

Exploring English Syntactic Structures and Tenses in Online International News

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Abstract

This study aimed at 1) studying the quantities of types of English sentence structures and 2) analyzing the English tenses used in the leads of online international news. The research used a purposive sampling by collecting the data from Reuters in the form of online publication. The genre of news was sports which covered 7 categories: athletics, cricket, cycling, golf, motor sports, soccer and tennis. The news has been posted on the Reuters' website during 1st-7th September 2021 with 123 news in total. The only part of the news that was used to analyze was the leads based on the basic four types of English sentence structures and tenses written by George Yule (2009). The statistics used to summarize the data consisted of frequencies and percentages. The findings of this study revealed that complex sentence was the type of sentence structures that was mostly used in the leads with 82 sentences (66.67%), followed by simple sentence with 23 sentences (18.70%), compound-complex sentence with 13 sentences (10.57%), and compound sentence with 5 sentences (4.06%) respectively. Moreover, the 7 types of English tenses were used in the leads including past simple, past progressive, past perfect, present simple, present perfect, present perfect progressive and future simple. The passive forms and modal verbs were also written in the sentences. Thus, the results of this study would be useful for EFL students to learn how to report the news in English, especially in the lead part, for their future development of writing skills.

Keywords: leads, sport news, sentence structures, verb tenses

1. Introduction

English is an international language that is used to contact with people around the globe, both in spoken and written contexts. Regarding written contexts, texts are used to communicate with target readers in various forms of publications such as article, journal, newsletter and newspaper. According to news, it reports activities of organizations. As it represents organizations, the contents and meanings of the news can have both positive and negative impact on public opinions of readers (Rea, 2017). This can lead to satisfactions and conflicts as people can access to the news easily via online sources such as website and social media. Thus, writing is an important skill for written communication.

As writing is considered as the most difficult skill for learning English apart from other three skills including listening, speaking, and reading, EFL learners require grammatical knowledge and the ability to convey their ideas into messages (Richard & Reppen, 2014; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Nunan, 1999). If EFL learners are lack of this knowledge, they wouldn't be able to construct sentences grammatically. Then, the students may encounter with obstacles in learning which affect to the development of their writing skills.

In Thailand, English has been taught in primary to higher levels of education. However, students still have been facing with difficulties in learning English, especially writing (Khumphee & Yodkamlue, 2017; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Padgate, 2008). Many studies in Thailand found that the problems were derived from grammatical errors. Khumphee and Yodkamlue (2017) found 26 types of grammatical errors in essay writing of the second year student majoring in English at Nakhon Rachasima University. The findings showed errors in sentence structure as the students were unable to create complex sentences grammatically, and they couldn't continue their writing till the end which resulted in incomplete sentences. Suvarnamani (2017) studied 180 final exam papers of the first-year students majoring Arts at Silapakorn University, and the results revealed that present simple tense and past simple tense were the two most frequent errors that the students had used in writing. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) studied writing errors of the English major students at Thepsatri Rajabhat University in three genres including narration, description, and comparison or contrast. Many errors, such as modal verbs, verb tenses, and sentence structures, were found in all types of writing. Padgate (2008) found that the students not only had urgent problems in sentence structures, but they also were unable to transfer their ideas into texts coherently and logically. These findings could be implied that the students might have a few writing experiences of writing since primary and secondary levels of education.

Teaching materials are crucial in language learning as they can influence the development of students' language skills. The study conducted by Herdi (2015) found that there were many factors that could affect the students' writing abilities including classroom activities,

classroom management, materials, media, teachers' approach, teaching materials, and teachers' strategy. Therefore, the teachers are in need to find appropriate teaching tools to enhance their writing skills both online and onsite classroom. The study led by Puengpipattrakul (2009) highlighted on using journal writing as a new teaching method to increase EFL students' grammatical accuracy and develop their writing skills. The results revealed that the students felt more confident in using verb tenses in writing, and they had motivation to study and be aware of their grammatical errors and teacher's feedback. Besides, Özdemir and Aydin (2015) suggested that learning writing from the target language would be an effective way to help students to improve their writing skills.

