

A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH SHORT STORIES FOR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Given the increasing technological advancement and widespread use of the online resources for education in general and teaching of English as a foreign language in particular, this study is aimed to contribute to this endeavor, with particular reference to young learners. It is an investigation of the syntactic characteristics of the English short stories targeted at children. The mixed-method was manipulated to capture the picture of the structures at the sentence and clause levels across the three age groups - 0 - 3, 4 - 6 and 7 - 12. The data constitute 30 short stories from the website <http://storyberries.com/>. The results from the analysis reveal that all three groups share all types of sentences and clauses except for verbless clauses. However, unequal proportions of different structures across three groups indicate age-specific characteristics. The findings demonstrate an increasing complexity in terms of syntactic structures as the targeted age-groups are more grown up. The close analysis upholds the pedagogical practicality of these resources, which should be harnessed to develop English proficiency of the young learners, especially in under-resourced settings.

Keywords: Clause, sentence, short stories, syntax, syntactic structure.

TÓM TẮT

Phân tích cú pháp truyện ngắn tiếng Anh dành cho trẻ em

Với sự phát triển ngày càng gia tăng của kỹ thuật và phổ biến các nguồn tài liệu trên mạng, tài liệu giáo dục nói chung và dạy học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ nói riêng, bài viết này nhằm đóng góp vào nỗ lực chung đó, với sự quan tâm với đối tượng thiếu nhi. Công trình này phân tích những đặc trưng cú pháp của các truyện ngắn tiếng Anh dành cho thiếu nhi. Chúng tôi sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu phối hợp để nắm bắt bức tranh về cấu trúc cú pháp của câu và mệnh đề của truyện ngắn dành cho 3 nhóm - 0 - 3 tuổi, 4 - 6 tuổi, và 7 - 12 tuổi. Dữ liệu khảo sát là 30 truyện, 10 truyện cho mỗi nhóm, từ trang web <http://storyberries.com/>. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy tất cả các loại cấu trúc câu và mệnh đề, ngoại trừ loại mệnh đề vắng động từ, đều được sử dụng trong cả 3 nhóm. Tuy nhiên, có sự khác nhau về tần số xuất hiện của mỗi loại cấu trúc ở các nhóm tuổi khác nhau; tần số sử dụng của các câu và mệnh đề phức tạp về cấu trúc lớn hơn khi đối tượng được hướng đến lớn tuổi hơn. Công trình phân tích cho thấy giá trị sư phạm của nguồn tư liệu này, chúng cần được sử dụng để phát triển năng lực tiếng Anh của thiếu nhi, đặc biệt ở những môi trường với điều kiện còn hạn chế.

Từ khóa: Mệnh đề, câu, truyện ngắn, cú pháp, cấu trúc cú pháp.

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Ngày nhận bài: 26/12/2018; Ngày nhận đăng: 6/3/2019

1. Introduction

Research has consistently shown the multiple ways that reading literary fiction impacts children's lives and influences their brain development. The benefits range from relieving stress, to developing memory, critical thinking skill, writing skills and empathy and emotional intelligence and broadening a child's outlook (Reddler, 2018). Reddler (2018) states:

In a world that is focusing more and more on logic, reading is a great way for kids to maintain their vibrant imagination while improving their ability to engage with peers, adults, and society. Reading allows our sons and daughters to live vicariously through the fictional lives of the characters which gives them valuable opportunities to explore new situations, see the world from another person's vantage point, learn about strong emotions from the safety of home, and event confront their fears. Reading gives our children the ability to know themselves through the stories of others”.

Equally emphasized is the role of short stories in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) to young learners (YLS). Scholars have highlighted the potential benefits of short stories to children (Elliott, 2011; Jennings, 1991; Phillips, 1993; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990; Slattery & Willis, 2001; Wright, 2000;...). Children, teachers, parents, and caregivers can turn to stories as immeasurable sources both of entertainment and early sources of language input. Stories hold a great potential for consolidating lexical and grammatical knowledge and increasing cultural knowledge. In class, stories can be exploited to provide chances for follow-up activities and good themes for discussions. Wright (2000) maintains that at an early stage of language acquisition, stories can supply children with a useful way of new language contextualization and introduction, which makes it meaningful and memorable. Jennings (1991) indicates the vital role of stories thanks to their opulent potential to supply an authentic model of language use.

Therefore, in the increasingly digital world, many dedicated people are concerned about the fact “that books are dead or that technology is changing how we get our information” and have launched various websites offering stories in order to excite and engage children in stories, in order to “*harness the power of literature to empower children to understand their own evolving natures and special place in the world.*” [27]. However, the question is: to what extent are these significant free resources, the English short stories for kids (ESSKs), designed by native English speakers, are linguistically appropriate to YLS of English as a foreign language (EFL)? This study is one of our attempts to delve into the tremendous benefits of these websites to the YLS of EFL. As a preliminary research, this study primarily aims to investigate whether or not an increase in the age labeled alongside the stories, 0 - 3, 4 - 6, and 7 - 12, corresponds to an increase in syntactic complexity of the stories in terms of the grammatical structures formally taught in English classes. The research questions are (1) *What are the syntactic features of ESSKs for the three age groups?* And (2) *What are the similarities and differences of the structures of the sentences and clauses across the three age groups?* The following sections will begin with an overview of the basic concepts in English syntax according to which the syntactical complexity of the stories was analyzed. It continues with the definitions and features of short stories. The methodology section is to describe the data of the study and delineate procedure of data analysis.

