The Saigon International University

The Saigon International
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Research Paper

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RESEARCH PAPER

Major:
English Language

Topic:
**Using Syntactic patterns
to improve writing skills
of The Saigon International
University students**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the project work entitled: "Using Syntactic patterns to improve writing skills of The Saigon International University students" is a record of the independent research work and it has been carried out by me during the period of my study, under the supervision of the instructors Lect. Nguyen Thi Kim Chung, M.A. and Lect. Nguyen Thi Phuoc Da, M.A.

This study is my original work, has not submitted to any other university for the award.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

A = adjective

Adv = adverb

AdvP = adverb phrase

AP = adjective phrase

DET = determiner

dO = direct object

ditrans-prep = ditransitive prepositional verb

H = the head

headN = the head noun

InfP = infinitive phrase

N = noun

NP = noun phrase

N' = N-bar (noun bar)

NOM = nominal

P = predicate

PP = prepositional phrase

PRE-DET = pre-determiner

S = subject

V = verb

VP = verb phrase

* = unaccepted form

(?) = unidentified form

VSTEP = Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency

SIU = The Saigon International University

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INSTRUCTORS' COMMENTS

• Student Name: Do Truong Minh

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• Topic: Using Syntactic patterns to improve writing skills of The Saigon International University students

After the research, the instructors had some comments as follows:

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Ho Chi Minh City, date …. month …. year ….

Instructors' confirmation

(signature and full-name)

ABSTRACT

Research questions: What are the common sentence structure errors in students' writing? Does the use of syntax patterns improve the writing skills of SIU students?

In this case, the aim of the research is to use syntax to help SIU students improve sentence structure in English paragraph writing. The study is designed to help students in the short term to apply the syntax to improve the necessary points in English writing skills, based on the grammar assessment criteria framework of VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency). The research of using syntax to improve writing skills is not a new research, but the biggest difference of this work compared to others is: instead of focusing on analyzing all assessment criteria as content, organization, vocabulary and grammar in a paragraph or an essay - this is very difficult for a student simutaneously to improve all the criteria in an essay and they sometimes confuse to be able to know where to start, the researcher's study focuses on only grammar criteria of VSTEP assessment in improving the structure in English sentences with syntax. The key to forming paragraphs and essays. The population was a chosen group of ten third-year students of the Department of Foreign Languages at The Saigon International University and the sampling was a purposive technique. In this study, the researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach and group study as a means of helping students to recall the old knowledge learned in syntactic subjects and instruct them to apply syntax in self-correcting grammatical errors in writing. This research consisted a pre-test and a post-test on writing a paragraph, and a post reflective questionnaire.

The results of this research shows that even though my study was limited consisting of only ten students, the use of syntax in improving writing skills was a reliable and valid research for students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the introduction to the research. It consists of the background of the study, reasons for choosing the topic, statement of the problem, purposes of the study, significance of the study, the scope of the study, research questions, research hypothesis.

1.1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the university context, one of the most important skills for learning English is writing (Hyland, 2003). It is required in universities' English curriculum. University students who are English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners need to learn many types of writing, for example, basic writing, paragraph writing, and essay writing. Thus, producing effective writing is crucial in academic writing contexts. Besides, syntax is a compulsory subject for English language students; however, many students have learned well but cannot apply it and understand the true nature of syntax.

This project work has the following central questions: (1) What are the common sentence structure errors in SIU student's writing? (2) Does the use of syntactic patterns improve writing skills for SIU students?

1.2. REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE TOPIC

As a third-year English language major at The Saigon International University, the researcher has a general and objective view of the long time spent learning to write. Students usually learn to write sentences in the first year, then learn to write paragraphs in the second year and essay writing in the third year. In addition, to improve the grammar in the writing, students have been given so many grammar exercises for years. However, its effectiveness was seen as quite negative. For a student who already has knowledge, it is very easy for him to acquire and write a great essay at his own level; otherwise, many students, who are not good at writing skills, are quite struggling to understand and apply dry and incomprehensible grammatically points in writing. Grammar exercises from the teachers sometimes just make them memorize the grammar in a reassuring and emotionless way. Because of not understanding the proper function of English

grammar, quite a lot of second-year and third-year students still make the basic grammatical errors in writing.

Therefore, is there another method that can help students improve their grammar except the ineffective ways mentioned above? This question has been with the researcher for a long time until he took the syntax course. The researcher realized that syntax can help students analyze functions of the constituents in English sentence structure. By this way, they can identify and self-correct their ungrammatical sentence structure in writing – the essential key forming a great paragraph or a good essay.

In this study, the purpose of the researcher to choose this topic was investigated and found out the syntactic aspects which can help improve grammar in sentence structure for SIU students. The paragraph writing tests that the researcher used during the study were considered only supporting documents to easily find common grammatical mistakes in them and also allow the group of experimental students to apply the syntax to identify and self-correct these grammatical mistakes in sentence structure.

1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

Writing paragraphs is an essential skill for university students. There are various types of paragraphs that you have known: descriptive, narrative, expository, persuasive, etc. however, although they depend on the purpose and style of the writer, they still have one thing in common they all have one thing in common is that a good paragraph must be made up of many meaningful and coherent sentences. One of the most common difficulties students face in writing is that they cannot formulate correct and meaningful sentences because they do not understand the grammar of the sentence; that is the syntactic structure of the sentence. According to McLean (2012), "writing in clear sentences is one way to ensure that you communicate well. Since an essay is composed of many paragraphs and each paragraph is composed of sentences, the best way to master essay writing is by starting to learn how to write well-structured sentences that provide clarity and cohesion to the written piece."

1.4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the study is to use syntax to help SIU students improve sentence structure in English writing. This will be a useful reference for all students. The researcher also wanted to investigate whether the use of syntax would have a positive impact on enhancing SIU students' writing.

1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The result of this research is expected to be a useful reference to help SIU students improve their writing grammar quickly by using syntax to understand and self-correct their writing.