However, many researchers studied on English sentence structures (Tipparach et al., 2021; Endu, 2019; Kongsakorn & Kongkaew, 2017) and structures of English news published in Thailand (Bunyarat, 2020; Seawnoi, 2008). A few studies focused on English sentence structures and tenses of international news. Therefore, the researchers aimed to study the types of English sentence structures and tenses appeared in the leads of online international sport news because the lead is an important part of the news which provides essential information for the readers. The readers could understand an overview of the news from the lead which summarizes 5W1H (who, what, where, when, why, and how) of the news (Telg & Lundy, 2021; Hough, 1984). As Reuters is one of the World's famous multimedia news providers, analysing authentic news might be effective for students in language learning supported by Tipparach et al. (2021) and Theangpitak (2017). The more the students experience actual learning, the more their skills are developed. Thus, the results of this study might be a guideline for EFL students to learn how to use the sentence structures and tenses in the lead sentences to report the news according to international writing style for their future development of writing skills. The results could also be applied to instructions for students who study mass communications for their future careers in relevant to sports.

2. Methods

This research used a purposive sampling by collecting the data from international sports news that has been posted on the Reuters' website during 1st -7th September 2021 with 123 news in total. The news covered 7 categories of sports including athletics, cricket, cycling, golf, motor sports, soccer and tennis. Apart from headline, the news consists of lead, secondary information, background information and additional information according to the structure of the inverted pyramid (Telg & Lundy, 2021). However, the lead, which is on the first part of the news, was the target part that was used to collect the data because the lead provides essential information of the news for the readers. The readers could understand an overview of the news from this part which summarizes 5W1H (who, what, where, when, why, and how) of the news (Telg & Lundy, 2021; Hough, 1984).

Regarding instruments, the researchers used the basic four types of English sentence structures: simple sentence, complex sentence, compound sentence and compound-complex sentence and the 12 English tenses written by George Yule (2009) to analyze the data. The raw data was recorded in Microsoft Word, and a color-coding method was used in the study to identify each type of sentence structures and tenses by highlighting them with different colors. The symbols, such as SP, CPO, CP, CPOCP, were also used to monitor all types of sentences. Then, the numbers of sentence structures and tenses were counted and summarized in Microsoft Excel. The data was presented statistically by using frequencies and percentages.

3. Findings and Discussion

According to international sport news that was collected during 1st -7th September 2021 on the Reuters' website, the news covered 7 categories of sports including athletics, cricket, cycling, golf, motor sports, soccer and tennis. The study found that there were 123 sentences in the leads with four types of English sentence structures. The quantities and percentages of sentence structures were described below.

Table 1. The quantities and percentages of sentence structures

Types of Sentence Structures	Quantities of Sentences	Percentages of Sentences
1. Simple sentence	23	18.70%
2. Compound sentence	5	4.06%
3. Complex sentence	82	66.67%
4. Compound-complex sentence	13	10.57%
Total	123	100%

From above table, the findings revealed that complex sentence was the type of sentence structures that was mostly used in the leads with 82 sentences (66.67%), followed by simple sentence with 23 sentences (18.70%), compound-complex sentence with 13 sentences (10.57%), and compound sentence with 5 sentences (4.06%) respectively.

In addition, as sentence structures are relevant to dependent clause (DC) and independent clause (IC), the study found that the writers used one to four dependent clauses with one independent clause in complex sentences in the lead part of sport news. The writers used various types of connectors to join clauses including adverbial subordinators (after, although, as, before, if, while, and whether) in adverb clauses, relative pronouns (that, which, who and whose) and relative adverbs (when and where) in adjective clauses, the WH-question word 'what' and 'how' in noun clauses. Likewise, the word 'that' was used in noun clauses, and it was not only included but also omitted in complex sentences. Besides, the study further found that the writers often used commas followed by participial phrases in complex sentences as modifiers.

