect word order especially in the use of conjunctions. Though, mentors provide varied performance tasks still learners find apprehension in the syntax wherein the functions of English language should have played essential roles in both written and spoken forms as this approach enhances to make better language outputs not only in educational context but in the corporate world.

Moreover, the poor mastery of English of the selected thirty students is based on their performances in writing might be attributable to such factors as limited time of exposure to the language particularly in using connectors. Meanwhile, during English lessons teachers, the learners do not use English all the time; they use both English, Filipino, Bisayan and even Ilonggo dialect. The limited time for English as dictated by the curriculum does not allow the teachers to practice regularly to improve their vocabulary and other discourses which are the basis for developing the students' writing abilities. By using this syntactic priming as an intervention, expected that the students are capable of learning the easier way in the process of writing. In this method, the exposure of sentences with a particular syntax can be patterned identically on what they have heard and seen from priming activities (Pickering, Branigan, Cleland, & Stewart, 2000).

Consequently, the current research adopts this approach to increase learners' performances on writing skills like sentence processing which are very significant in composing sentences and even paragraphs through the use of images or pictures. It provides a better understanding of how the mechanisms of comprehension acquire language and tell the processor of syntactic priming to employ knowledge sources by clues given during activities. The uttered hints happen where the priming normally occurs and when sentences are syntactically alike to the prepared answers in the given pictures during pre-test and post-test assessment. It is very useful for teachers in helping their students to increase their written production. It develops their scripts to construct sentences properly not only in coordinating conjunctions but in other areas, as well.