This is also a reliable document for new teachers to refer to and apply to correct sentence structure errors written by students.

1.6. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

There are two primary limitations present in this research. The first limitation of the research targets on the methodology: the fact that this researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach. A prevailing characteristic of case studies is that they typically use small sample sizes and non-numerical reporting in the research process. Because of this, the findings of these types of studies are not considered by researchers to be generalizable to a larger population (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2013). However, this limitation is a generally-accepted and unavoidable one that is known by researchers to accompany case study research.

The second limitation of the research revolves around the sampling methodology utilized in the study. Although the researcher used the purposive sampling technique, he only studied the impact on a small group of students. For the current case study, in order to mitigate the effects of researcher bias, the researcher aimed that this study is for a specific group of ten third-year students at Saigon International University from July 1st to July 20th of the year 2020 to reference in need of improving paragraph writing skills. The study only focused on the use of syntax in improving grammatical errors.

1.7. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the common sentence structure errors in SIU students' writing?

2. Does the use of syntactic patterns improve grammar in SIU students' writing?

1.8. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Using syntax would have a positive impact on enhancing SIU students' writing.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. MISTAKES VERSUS ERRORS

According to Corder's definitions (1981:10). He defines a mistake as an error of performance, or a failure to follow a known rule. Just as native speakers of a language make mistakes, so do language learners. They are due to 'memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion' (op cit.). Corder also uses the term 'erroneous sentences' to describe sentences which result from failures of performance. "The noticeable thing about erroneous sentences is that they are normally readily corrected or correctable by the speaker himself" (1981:18). Errors, on the other hand, are failures of competence; the learner does not know the target language rule, and is following his or her interlanguage rules. A learner's interlanguage is the language system the learner uses in the intermediate stages of learning a language (Selinker, 1972). Corder (1981:17) describes it as 'regular, systematic and meaningful, i.e. it has a grammar'. Also, it is unstable; as learners acquire more knowledge of the target language, they revise their interlanguage rules. After understanding the difference between mistakes and errors, the researcher decided to choose the term errors during the study because the purpose of the researcher was to find students' common errors in the writing and help them apply syntax to solve grammatical errors in English sentence structure.

2.2 HOW SHOULD ERRORS BE CORRECTED?

According to James (1998), it is sensible to follow the three principles in error correction. Firstly, the techniques involved in error correction would be able to enhance the students' accuracy in expression. Secondly, the students' affective factors should be taken into consideration and the correction should not be face-threatening to the students.

Some scholars believed that teachers' indirect correction is highly appreciated. They either encourage students to do self-correction in heuristic methods or present the correct form, so students could not feel embarrassed.

Ways of Correction:

There are several ways of correction that can be utilized in the classroom.

Self-correction:

After the student recognizes what is ungrammatical in his response, he should be able to correct himself. Self-correction is the most essential technique, because it helps students remember it better.

Peer correction:

The teacher can encourage other students to supply correction if the student cannot correct himself. This technique is to be applied tactfully, so that he made the error and gets him to say it correctly. Edge (1990) mentions the following advantages of peer students who originally made the mistake will not feel humiliated. In the case of errors, it is useful if after peer correction the teacher goes back to the student who correction:

- It encourages cooperation, students get used to the idea that they can learn from each other

- Both learners (who made the error and who correct) are involved in listening to and thinking about the language

- The teacher gets a lot of important information about the learners' ability – if students learn to practice peer correction without hurting each other's feelings, they will do the same in pair-work activities. However, it may happen that whenever the teacher asks for peer correction from the whole class, it is always the same students who answer. In this case the teacher has to make sure that other students are involved as well.

Teacher correction:

In the event that no one can correct the error, the teacher must help them point out the error by reinterpreting, especially with the errors that the whole class makes. We must always remember that the main purpose of error correction is to provide the best conditions for the student to learn a new language correctly. That is why,

after correcting the error, teachers often have to tell the student who originally made the error and to give the correct response.

2.3. SYNTAX

Syntax is a branch of linguistics that is a study of the structure of a sentence and its elements. Some linguists gave standpoints about syntax:

"Knowing a language includes the ability to construct phrases and sentences out of morphemes and words. The part of the grammar that represents a structure and their formation is called syntax" (Fromkin and Rodman 106).

"Syntax studies the organization of words into phrases and phrases into sentences" (Dwight 171).

"Syntax is study of principle and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular language" (Chomsky 2002).

Form the definition above the researcher concluded that syntax is the branch of grammar which deals with: word syntactic structure, phrase syntactic structure, clause syntactic structure, and sentence syntactic structure.

2.4. STRUCTURE

"Structure is central to the study of syntax. But structure is a very general concept that applies to any complex thing, whether it's a bicycle, a commercial company or a carbon molecule"; "When we say something is complex we mean, not that it is complicated, but that (a) it's divisible into parts (its constituents), (b) there are different kinds of parts (different categories of constituents), (c) the constituents are arranged in a certain way, (d) and each constituent has a specifiable function in the structure of the thing as a whole." (Robert, 2016:6).

2.5. SENTENCE STRUCTURE OF SYNTAX

Constituents consist of words, phrases, sentences, phrases and constituents, structurally ambiguous sentences and kinds of evidence for constituents – (a) omission, (b) replacement by a single word, (c) question test, (d) movement.

Functions comprise subject and predicate, noun phrases and verb phrases, dependency and function, heads, the modifier – head relation and the head – complement relation.

Categories contain elements as nouns, nouns and noun phrases, adjectives and adverbs, adjective phrases and adverb phrases, prepositions and prepositional phrases and co-ordinate phrases.

2.6. CASE STUDY

"a detailed examination of a particular process or situation over a period of time" (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary).

"a detailed study of a person, group, or thing, especially in order to show general principles" (Cambridge Business English Dictionary).