When the compound-complex sentences were considered, it found that the writers used one to three dependent clauses in the leads with two to three independent clauses. The writers used ‘and’ and ‘but’ in this type of sentence structures, and the most frequent coordinator was ‘but’ for 8 times, followed by ‘and’ for 5 times. Also, the adverbial subordinators that appeared in the compound-complex sentences were after, as, and while. The relative pronoun ‘who’ and the relative adverb ‘where’ were also used in adjective clauses as well as the WH-question word ‘what’ that was used in noun clauses whereas the word ‘that’ was all discarded in compound-complex sentences. For compound sentence, the study found that the writers only used two independent clauses with two types of coordinating conjunctions including ‘and’ and ‘but’ for 3 times and 2 times consecutively.

To sum up, it could be mentioned that all sentence structures were used in the leads to report online sport news on the Reuters’s website. By the way, complex sentence was the most frequent type while compound sentence was the least frequent type of sentence structures that were written in the leads. Besides, the writers seemed to report the news in the lead only one sentence as there were 123 sentences in 123 leads.

Regarding the use of English tenses in the lead sentences, the results revealed that 7 types of English tenses appeared in the leads including past simple tense, past progressive tense, past perfect tense, present simple tense, present perfect tense, present perfect progressive tense and future simple tense. The quantities and percentages of English tenses were listed in the table below.

Table 2. The quantities and percentages of English tenses

Types of English tenses	Quantities of Tenses	Percentages of Tenses
1. Past simple tense	188	72.31%
2. Past progressive tense	5	1.92%
3. Past perfect tense	2	0.77%
4. Present simple tense	30	11.54%
5. Present perfect tense	22	8.46%
6. Present perfect progressive tense	1	0.38%
7. Future simple tense	12	4.62%
Total	260	100%

From Table 2, the results found that past simple tense was mostly used in the leads with 188 verb tenses (72.31%). Next, it was present simple tense with 30 verb tenses (11.54%), followed by present perfect tense with 22 verb tenses (8.46%), future simple tense with 12 verb tenses (4.62%), past progressive tense with 5 verb tenses (1.92%) and past perfect tense with 2 verb tenses (0.77%) respectively. Lastly, the present perfect progressive tense was used in the leads with only one verb tense (0.38%) as the lowest percentage among all tenses.

Therefore, it could be indicated that past simple tense was the most frequent type of English tenses that was used in the lead part to report the news. On the other hand, present perfect progressive tense was the least frequent type of English tenses that appeared in the leads as it was used only once.

Apart from the verb tenses in active voice, the study found 4 verb tenses in passive voice including past simple tense, past continuous tense, present simple tense and present perfect tense. The passive infinitives and gerund also appeared in the leads, so the quantities of passive forms were presented distinctively as follows.

Table 3. The quantities and percentages of passive forms

Types of Passive Forms	Quantities of Passive Forms	Percentages of Passive Forms
1. Past simple tense	13	44.83%
2. Past progressive tense	1	3.45%
3. Present simple tense	2	6.90%
4. Present perfect tense	3	10.34%
5. Infinitive	5	17.24%
6. Gerund	5	17.24%
Total	29	100%

The above table showed that the past simple tense was the most frequent tense that appeared in the lead part of the news in the form of passive voice. It covered 13 passive verbs which accounted for 44.83%, followed by present perfect tense for 3 passive verbs at 10.34%, and present simple tense for 2 passive verbs at 6.90%. The least frequent tense of passive verbs was present progressive tense which was used once in the lead at 3.45%. Additionally, the study found two more types of passive forms including infinitive and gerund in the leads for 5 times each with the same frequency at 17.24%.

Hence, it could be summarized that the passive forms of verb tenses, infinitive and gerund were also used in the leads to report the news, and the most frequent form of passive voice was past simple tense which was used to explain what occurred to the subject of the sentence. The passive infinitive was ranked second, and the passive gerund was ranked third consecutively.

Additionally, there were 6 types of modal verbs that appeared in the lead sentences including could, may, might, should, will and would. These auxiliary verbs were used 25 times in the leads to report the news as showed in the following table.