Process

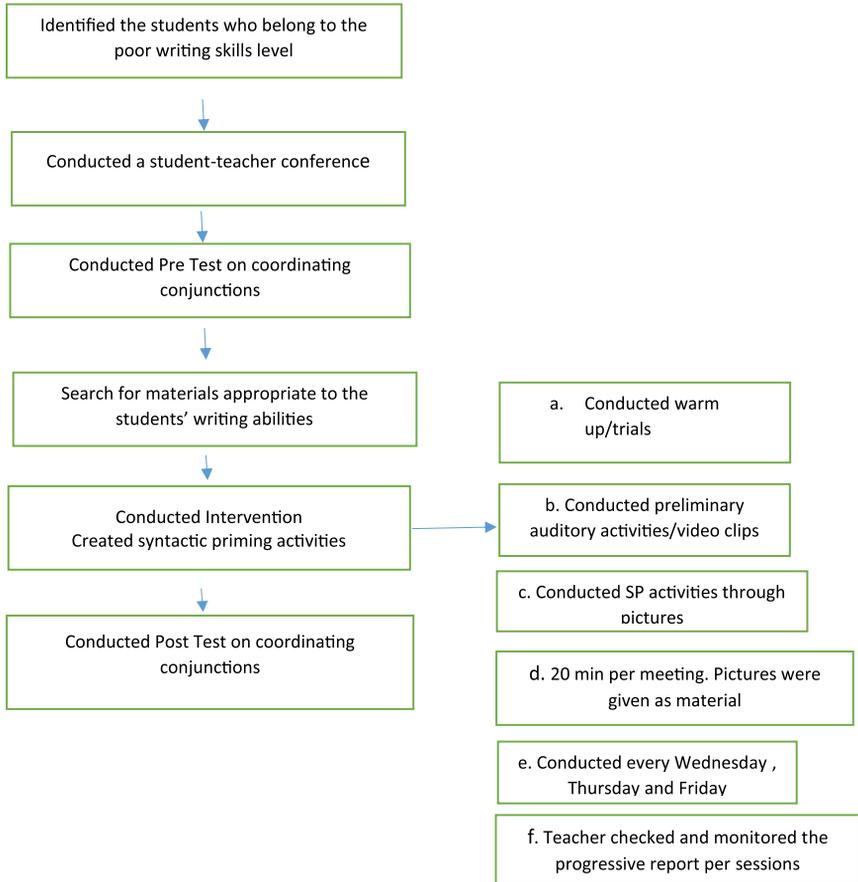


Figure 1. This diagram is the flow of syntactic priming as intervention to solve syntax difficulty in any writings specifically in the used of coordinating conjunctions “for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so” to address the main problem the poor writing skills of the Grade 11 students in Tongantongan National High School, Valencia City Philippines.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study examines the effect of syntactic priming as an intervention on students' writing abilities. Specifically, it sought to answer the following: (1) to identify the coordinating conjunctions mistakenly used by Grade 11 students in making sentences. (2) To determine the student's writing proficiency level before and after using syntactic priming (3) to evaluate the improvement of students' writing proficiencies after using syntactic priming.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This action research utilizes experimental design which seek to find out the syntactic priming and its effects in student's writing proficiency before and after using the intervention by a self-administered test to the specified thirty participants who are identified to poor writers at the beginning of the academic year 2018-2019 out of one hundred twenty-seven students in Grade 11 at Tongantongan National High School in Tongantongan Valencia City of Bukidnon, Philippines based on their written tasks. This design had been selected to fulfill the aims of the study from the identification of the coordinating conjunctions which are erroneously committed by the said respondents mainly in word order and sentence construction and its effect of syntactic priming on students' writing proficiencies after using the said intervention.

Moreover, the performances of the students toward writing in general before and after using syntactic priming as an intervention have been evaluated through descriptive statistics such as mean and t-test analysis. The structured test is also used to incorporate the descriptive statements of the respondents during the conduction of the study. Data from descriptive writings using images presented via multimedia presentations are also employed to measure if there is an improvement of scores from pre-test to post-test assessment.

Research Site

The study is conducted at Senior High School Department specifically in Grade 11 students in Tongantongan National High School, a public secondary school situated at Purok 8, Brgy. Tongantongan, approximately eight-kilometer from the city proper. The school has been an Annex of Valencia National High School since it was founding in 2006. The school legislated as a national high

school last April 2013 and accredited as School-Based Management (SBM) Level 2 High School in 2014. At present, the school, had 1200 enrollees, 17 classrooms, 1 H.E room, 2 computer laboratories, and 35 teachers. It has five sections of Grade 7, five also for Grade 8, four sections in grades 9 and 10 and four sections in the senior secondary curriculum. The thirty (30) recipients from Grade 11 Section Tulips are chosen because these are considered as the poor writers among Senior High School students to resolve the low level of students' writing proficiency in the said curriculum. Likewise, they are accessible and highly advisable to be addressed based on their suited needs.

Participants

The respondents of this study are 30 (n=30) who belong to identified students who are poor in writing sentences from Tulip section only of Senior High School Department of Tongantongan National High School, Valencia City. To be included as respondents, the participants are screened based on the results of their scores on their written performance tasks given from the first quarter of the school year 2018-2019. Twenty-one (21) males and nine (9) were females. Out of one hundred twenty-seven (127), Thirty (30) Grade 11 students are identified as poor writers at the beginning of the school year from Technical Vocational and Livelihood Track composed of Shield Metal Arc and Welding, Information and Communication Technology and Cookery. The students' ages ranged from 16-22 and mostly come from middle to below the poverty line family.

The researcher further identified the thirty (30) participants through a purposive selection because they rank as the lowest in terms of writing aptitudes in English instruction and also have the lowest scores in the structured test. Descriptive essays' results from the pictures presented per sessions during the intervention period are also asked from them to determine the improvement of the scored mean from pre-test to post-test.

Instrumentation

The researcher used structured test and descriptive essays as the research instruments of the study. The first set which is the structured test- a sixty multiple choice item dealt with the conjunctions used during pre-test and post-test assessment and this test has been checked and validated by the school administrator, research coordinator, language panel and teachers and co-researchers. The test has been used as pilot-test in Grade 11 Marigold before the actual conduction of the intervention in Tulips.

The second is the descriptive essays. Descriptive essays are the data gathered from the intervention on syntactic priming to measure the students' writing capabilities through pictures presented via multimedia. The students are given two pictures to be described in written forms per session written on the paper provided by the researcher.