2.7. THE SYNTAX CONCEPT OF THE RESEARCHER

This study followed the conception of the author Noel Burton-Roberts in the book – Analysing Sentences, An Introduction to English Syntax (2016). Not only does he share and explain the syntax-related terms, but he also gives a detailed analysis in the structure of sentences, and helps readers understand and use the syntax effectively in an academic environment.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

3.1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

3.1.1. Aims

• To investigate the impact of using Syntax on enhancing SIU students' performance in writing.

3.1.2. Objectives

• To find out common sentence structural errors in writing

• To test the effect of using Syntax on SIU third-year students' writing

• To suggest and prove the use of Syntax as a means of overcoming grammar difficulties

3.2. METHODOLOGY

3.2.1. Research method

In this study, the researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach to get the data followed eight nine as follows:

1. First, the researcher chose a group of random ten third-year students of the Department of Foreign Languages at SIU. All participants had experienced studying basic writing course and paragraph writing course in their first year and second year, respectively. The English proficiency of the participants was intermediate.

2. After selecting the sample, the researcher conducted a pre-writing test to all ten students.

3. The researcher found the common sentence structure errors in pre-writing tests.

4. After finding out common errors in paragraphs, the researcher would group-study with chosen ten students. He just focused on sharing syntactic knowledge related to solutions to common errors found in pre-writing tests.

The group meetings lasted five sessions which are explained specifically in the section Group Study below.

5. The post-writing test was performed by ten students after they finished the group study. They were required to self-correct the errors of sentence structure in your own pre-writing test by applying the syntactic knowledge shared in the previous 5 sessions.

6. After students finished self-correction, the researcher utilized the peer correction technique in group study.

7. The researcher compared and contrasted the pre-test with the post-test to assess the improvement after group study based on VSTEP criteria for assessing grammar in writing (Appendix 1). Then, both tests' results were teacher-corrected and verified by Lec. Tong Trieu Anh Thu.

8. After having data from the pre-test and post-test comparison, the researcher conducted a post reflective questionnaire to all ten students.

9. After getting students' feedback from the post reflective questionnaire, the researcher concluded the result of SIU student's achievement using syntax in writing.

3.2.2. The case study approach

According to Wallace (1997), "case studies concentrate on what is unique: an individual student, a particular group, a particular class, etc. I have opted for adopting the case study approach because the limited nature of the case study may make it more accessible to the professional." According to Wallace (1997, pp. 160-161), "for practitioners of a profession like teaching, this fact makes case study research more accessible and more valuable."

The purposes of using the case study approach are diverse. The researcher have decided to use this approach in order to explore the following research questions: (1) What are the common sentence structural errors in SIU students' writing? (2) Does the use of syntactic patterns improve sentence structure in writing for SIU students?

3.2.3. Assessment tools

VSTEP is a test format for assessing English language proficiency from level 3 to level 5 according to the 6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam (also known as Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency, abbreviated as VSTEP). This exam format was developed by the University of Foreign Languages - VNU with Professor Nguyen Hoa - the Rector of the University. March 20, 2015 at LTRC Toronto - Canada.

VSTEP is designed to be a level 3 - 5 English proficiency assessment tool for post-high school students, used nationwide and towards international recognition. This is also a goal of the Foreign Language Project 2020. VSTEP is applied to foreign language training institutions, foreign language training programs, and foreign language learners in the national education system.

VSTEP is graded on a 10-point scale for each skill, with four criteria for marking it in the test: content, organization, vocabulary and grammar. The researcher only evaluated the grammar and sentence structure in SIU students' paragraph writing, so he only considered grammar criteria on a scale of 10 in VSTEP.

3.2.4. Pre-test on writing a paragraph

At the beginning of the group study, the experimental group was given an initial test entitled: Pre-test on writing a paragraph (Appendix 2). The objective was to find out the common sentence structural errors in SIU students' paragraph writing.

3.2.5. Group study

The experimental group consisted of ten third-year students who have studied English Syntax at SIU, they are familiar with the syntactic terms and have a basic background. The purpose of the study group is to help students to recall the old knowledge learned in syntactic subjects and instruct them to apply syntax in paragraph writing.

In order to select lessons and exercises shared in group study sessions towards the research objectives, the researcher referred to many English syntax books and two of the main reference books were Analysing Sentences- An Introduction to English Syntax (Noel Burton-Roberts, 2016). and Syntax Workbook (Mick Erkins, 2011). The group study lasted for five sessions of two hours each. In meeting sessions, the researcher only focused on sharing the knowledge of the sentence structure of Syntax in which five indispensable components are constituents, functions, categories, sentence varieties, and types of clauses which were equivalent to the length of five group meeting sessions.

3.2.5.1. FIRST SESSION OF GROUP STUDY – Constituents

In the first group meeting, both researcher and the experimental group learnt about elements related to constituents as words, phrases, sentences, phrases and constituents, and structurally ambiguous sentences.

The researcher recommended four testing methods as omission, replacement by a single word, the question test and movement to identify whether they are words, phrases, sentences, or constituents as well as clarifying structural ambiguity in sentences.

3.2.5.2. SECOND SESSION OF GROUP STUDY – Functions

Constituents have their functions in respect of their sisters. There are three kinds of functional relation between sisters. In the second group meeting, all participants must grasp the following knowledge:

• **Subject-Predicate:** The functional relation between the immediate constituents of sentences, Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases. It is a mutual (two-way) dependency – S and P are both obligatory. S precedes P.

• **Modifier-Head:** This is a one-way dependency, modifiers depend on heads. Modifiers are optional (omissible). Some modifiers precede and some follow the heads they modify.

• **Head-Complement:** A two-way dependency, Complements are obligatory, needed to complete the meaning of the phrase. The head generally precedes its complement.

• **Heads:** The head is the obligatory centre of its phrase. Every phrase has a head and no more than one head. The category of the head determines the category of the phrase.

3.2.5.3. THIRD SESSION OF GROUP STUDY – Categories

In the third group meeting, all participants must grasp the following important general knowledge: the phrasal categories (NP, VP, AP, PP, and AdvP) have a variety of functions as subject, predicate, modifier or complement. But lexical categories (N, V, A, P, and Adv) have only one function – they always function as the head of the appropriate phrasal category. This means that, in any phrase marker, lexical categories must always be dominated by a node bearing the appropriate phrasal category label even if those phrases contain nothing in addition to the head.