Table 4. The quantities and percentages of modal verbs

Types of Modal verbs	Quantities of Modal Verbs	Percentages of Modal Verbs
1. Could	2	8.00%
2. May	2	8.00%
3. Might	1	4.00%
4. Should	2	8.00%
5. Will	12	48.00%
6. Would	6	24.00%
Total	25	100%

From Table 4, the most frequent modal verb that was used in the lead sentences was ‘will’ for 12 times at 48.00%, followed by ‘would’ for 6 times at 24.00%. The modal verb ‘could’, ‘may’ and ‘should’ were addressed for 2 times each. They were resulted in the same frequency at 8.00%, and ‘might’ was the least frequent modal as it was written only once in the lead at 4.00%.

Thereby, it could be presumed that the modal verb ‘will’ was mostly used in the lead part of sport news as it belongs to the structure of future simple tense, and ‘might’ showed the least frequent use in the news. Besides, ‘may’ was the only modal verb that was once followed by ‘have’ and ‘past participle’ as the modal perfect.

From the above results, it could be discussed in two main aspects including English sentence structures and tenses. After the sentence structures were studied, the finding revealed that all four types of sentence structures were used in the lead sentences to report sport news on the Reuters’s website including simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentence. The most frequent type of sentence structures was complex sentence, followed by simple sentence, compound-complex sentence, and compound sentence consecutively. These findings presented the same results as the study of Theangpitak (2017) which found that the most prevalent structure that was used in political news in Nation English newspaper was complex sentence, followed by simple sentence, compound-complex sentence and compound sentence accordingly. However, all parts of the news were analyzed, not only the lead like this study. Moreover, the study of Endu (2020) supported that the most frequent use of sentence structures in the leads in Thai educational news on online Bangkok Post’s website was complex sentence, followed by simple sentence. Nonetheless, the least used structure of sentence was compound-complex sentence which was different from this study. Moreover, when the quantities of lead sentences in both studies were compared, the findings showed that the lead sentences in Bangkok Post were frequently written by one sentence. In relation to the lead sentences in Reuters, the study found that the sentences were all written by one sentence. Thus, it could be mentioned that the lead

sentences of English news were mostly written by one sentence per lead. Even though both studies used online international news, the results might show some differences and similarities as they used different genres of news: Thai educational news and sport news.

In the leads, the writers often reported the news by mixing clauses with various types of connectors in one sentence. Oshima and Hogue (1998) divided the conjunctions into three main types including coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and correlative conjunctions. After the lead sentences were studied, the findings revealed that the writers used one to four dependent clauses with one independent clause in complex sentences. Three types of dependent clauses were found including adverb clauses, adjective clauses, and noun clauses. In adverb clauses, they were connected by adverbial subordinators such as after, although, as, before, if, while and whether. It also found that four relative pronouns (that, which, who and whose) and two relative adverbs (when and where) were used in adjective clauses as well. In noun clauses, the WH-question word 'what' and 'how' were used in complex sentences. Likewise, the word 'that' was used in noun clauses, and it was not only included but also omitted in complex sentences. As a result, it could be addressed that subordinating conjunctions were used in complex sentences distinctively to join three types of dependent clauses including adverb clause, adjective clause, and noun clause with a main clause. The study led by Kongsakorn and Kongkaew (2017) also found that the complex sentences were used in the political news in online Bangkok Post, and three types of clauses were ranked from the most to the least prevalent including noun clauses (44%), adverb clauses (29%), and adjective clauses (27%) respectively. In noun clauses, the results of both studies showed that the word 'that' was not only included but also omitted in complex sentences. Besides, the study further found that the writers often used comma followed by participial phrases in complex sentences as postmodifiers. These postmodifiers were equal to relative clauses or adjective clauses (Gu, 2020). Therefore, it could be inferred that adjective clause, adverb clause and noun clause would be used distinctively in complex sentence and be visible in the lead part of sport news. Notwithstanding, the quantities of types of clauses could be varied in the lead sentences. Also, the present participle postmodifiers could be applied to use in the leads as they were frequently introduced at the end of the sentences.