Data Gathering and Procedure

After all the preliminaries and protocol are observed from data validity and reliability of the test, a letter request is properly set to conduct this action research. The researcher calls the attention of the students who belong to the poor level based on the result of the writing assessment done in the first quarter written activities of the school year 2018-2019. Only thirty students from the same grade 11 Tulip are chosen to be the respondents of the study.

During the pre-test assessment, the students answer the sixty multiple-choice item, and due to their poor performances specifically on the coordinating conjunctions, the researcher then conducted an intervention through the use of pictures where students can write sentences based on the images shown to their teacher. They are given twenty minutes every session during Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays based on their vacant schedules to avoid disruption of classes. It has been implemented for two months equivalent to eight weeks to complete the cycle. This intervention, a researcher utters directly to the description of the pictures loudly and let them absorb the descriptions without knowing that they are already developing their skills through the use of conjunctions during motivations and short drills for 5-10 minute while the second 10-minute session is the implementation process where they give descriptions through writing descriptive paragraphs suited on each image per session.

To identify the common coordinating conjunctions mistakenly used in making sentences, the researcher recalls and lists the major coordinators who are incorrectly used in sentence construction from the assessment provided.

To determine the student's writing proficiency level before and after using syntactic priming, the researcher conduct pre-test and post-test to assess if there is a difference from pre-test to post-test using the said intervention.

To evaluate the syntactic priming improvement the students' writing proficiency, it must be based on the results of the intervention conducted by the researcher to the said identified mentally challenged participants.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, all participants are subject to participate voluntarily. Accomplices are rest assured that their own identity together with the name of the departments and sections, works will be remained confidential. The identified participants are explained that the test is completely anonymous excluded any personal information such as names, addresses, advisers, and if necessary may only reveal during the presentation of the paper to the administration, other than these, their identities must not be in public for their security. Also, all participants are provided by the copy of the results upon request. The researcher must obtain an Ethics Clearance Review Committee with the permission and signed consents from respondents and their parents.

Statistical Analysis

Before dealing out the responses, the completed structured test was checked and edited for completeness and consistency. The researcher mainly used descriptive statistics such as mean, percentage, and t-test to determine the increase of their writing performances. The data gathered are analysed and treated in accordance with the objective of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Writing proficiency of the students have been challenged until today due to difficulty in syntax and its language rules. It implies that these students are empowered by the advanced technologies and diminish their interests to write and practice which much be more exposed in this micro-skill.

Obviously, at this level, senior high school students are well enhanced in any writings not only in patterns but in content and proper usage of grammatical features. Sad to say, some students still categorize to mentally challenge because of syntax difficulty in connecting words, phrases and clauses. They interchange most of the time the uses of the “but” and “yet,” “so” and “and” “or” and “nor” “so” and “for. Perhaps, they able to distinguish these coordinating conjunctions but not too in depth functions and purposes once it links with other thoughts. They just join the sentences without comprehending to the new meaning attached in the newly constructed sentences. For them, as long as they can connect with the seven coordinators: “for and, nor, but, or, yet, so” which is popularly known as FANBOYS, they are grammatically correct.

Coordinating conjunctions are most of the time mistakenly used by Grade 11 students due to the proper usage which gives them confusion on the functions and results to the interchange of coordinators. The conjunctions of “but,” “yet,” “for,” “not,” and “so,” 75% of them switched most of the uses of conjunctions like the use of “but” and “yet” based on their written outputs during the performance tasks in the beginning of the academic year 2018-2019. Example of the statements were as follows: “The children were not in happy faces, but they could still play,” in the said statement instead of using “but,” it must be “yet,” while in this statement, “ The balloons were nice yet it burst out easily,” supposedly the correct connector can be used for positive to negative thought is “but.” Then, others used “or” instead of “so” as the opposite. In short, the learners might swap the connectors due to lack of exposure and training on grammatical features in English. However, the 25% not simply interchanged but they answer “and” most of the time then, as long as there are more than two sentences to be connected each other, they simply use “and” to link with others regardless if it is correct or not.