3.2.5.4. FOURTH SESSION OF GROUP STUDY – Sentence Variety

In the fourth group meeting, all participants can use the following types of sentences, errors in grammatical sentences and types of clauses: simple, complex, compound, compound-complex sentences; choppy sentences, run-on sentences, fragment sentences, etc. including that-clauses, whether-clauses, and wh-clauses.

3.2.5.5. LAST SESSION OF GROUP STUDY – Application in practice

The participants were provided with some paragraph writing from other class students, then they looked for errors related to the sentence structure shared in the previous four sessions and corrected them.

3.2.6. Post-test on writing a paragraph

This test was performed by ten students after finishing the group study. The purpose of the test is to measure students' understanding of the use of syntax to correct the sentence structure in English writing and to see how many band scores students can increase after applying the syntax into writing paragraphs as well.

3.2.7. Post reflective questionnaire

Students were asked to fill in a questionnaire after completing the task of post-writing test (Appendix 3). The purpose of this questionnaire was to find out how students found the experience of using syntax to enhance paragraph writing skills; how they found the informative syntactic knowledge shared in the group meetings and what they learnt from them.

3.3. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.3.1. Population

"A population is all the possible members of a group defined by the researcher" (Huck and Bounds 1974: 38).

In this study, the researcher determined the population was a group of ten third-year students who major in English language at SIU. All participants, who have studied Syntax, have experienced studying basic writing course and paragraph writing course in their first year and second year, respectively. The English proficiency of the participants was intermediate.

3.3.2. Sampling

According to Best (1981: 89), "sample is a small proportion of population selected for observation and analysis." The researcher selected sample from the population to make the research practical. To make the sample more representative, the researcher used purposive sampling technique.

3.4. DATA COLLECTION

Pre-test on writing a paragraph (Appendix 2)

PURPOSE: to find out the common sentence structure mistakes in SIU students' paragraph writing.

Group study

PURPOSE: to help students to recall the old knowledge learned in syntactic subjects and instruct them to apply syntax in paragraph writing. Besides, it is a useful tool to apply self-correction, pear and teach correction techniques to measure students' improvements.

Post-test on writing a paragraph (Appendix 3)

PURPOSE: to measure students' understanding of the use of syntax to correct the sentence structure in English writing and to see how many band scores students can increase after applying the syntax into writing paragraphs as well.

Post reflective questionnaire (Appendix 5)
(Questionnaire on students' belief in using syntax to improve writing skills)

PURPOSE: to find out how students found the experience of using syntax to enhance writing skills; how they found the informative syntactic knowledge shared in the group meetings and what they learnt from them.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1. RESULTS OF STUDENTS' PRE-TEST ON WRITING A PARAGRAPH

First, the researcher referenced the document - Assessing Language Standards (Grammar and Conventions) for College and Career Readiness (CCR) - to capture the terminology of grammatical errors in sentence structure.

After carefully reading ten students' writing papers, the researcher selected the most common sentence structure errors and divided them into three main categories: the constituent, its functions and categories; clauses (sentence within sentence) and sentence varieties.

Here are some common errors of ten students found in pre-writing tests:

(1) The constituent, its functions and categories

Students N°2, N°7 and N°8 wrote:

*(1.a) "*Accident transport* and the congestion of traffic are becoming serious day by day."

(1.a') "*Transport accidents* and the congestion of traffic are becoming serious day by day."

*(1.b) "I believe *they can improve solve* with some solutions above."

(1.b') "I believe *the potential problems can be solved* with certain solutions above."

*(1.c) "*taxing private vehicle owners* deeply brings some negative points for individual and society."

(1.c') "*high taxes on private vehicle owners* cause some negative aspects to the individual and society."

(2) Clauses

Students N°6 and N°9 wrote:

*(2.a) "It will support many people to adapt to current jobs and work more effectively for the company. *Since* then the official unemployment rate will decrease."

(2.a') "It will support many people to adapt to current jobs and work more effectively for the company *reducing the unemployment rate*."

*(2.b) "public transportation reduce congestion and accidents *if system still imperfect.*"

(2.b') public transportation wound help reduce traffic congestion and accidents *if they are improved.*"

(3) Sentence varieties

Students Nº3 and Nº4 wrote:

(3.a) "Therefore, parents should have the solutions to minimize the bad effects *when playing computer games*."

(3.b) "Therefore, parents should have the solutions to minimize the bad effects *of computer games on children*."

(4.a) "they should *set limits on the length of time games are played*."

(4.b) "they should *set time limits on their kid's use of video games*."

After being supported from Lect. Tong Trieu Anh Thu in finding common mistakes in writing paragraphs of ten students, the researcher would integrate syntax to fix these errors in five group-study meetings.

4.2. RESULTS OF STUDENTS' POST-TEST ON WRITING A PARAGRAPH

Here are some evidences on comparing and contrasting the pre-test with the post-test extracted from one of ten students in the experiment group. In the pre-test, this student had a lot of sentence structure errors. There is a typical example sentence in the paragraph writing: "(1) *One of solution to solve this problem is* (2) *to impose highly tax private car drivers and use the money to develop public transportation*." – band 5 in the VSTEP scale. This sentence is assessed band 5 due to constituent errors. (1) Theoretically, the noun phrase (NP) cannot be uttered

alone in the sentence without having a grammatical relationship with any of the words in it. If a noun phrase is an indefinite and more general interpretation, it can stand alone after an unfilled determiner; otherwise, a noun phrase must have determiners (articles, demonstratives, and possessives) preceded to modify. From the above arguments, the searcher saw that the word "solution" in the example above is categorized as a definite noun phrase which should have been followed by a determiner, shown in *table 4.2.1*. Thus, this phrase is ungrammatically structural because it lacks a determiner, which is shown specifically in *figure 4.2.2*.