Moreover, this study found that the writers used one to three dependent clauses with two to three independent clauses in compound-complex sentences in the lead part of sport news. Two types of coordinating conjunctions were used to join independent clauses including 'and' and 'but', and the mostly used coordinator was 'but' for 8 times followed by 'and' for 5 times. When the dependent clauses were considered, the study found that the adverbial subordinators (after, as, and while) were used in adjective clauses as well as the relative pronoun 'who' and the relative adverb 'where'. The WH-question word 'what' was also used in noun clauses whereas the word 'that' was entirely omitted in compound-complex sentences. If all sentence structures were compared, the study found that compound sentence

was the least used structure in the lead part of sport news, and the writers only used two independent clauses with two types of coordinating conjunctions namely ‘and’ and ‘but’ for 3 times and 2 times consecutively. Moreover, the study led by Rira and Ardi (2013) found three types of conjunctions in the opinion columns from 8 editions of Singgalang newspapers. The findings indicated that the coordinating conjunction was ranked first (50.98%) that appeared in the newspapers, followed by subordinating conjunction (31.37%) and correlative conjunction (17.64%) as they were used in the newspaper to express facts and opinions which were similar to the sport news that was analyzed in this study. Nevertheless, after the sentence structures and tenses were studied, the results displayed that there were only two types of conjunctions including coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions that were used to join clauses in the lead sentences.

Consequently, it could be concluded that four types of sentence structures appeared in the lead part of sport news on Reuters’ website, and the writers mostly used complex sentence to report the news, followed by simple sentence, compound-complex sentence and compound sentence. Additionally, two types of connectors including coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions, were both used to join dependent and independent clauses together.

With respect to English tenses, the study found that past simple tense was the most frequent type of English tenses that was written in the lead part of sport news as this tense is used to describe the activities that happened at the definite time in the past. The following tenses included present simple tense, present perfect tense, future simple tense, past progressive tense and past perfect tense. It found that the present perfect progressive tense was the least frequent tense that appeared in the lead sentences as this tense describes actions that started in the past and are continuing up to the present (Yule, 2009). It was confirmed by the study of Muta and Dennis (2016) that there were 279 sentences that appeared in 20 online English news from the Breakingnewsenglish website at Mini-Lessons. They divided all tenses into three groups: past tenses for 155 sentences, present tenses for 120 sentences and future tenses for 4 sentences. The results indicated that past simple tense was the most frequent tense in the news (151 sentences), followed by present simple tense (86 sentences), present perfect tense (22 sentences), present progressive tense (11 sentences), future simple tense (3 sentences), past progressive tense (2 sentences), past perfect tense (2 sentences), present perfect progressive tense (1 sentence) and future perfect tense (1 sentence). Accordingly, it could be concluded that the top 3 tenses that were used in English news of both studies were past simple tense, present simple tense and present perfect tense consecutively. Also, both studies found that four types of tenses including past perfect progressive tense, future progressive tense, future perfect tense and future perfect progressive tense didn’t appear in the news. The findings were resulted differently in some points as the researchers of both studies focused on different parts and genres of the news. In other words,

this study only highlighted on the lead part of sport news, but the study led by Muta and Dennis studied all parts of the breaking news in distinctive genres.

In regard to passive voice, the studied found that gerund, infinitive and verb tenses were written in the lead sentences to report sport news. Compared to three types of passive forms, the verb tenses were mostly used in the leads. The passive infinitive was ranked second, and the passive gerund in participle clauses was ranked third consecutively. In relation to verb tenses, the most prevalent verb tense was past simple tense which was used to explain what occurred to the subjects of the sentences, followed by present perfect tense, present simple tense and present progressive tense respectively. Söğüt (2018) investigated the frequencies and distributions of the active, passive sentences and nominalized structures in news reports between British and American newspapers. The study found that the writers in both newspapers used active and passive voices to report the news, and the active voice was used more frequently than passive voice in the same way as this study. Söğüt further mentioned that the writers often used active voice to describe the actions and events with the subjects. On the other hand, they tended to use passive voice to explain the actions when the subjects were unknown or unrelated. In this study, the writers used passive voice to report sport news by expressing the subjects and excluding them sometimes. The reason might be that the readers would be able to anticipate who the subjects were from other words that the writers hinted in the sentences.