Meanwhile, based on the data gathered the level of students’ writing proficiencies before syntactic priming being used is poor while average to excellent after using the intervention.

Table 1. Students’ Writing Abilities during Pre-Test and Post-Test Assessment

| | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|-----------|---------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 | Pre-test | 13.5333 | 30 | 5.3222 | .9717 |
| | Post-test | 16.9000 | 30 | 4.9154 | .8974 |

In this data explains that scored mean from 13.53 has improved as the post-test assessment conducted to 16.90, the researcher then determines also, standard deviation and error mean down to 0.41 from 0.74 and thus, this syntactic priming can improve their writing skill level based on their scores from pre-test assessment specifically on coordinating conjunctions.

Definitely, there is an escalation of a percentage due to syntactic intervention, students are now able to identify the coordinating conjunctions very well and the errors committed to using coordinators are slightly observed. They increase their performances definitely on the intervention used in which broaden their minds and skills in choosing the proper conjunctions in joining words and sentences.

Table 2. Significant Difference between Pre-Test and Post-Test Assessment

| Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | (lower) | (Upper) | t | Df | Sig.(tailed) 95% Level of Conf. |
|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|---------|---------|---|----|---------------------------------|
| Pair 1 Pre Test | | | | | | | |
| -3.336 | 3.819 | .697 | -4.791 | -1.940 | | 30 | .0000 |
| & Post Test | | | -4.828 | | | | |

The scored mean increased of more than 3 % from 13. 53 to 16.90 using One-Sample T-Test which results in a p-value of 0.000 based on the data below. It is noted that there is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test since it was lesser than 0.5, which simply meant that null hypothesis was rejected with 95% level of confidence based on the students’ scores before and after taking the intervention in which are not the same.

This action research, also affirm with other researches’ findings of the study, Bock (1986) who reports a study which specifically used structural priming to investigate language structures and used the active description of the target picture which resulted the same effect has observed after the said intervention. Pickering, Branigan, Cleland, and Stewart (2000) supports the results of Bock’s study reveals that produced sentences are often structurally similar to recently heard utterances. Rahman and Asfah (2018) in exposure to English structures through explicit instruction has been concluded that there is an impact on students’ grammatical knowledge for immediate use in writing. McDonough and Mackey (2008) indicate that participants who evidenced high levels of syntactic priming are likely to advance to a higher stage in English as Second Language while Erviyanti, R. (2015) determines that syntactic priming is a better approach in writing but has more demanding task compared with speaking that eventually requires more conscious knowledge of grammar and language.

Furthermore, there is an impact to the learners from the intervention used since the identified poor writers are now averagely scored in their written performance tasks, and most of them have already recognized the functions and proper usage of coordinating conjunctions in which the tendency of interchanging the major coordinators are not highly observed after the assessment. This intervention serves them as a solution to lessen the writing difficulties in making sentences and paragraphs especially in linking thoughts and other ideas. Through this, they enable to increase their performances, exercise the techniques to eliminate redundancies and join the phrases, clauses, and even sentences appropriate and properly to be connected.

CONCLUSIONS

Syntactic priming is the solution to lessen syntax difficulty especially in the usage of coordinating conjunctions through the use of pictures. It serves them as a tool in broadening their knowledge in recognizing the correct way of linking thoughts and ideas through F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. (for, and, nor, but, or, yet so). This approach tends the speakers to speak or write the prime (speaking the first sentence in a successive pair sentences) and the target (second sentence) which is profound to syntactic priming because speaker or the teacher select to repeat the target utterance to be immersed by the participants in the form of writing. It measures the ability also of a learner to produce the same syntactic structure based on the language features provided by the speaker who sends information about the picture description.

Then, the learners enable to come up with sentences that are similar to recently heard or have viewed from the speakers or writers as they process the language features and share it with the same syntax in written forms. They can easily absorb the descriptions automatically in a given time duration which is good for immediate use only. To retain the information for the next day, learners should employ practice in writing and even reading to widen their vocabulary use and improve their grammatical skills as well.