A brief function of determiners and pre-determiners:

Non-branching: (1)   NP $\longrightarrow$ $\begin{cases} \text{pronoun} \\ \text{or} \\ \text{name} \end{cases}$

branching: (2)   NP $\longrightarrow$ DET + NOM

(3)   NP $\longrightarrow$ PRE-DET + NP

(4)   NP $\longrightarrow$ NP + & + NP

one of	?	solution	to solve	this problem
QA	**DET**	headN	V	O
Noun phrase			Infinitive phrase (Adjective phrase)	

Table 4.2.1: the description of constituent functions in the phrase
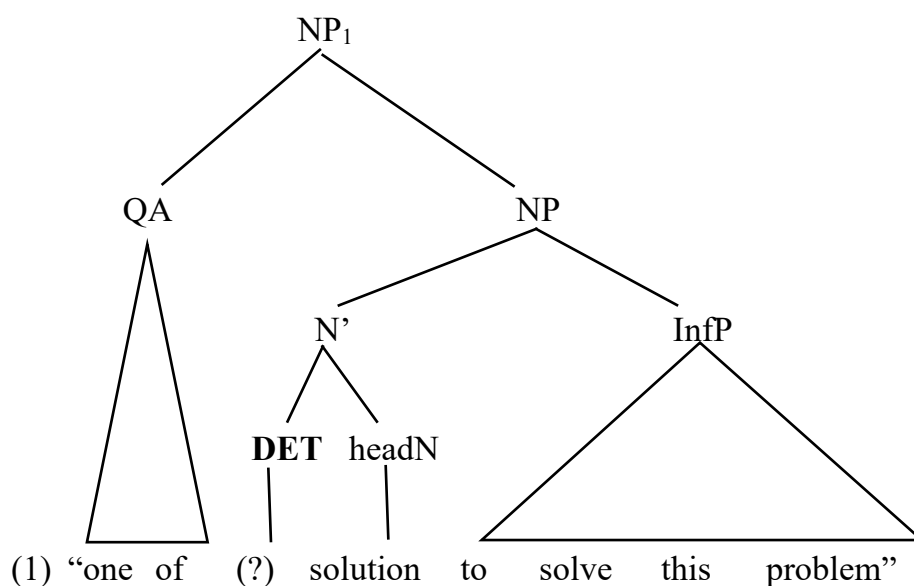

Figure 4.2.2: a Tree Diagram analysis

In the post-test, this student corrected this constituent errors by adding a determiner and the noun in the plural, as follows: "One of the solutions to tackle this issue is …"

In the phrase (2) "…*to impose highly tax private car drivers …*" written in the student's pre-writing test. This phrase is ungrammatically structural due to functional errors of constituents. This is shown as follows:

"to   impose (3) *highly   tax   private   car   drivers*"
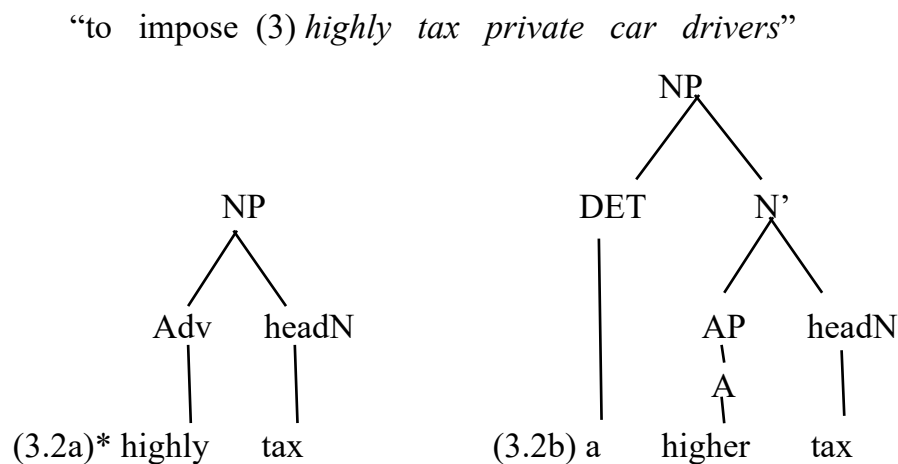
Figure 4.2.3: a Tree Diagram analysis

The phrase (3.2a)* is wrong because the adverb cannot be a pre-modifier of a noun.

In the post-writing test, this phrase was corrected as (3.2b):

"… to impose a higher tax …"

In addition, another ungrammatically structural point in the phrase (2) is the misuse of verb phrases. The verb "to impose" in (2) is not a ditransitive verb, but a ditransitive prepositional verb which is grammatically formed in *Table 4.2.4.*

to impose	a higher tax	**on**	private car owners
ditrans – prep	dO	Prepositional object	

Table 4.2.4: the description of constituent functions in the phrase

The phrase "*car drivers*" changed into "*car owners*" in *table 4.2.4* to be a meaningful phrase in context. Finally, this student could self-correct and form another better sentence structure by applying syntactic analysis and tree diagrams: "One of the solutions to tackle this issue is to impose a higher tax on private car owners and use the money to develop public transportation." – band 7.

More illustrations were in Appendix 7.