With reference to modal verbs, it found that 6 modal verbs appeared in the lead sentences including could, may, might, should, will and would. The writers used these auxiliary verbs in the leads to report sport news, and the most frequent modal was 'will', followed by 'would'. The modal 'could', 'may' and 'should' showed equal frequencies, and the modal 'might' was the least used modal verb as it was written only once in the lead. Thus, it could be assumed that 'will' presented the most frequent modal verb in the lead sentences due to the structure of present future tense which was introduced in the leads. As the modal 'would' describes willingness in the future and predictions, it can normally be used in sport news to report the willingness of athletes or the predictions of the writers about events. Also, the modal 'will' is changed to 'would' in reported speech, so it's commonly found in the news. Generally, the modal verb will be followed by infinitive without 'to'. After all, 'may' was the only one modal verb that was once followed by 'have' and 'past participle'. It's called 'the modal perfect' which describes possible or uncertain actions in the past (Yule, 2009). These findings could be supported by the study of Surbakti (2016) which found that modal verbs were used in the Jakarta Post Newspaper. It displayed 8 modal verbs namely can, could, should, will, would, may, might and must, but this study only exhibited 6 modal verbs except can and must. Furthermore, both studies found that the modal verb 'will' presented the most frequent modal, and 'might' was the least used modal in both news. Consequently, it could be proposed that modal verbs were frequently used to report the news, but some modal verbs

were not addressed as both studies found that the modal ‘shall’ and ‘ought to’ were excluded from the news.

4. Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to study the quantities of types of English sentence structures and analyze the English tenses used in the leads of online international news on Reuters’ website. The genre of news was sports which covered 7 categories: athletics, cricket, cycling, golf, motor sports, soccer and tennis. The researchers selected the news that has been posted on the Reuters’ website during 1st -7th September 2021 for this study. The lead was the only part of the news that was analyzed based on the basic four types of English sentence structures and tenses written by George Yule (2009).

Based on the findings of this study, it found that there were 123 lead sentences in sport news with 123 news in total. The sentences in the leads were mostly written by one sentence per lead. In relation to four types of sentence structure, complex sentence was mostly used in the leads, followed by simple sentence, compound-complex sentence and compound sentence respectively. The study further revealed that the writers used 7 types of English tenses were in the leads including past simple, past progressive, past perfect, present simple, present perfect, present perfect progressive and future simple. However, past simple tense was mostly used in the leads while present perfect progressive tense was the least prevalent verb tense that was written in the lead compared to all tenses.

Apart from the verb tenses in active voice, the study found 4 verb tenses in passive voice including past simple tense, past continuous tense, present simple tense and present perfect tense. The past simple tense was the most frequent tense that appeared in the leads in the form of passive voice whereas the least frequent tense of passive verbs was present progressive tense which was used once in the lead. The study also found two more types of passive forms including infinitive and gerund in the leads with the same frequency. When all passive forms were compared, the most frequent form of passive voice was past simple tense. The passive infinitive was ranked second, and the passive gerund was ranked third consecutively. Additionally, there were 6 types of modal verbs that appeared in the lead sentences including could, may, might, should, will and would. The writers often displayed the modal verb ‘will’, but they rarely used ‘might’ in the lead sentences of sport news.

In conclusion, the results of this study would be beneficial for EFL students as it could be used as a guideline for them to learn how to report news in English, especially in the lead part of sport news based on the international writing style from well-known multimedia news provider. Learning from authentic teaching materials might be productive for students in language learning. In other words, the students wouldn’t only gain their knowledge gradually, but they would also develop their critical skills (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2019). As a result,

the students might understand and be able to use appropriate sentence structures and tenses to report the news in English effectively for their future development of writing skills. The results could also be applied to instructions for students who study mass communications in relevant to sports to have skills that are ready for future careers such as journalist and writer.

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