Moreover, writing skill is very important not only in educational context but in the world of employment, business and other communications. This skill perhaps difficult to enhance if there is no patience in practical applications. The learners should write, read their works more than twice, edit and revise to the extent they can completely eradicate repetitions and pattern it a correct way of linking words, sentences and even paragraphs. Through this syntactic priming, sentence construction may be easier for the learners to write and somehow develop the students' writing abilities and resolve the difficulty in writing using coordinating conjunctions (Leonard, 2011).

Other researchers also agreed to the conclusions of this intervention which are excellent at their explorations. Oltra-Massuet, Sharpe, Neophytou, and Marantz (2017), where syntactic priming has been discovered in its good effect in comprehension and recommends since it has a stronger contribution in the syntax level of the respondents. Reza (2007) also indicates also that priming generates an increased production of the target structure by the experimental groups as compared with the production of the control group. The experimental group appeared that the rate of production of the target structure has remained

significantly higher for the selected participants and so with, Fine, Jaeger, Farmer, and Qian (2013) on syntactic processing within the speakers that participants could easily absorb on the intended messages through the use of this priming method.

Based on the data findings, lots of errors committed by Grade 11 Tulips participants due to the high inclination to interchange the coordinating conjunctions in connecting sentences. It is definitely due to lack of experience in writing in previous years, that supposedly at their level now they are well-developed already in any writing performances. Though it is an additional burden for the teachers to restart in the grammatical rules and yet they have to be exposed merely in constructing sentences for them to write a good composition. In short, teachers should give more written activities and expose them again to enrich their knowledge on sentence construction and somehow heighten their abilities in their works.

Nevertheless, through this mediation, there is absolutely an escalating of scores based on post-assessment. In short, there is a positive effect on the students' performances. Since the main objective enables to repeat and follow the patterns of English language structures in the use of coordinating conjunctions, this simply means that the scores prove that there is progress on their abilities in writing sentences. Of course, the participants able to gain benefits during the priming sessions in the given writing tasks from poor to average with 3.37%. In short, it is a good point to implement this approach to enhance students' writing abilities in any forms of writings.

Syntactic Priming is a better approach to any strategies in the sense that learners can easily get a hint in providing words, phrases, and clauses. A sort of motivation to let the learners think and absorb the clues spoken or heard from the initiator. This is one way of implying that these learners can be improved in some ways not only in writing abilities but also their interests to write something on what comes to their mind automatically based on the given picture. Since most of them are visuals, love images, it easy for them to follow the patterns in which it provides the new information for new vocabulary and learnings by session. Then, after the activities, perhaps they can recall immediately on the words chosen by them to input because of the pictures presented in the previous. And for that, it lessens the burden of themselves and so with the teachers to check on the grammatical rules in language especially on the usage of conjunctions. Usually, they can produce identical sentences as they repeat the activities they can improve the uses of language features.

Hence, there is an improvement using this syntactic intervention. It has a significant difference as an indication of effective technique on writing skills development of the learners. Syntactic priming reveals that there is a higher probability of Grade 11 Tulips to produce the language features as how the learners' influence from the speaker's utterance, in short, they able to process the same patterns and structures in making sentences with the correct use of coordinators through picture description method. Evidently, through this, the repeated syntactic structures are produced or imitated almost the same syntax in written production. It provides them new input for the new information they have heard and make some valuable insights into real-world syntactic processing in any writings and even in conversations.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The result of the study can be translated through articles, journals, publications, newsletters, radio, social media, and other media for information dissemination but not limited to policy, song, dance, illustrational books, drama, storytelling, brochures, posters, paintings, radio play, and video clips. Indigenous materials such as wall newspaper, one-act play, among others may be designed for stakeholders, and other sponsoring group and organization from the remote areas, social media and mass media (TV, newspaper, and radio) may be used in the information.

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