4.3. RESULTS OF PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST SCORE COMPARISON

Based on VSTEP criteria for assessing grammar in writing, the results of comparing pre-test and post-test on writing a paragraph (Appendix 4) showed that among 10 students, 4 students increased from band 5 to band 7, 5 students increased by 1 band score and 1 student did not increase points because the level of grammar improvement was not significant so it remained the same – band 7. All band assessment was verified by Lect. Tong Trieu Anh Thu. In general, all students were able to apply the syntax to correct sentence structure errors in writing for higher bands.
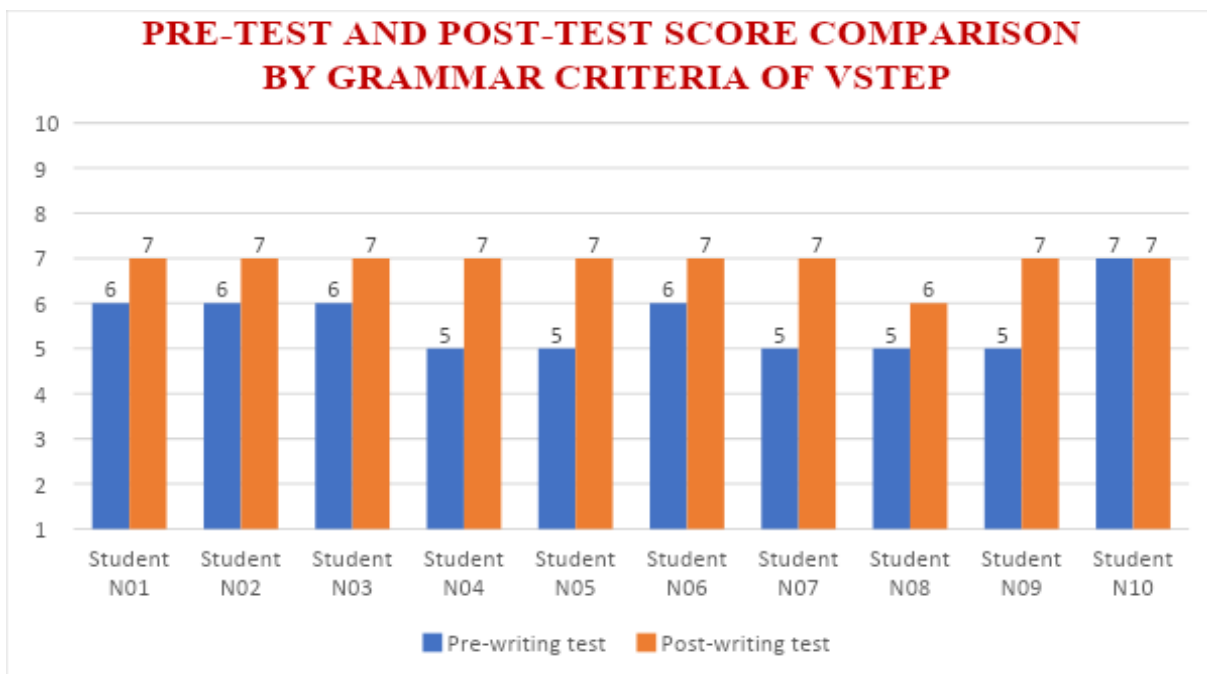

Chart 4.3.1: results of pre-test and post-test on writing assessed by VSTEP

Participants	Pre-writing test assessed by VSTEP	Post-writing test assessed by VSTEP	Band score raised
Student N^{O}1	6	7	1
Student N^{O}2	6	7	1
Student N^{O}3	6	7	1
Student N^{O}4	5	7	2
Student N^{O}5	5	7	2
Student N^{O}6	6	7	1
Student N^{O}7	5	7	2
Student N^{O}8	5	6	1
Student N^{O}9	5	7	2
Student N^{O}10	7	7	0
	THE HIGHEST BAND SCORE = 10		

Table 4.3.2 in Appendix 4: the extent of improvements in post-writing test

4.4. RESULTS OF STUDENTS' POST REFLECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

In the first section of the questionnaire (Appendix 6), students were required to provide some information about their English learning such as how long they have been studying English and what year they are currently at SIU. The answers were to guarantee the amount of time that they have spent on studying English was long enough; the student has been studying English for the longest of 19 years and at least 6 years. All students confirmed that they are third-year students at SIU. In addition, students were also asked if you have ever studied syntax and they all chose "Yes".

In the second section, students were required to make their own feelings about five arguments related to the use of syntax in writing paragraphs through four levels – 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= agree and 4= strongly agree. They must tick the corresponding five arguments below:

(1) After group study, the knowledge of syntax was shared to help self-correct grammatical errors in sentence structure, which is easy to understand and apply.

(2) We can avoid most of the normal grammar errors in writing, but some sentences do not seem so comprehensive if we break down their components.

(3) Applying syntactic patterns, you received during our sharing greatly improved your confidence in writing.

(4) Syntax is of crucial importance for the students, especially English majors, to master grammar points.

(5) It is more important to pay attention to proactive use of complex and variable structures in writing for academic writing tests.

The results showed that all 10 students ticked "4= strongly agree", "3= agree" and no students ticked "2= disagree", "3= strongly". These has realized the researcher's hypothesis that students are able to enhance their writing skills through syntactic analysis. Besides, the argument (1) is one of the most important due to the realistic reflection to syntactic knowledge shared in group meetings, with 2 students expressed "strongly agree" and 8 students for "agree".

In the final section, students were asked to write their comments about group study. From the comments of 10 students, the researcher synthesized and selected the three most typical comments. With the first comment – "syntax can improve sentence structure in writing" – written by all 10 students. The second comment – "I can understand how to apply Syntax in writing although the period of group study was rather short." – written by all 10 students as well. The third comment – "I can avoid many grammatical errors in English sentence structure." and the last comment – "I hope the researcher will have more informative meetings of syntax soon." – written by 9 and 5 students, respectively. Specifically, three typical students wrote their comments about group study as follows:

A first student wrote: "Syntax is a potential subject which plays an important role in mastering grammar points, I think. Although I have just applied syntax in

writing in a short time, I can understand the grammar as well as not make errors. I hope syntax can contribute a lot to the improvement of English skills."

A second student stated the following: "I think that syntax is essential in writing English. The lessons are useful and interesting. After some lessons, I realize that we can use syntax to correct grammar errors in writing. I hope that I will have more time to study syntax in the future to improve my writing skill."

A third student expressed herself in the following way: "After taking part in the group study on this topic. I realized that syntax plays a crucial role in studying English major. Although I just joined a few lessons, I can strengthen the knowledge about how to use grammar structure correctly in writing. I am gradually interested in syntax and I hope I will have more opportunities to study it."

The results of the students' post reflective questionnaire (Appendix 6) is very positive and reinforces the researcher's beliefs that his hypothesis is totally correct.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this study, the central questions of my study were: (1) What are the common sentence structural errors in SIU students' writing? (2) Does the use of syntactic patterns improve the writing skills of SIU students?. The objective of the researcher is to use syntax to help SIU students improve sentence structure in English writing. The study was designed to help students in the short term to apply the syntax to improve the necessary points in English writing skills, based on the grammar assessment criteria framework of VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency). The research of using syntax to improve writing skills is not a new research, but the biggest difference of this work compared to others is: instead of focusing on analyzing all assessment criteria as content, organization, vocabulary and grammar in a paragraph or an essay - this is very difficult for a student simutaneously to improve all the criteria in a paragraph and they may sometimes confuse to know where to start, the researcher's study focused on only grammar criteria of VSTEP assessment in improving the structure in English sentences with syntax. Moreover, the researcher believe whether it is a passage or an essay, they are all compulsorily made up of complete sentences, which means that the higher the accuracy of using sentence structures in a paragraph is, the better the paragraph will be evaluated. Thus, the researcher understood the importance of sentence structure, so he only focused on improving structure in sentences, which is the key to forming great paragraphs and essays. The population was a chosen group of ten third-year students of the Department of Foreign Languages at The Saigon International University and the sampling was a purposive technique. In this study, the researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach and group study as a means of helping students to recall the old knowledge learned in syntactic subjects and instruct them to apply syntax in paragraph writing. This research consisted a pre-test and a post-test on writing a paragraph, and a post reflective questionnaire. Both the pre-test and the post-test were utilized in this study to measure students' understanding of the use of syntax to correct the sentence structure in English writing and to see how many band scores students could increase after applying the syntax into writing paragraphs as well. After having data from the pre-test and post-

test comparison, a post reflective questionnaire was conducted to all ten students to find out how students found the experience of using syntax to self-correct ungramatical errors in writing ; how they found the informative syntactic knowledge shared in the group meetings and what they learnt from them.

The researcher was able to show, even though the study was limited in a qualitative case study approach and the sampling methodology utilized in the study was the purposive sampling technique, so the researcher only studied the impact on a specific small group of ten third-year students at SIU from July 1st to July 20th of the year 2020. The present study showed that these ten students were able to apply syntax in better paragraph writing. Students' data of the pre-test and post-test score comparison and all feedback of the post reflective questionnaires showed to be reliable and valid, all of which clarified in the part content above. Eventually, the researcher was able to achieve the hypothesis that he set out to do at the beginning of his study: Using syntax would have a positive impact on enhancing SIU students' writing.

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APPENDIX 1:
ASSESSMENT TOOL - VIETNAMESE STANDARDIZED TEST OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (VSTEP CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING GRAMMAR IN WRITING)

VSTEP known as Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency is a test format for assessing English language proficiency from level 3 to level 5 according to the 6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam.

The VSTEP test is scored on a 10-point scale for each skill, rounded up to 0.5. The rounding point of 4 rounding skills up to 0.5 is used to convert to 3 steps, respectively B1, B2, C1. Below 4.0 will not be considered level level, 4.0 / 10 to achieve B1, 6.0 / 10 to achieve B2, 8.5 / 10 to achieve C1.

The following is a 10-point scale to evaluate only grammar criteria:

0	● Quit the exam ● Do not write a word ● Rewrite an essay by memory or memorizing	**5**	● Good control of simple structures ● Try to use complex structures but most of them are misused ● Make mistakes which are not annoying to readers
1	● Fail to write complete sentences	**6**	● Use simple and complex structures ● Make mistakes but hardly leading to misunderstandings
2	● Write only a few phrases that have been memorized before ● Many mistakes occur, which changes the meaning.	**7**	● Use simple and complex structures ● Make mistakes but hardly leading to misunderstandings

3	• Correct use of some simple structures • Frequently make fundamental mistakes that change the meaning	**8**	• Good control of many simple and complex structures • The majority of sentences have no mistakes. • No system mistakes that make it difficult for the readers
4	• Simple structure control • Try but fail to use some complex structures • Make mistakes often and sometimes make it difficult for readers	**9**	• Use a variety of simple and complex structures correctly • The vast majority of sentences have no mistakes. • No system mistakes that make it difficult for the readers
		10	• The various structures used with accuracy and flexibility • Almost no mistakes or just one or two mistakes by accident

APPENDIX 2:
PRE-TEST ON WRITING A PARAGRAPH

CONTENT:

Choose one of the following 3 topics and write a paragraph of about 250 words

- Computer games
- Technology
- Traffic problem

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APPENDIX 3:
POST-TEST ON WRITING A PARAGRAPH

<u>CONTENT:</u>

The task is to correct the errors of sentence structure in your own Pre-test writing
by applying the syntactic knowledge shared in the previous 5 sessions.

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APPENDIX 4:

TABLE 1 – THE EXTENT OF IMPROVEMENTS IN POST-WRITING TEST (VSTEP CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING GRAMMAR IN WRITING)

Participants	Pre-writing test assessed by VSTEP	Post-writing test Assessed by VSTEP	Band score raised
Student N^{O}1	6	7	1
Student N^{O}2	6	7	1
Student N^{O}3	6	7	1
Student N^{O}4	5	7	2
Student N^{O}5	5	7	2
Student N^{O}6	6	7	1
Student N^{O}7	5	7	2
Student N^{O}8	5	6	1
Student N^{O}9	5	7	2
Student N^{O}10	7	7	0
	THE HIGHEST BAND SCORE = 10		

APPENDIX 5:
QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS' BELIEF IN USING SYNTAX TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

Dear participants,

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. You will not be asked to provide your name so your identity will be completely anonymous to the researcher.

Please provide some of your English learning information

☺ Length of English learning: … years

☺ Year of university study: …

☺ Have you studied Syntax? Yes / No

Directions: Please read the questionnaire items carefully and tick the answer you agree with.

4= strongly agree

3= agree

2= disagree

1= strongly disagree

	4	3	2	1
1. After group study, the knowledge of syntax was shared to help self-correct grammatical errors in sentence structure, which is easy to understand and apply.				
2. We can avoid most of the normal grammar errors in writing, but some sentences do not seem so comprehensive if we break down their components.				
3. Applying syntactic patterns, you received during our sharing greatly improved your confidence in writing.				
4. Syntax is of crucial importance for the students, especially English majors, to master grammar points.				
5. It is more important to pay attention to proactive use of complex and variable structures in writing for academic writing tests.				

If you have any other comments about our Group study on this topic, please specify:

………………………………………………………………………………………

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………………………………………………………………………………………

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Thank you for your cooperation!

APPENDIX 6:
TABLE 2 - RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS' BELIEF IN USING SYNTAX TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS' BELIEF IN USING SYNTAX TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS				
1. Please provide some of your English learning information: Length of English learning				
19 years	1			
15 years	2			
13 years	2			
12 years	1			
10 years	3			
6 years	1			
Years of university study				
3 years	10			
Have you studied Syntax?				
Yes	10			
No				
2. Read the questionnaire items and tick the answer you agree				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
After group study, the knowledge of syntax was shared to help self-correct grammatical errors in sentence structure, which is easy to understand and apply.	2	8		
We can avoid most of normal grammar mistakes in writing, but some sentences do not seem so comprehensive if we break down their components.	5	5		
Applying syntactic patterns, you received during our	7	3		

sharing greatly improved your confidence in writing.				
Syntax is of crucial importance for the students, especially English majors, to master grammar points.	6	4		
It is more important to pay attention to proactive use of complex and variable structures in writing for academic writing tests.	2	8		
STUDENTS' ANSWERS	**TOTAL NUMBERS OF STUDENTS = 10**			

3. Students' comments about Group Study (Feedback)										
Students' quoted feedback	Nº1	Nº2	Nº3	Nº4	Nº5	Nº6	Nº7	Nº8	Nº9	Nº10
Syntax can improve sentence structure in writing.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I can understand how to apply Syntax in writing although the period of group study was rather short.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I can avoid many grammatical errors in English sentence structure.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
I hope the researcher will have more informative meetings of Syntax soon.	✓	✓			✓		✓			✓
	TOTAL NUMBERS OF STUDENTS = 10									

APPENDIX 7:
A DIAGRAM WITH STUDENT'S SAMPLES OF PRE-WRITING AND POST-WRITING TESTS PRESENTS IMPROVEMENT AFTER GROUP STUDY - STUDENT Nº9

W R I T I N G A S S E S S M E N T C R I T E R I A	**PRE-WRITING TEST**	**POST-WRITING TEST**
	Traffic problem is a serious problem in Ho Chi Minh city. One of solution to solve this problem is to impose highly tax private car drivers and use the money to develop public transportation. This essay discusses the advantages and disadvantages of such a solution. One of the advantages is about buying car will be more difficult. The high taxes would restrict the car owners. This would mean that they will switch to using public transports instead of driving everywhere. Moreover, public transportation will be reduce congestion and traffic accidents if it was improve. Actually, public transport systems in Ho Chi Minh city is still imperfect. For instance, we often see lots of overcrowded buses in the street ……..…. Morever, public transportation reduce congestion and accidents if system still imperfect. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks such a solution. This would be a big burden for car drivers. At present, taxes are already high for a lot of inhabitants of the city, and so further taxes would make their lives more difficult, especially, the drivers. Another thing is public transport often runs at fixed times and fixed places, so using public transportation is also inconvenient for people. …..
……… there are beneficial and detrimental of introducing to improve such a policy.	Traffic congestion is a serious problem in Ho Chi Minh city. One of the solutions to tackle this issue is to impose a higher tax on private car owners and use the money to develop public transportation. This essay discusses the advantages and disadvantages of such a solution. One of the advantages is that buying cars will be more difficult. The high taxes would restrict people to buy new cars. In other words, they would switch to using public transports instead of driving from place to place, leading to a drop in the number of private vehicles in the streets. Moreover, public transportation would help reduce traffic congestion and accidents if they are improved. The reality has shown that only a small proportion of Ho Chi Minh City citizens use public transports because its systems are still imperfect. For instance, we often see lots of downgraded and overcrowded buses in the streets driving recklessly, making them less convenient for commuters. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks of such a solution. Firstly, this would be a big burden for car drivers. At present, taxes are already high for a lot of inhabitants of the city, and further taxes would make their lives more difficult, especially those who commute daily by cars. Another disadvantage that might arise is the inconvenience of public transports. Since most of the time they operate on a fixed schedule, many people find it challenging to manage their business without their private cars. All in all, although there are both beneficial and detrimental effects of applying such a policy, these aforementioned solutions are worth considering to improve the current traffic situation.

GRAMMAR CRITERIA IN SYNTAX	PRE-WRITING TEST	POST-WRITING TEST
CONSTITUENTS, FUNCTIONS CATEGORIES	"One of solution to solve this problem …" " … highly tax private car drivers …"	"One of the solutions to tackle this issue is …" " … a higher tax on private car owners …"
CLAUSES	"One of the advantages is about buying car will be more difficult" "public transportation reduce congestion and accidents if system still imperfect."	"One of the advantages is that buying cars will be more difficult." "The reality has shown that only a small proportion of Ho Chi Minh City citizens use public transports because its systems are still imperfect."
SENTENCE VARIETY	"public transportation will be reduce congestion and traffic accidents if it was improve." "…further taxes would make their lives more difficult, especially, the drivers." "there are beneficial and detrimental of introducing to improve such a policy."	"public transportation would help reduce traffic congestion and accidents if they are improved." " … further taxes would make their lives more difficult, especially those who commute daily by cars." "there are both beneficial and detrimental effects of applying such a policy."

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