The fourth part presents the findings and discussion. The paper closes with some implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) to young learners (YL).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The sentence and the clause

The structures and functions of language have been subjected to analyses and descriptions from a range of theories such as Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, Transformational-Generative Grammar, Cognitive Grammar, Systemic Functional Grammar and so on. As this study is practically motivated, the analysis was based on the grammatical frameworks integrated in English coursebooks which are widely-circulated in the educational system in Vietnam. In the following sections, the definitions, the classification, and the structure of the sentence and the clause are heavily withdrawn from the works by Oshima and Hogue (2006) and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1985).

2.1.1. The sentence

In the simplest term, by ‘Sentence’, we mean a group of words beginning with a capitalized letter and ending with a full stop, exclamation mark, or question mark. Technically, “*a sentence is a group of words used to communicate ideas. Each sentence is formed from one or more clauses and expresses a complete thought*”. (Oshima and Hogue, 2006, p. 164). Sentences in English are classified into *simple sentences* (SSs), *compound sentences* (CpdSs), *complex sentences* (CplSs) and *compound-complex sentences* (CppSs). Each kind of sentence is determined by the kind of clauses used to form it.

- A simple sentence consists of a single independent clause, such as (1).

(1) *Fresh water boils at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level.*

- A compound sentence is a structure of two or more independent clauses; the clauses can be combined in three ways: with a coordinator, with a conjunctive adverb, or with a semicolon.

(2) *Japanese people live longer than most other nationalities, for they eat healthy diets.*

(3) *Students must take final exams; otherwise, they will receive a grade of Incomplete.*

(4) *Salt water boils at a higher temperature than fresh water; food cooks faster in salt water.*

- A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and one (or more) dependent clause (s). Dependent clauses comprise three subcategories: *adverb clauses*, *adjective clauses*, and *noun clauses*.

(5) *A citizen can vote in the United States when he or she is 18 years old.*

(6) *Men who are not married are called bachelors.*

(7) *Scientists know what caused it.*

- A compound-complex sentence is comprised of at least two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses. In other words, to form a compound-complex sentence, any combination of dependent and independent clauses is possible as long as there are at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause.

(8) *I wanted to travel after I graduated from college; however, I had to go to work immediately.*

(9) *I could not decide where I should work or what I should do so at first, I did nothing.*

2.1.2. *The clause*

The clause, as defined by Oshima & Hogue (2006, p. 174), is “*the building blocks of sentences. A clause is a group of words that contains (at least) a subject and a verb*”. Many others refer to this structure as a composition of at least two constituent elements, one of which plays the role of subject, the other, of predicate. The structural components of the clause are also referred to as ‘Subject’, ‘Verb’, ‘Complement’, ‘Object’ and ‘Adverbial’ (Downing & Locke, 2006; Delahunty and Garvey, 2010; Quirk et al., 1985).

Structurally, Quirk et al. (1985) classify the clause into three types - finite clauses (FCs), nonfinite clauses (nonFCs), and verbless clauses (VLCs).

- A finite clause is a clause whose verb element is finite, which mean it is marked for either tense or modality and can be simple or complex. For example,

(10) *I can't go out with you because I am studying this evening.*

- A nonfinite clause is a clause with its verb element being a nonfinite verb. The nonfinite clause always consists of a verb and may be with or without a subject, which is commonly absent. Unlike finite verb phrases, nonfinite verb phrases have no tense or mood distinctions. There are four subcategories of nonfinite clauses: *to-infinitive clauses* (to-VCs), *bare infinitive clauses* (bareCs), *-ing clauses* (V-ingCs), and *-ed clauses* (V-edCs), depending on whether the nonfinite verb is a to-infinitive, bare infinitive, V-ing participle, or V-ed participle.

(11) *The best thing would be for you to tell everybody.*

(12) *Rather than you do the job, I'd prefer to finish it myself.*

(13) *The parents having paid for the damaged window, the police were not called.*

(14) *Covered with confusion, they apologized abjectly.*

- A verbless clause is a clause without a verb element, but is nevertheless capable of being analyzed into clause elements. Verbless clauses take syntactic compression one stage further than nonfinite clauses and like nonfinite clauses, they are commonly with subjects. It is often possible to postulate a missing form of the verb *be* and to recover the subject, when omitted, from the context.

(15) *Whether right or wrong, he always comes off worst in argument.*

2.2. *Short stories*

Short stories have long been of great interest to human beings. Attempts at a definition have been highly diverse. May (1989, p. 64) maintains the short story is “*the structural core of all fiction in its derivation from folktale and myth*”, and “*it has from its beginning been a hybrid form combining both the metaphoric mode of the old romance and the metonymic mode of the new realism*”. A short story is also defined as a brief fictional work written in prose, and it deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation (Matthews, 1994). Similarly, Baldick (2001, p. 236) defines a short story as a fictional prose tale; this genre does not have specified length and is too short to be published as a volume on its own. According to Abrams (1993), regardless of length, a short story is a narrative that can be read at one sitting from half an hour to two hours, and it is limited to a certain unique or single effect to which every detail is subordinate.

Compared with a novel, short stories are less complicated. Patea (2012) states that a short story deals only with a fragment, an incident, a single small-scale event. It centers on a scene or/and a person cut off from a larger social, historical or existential continuum, and concentrates on a moment of awareness rather than a completed action. This genre blends the brevity and intensity of the lyric with narrative features such as plot, denouement, character, and events. In spite of short length and simple characterization, a short story can reflect its writer's features of narration and ideas or thoughts thanks to its structure (Gao, 1976). According to Gordimer (1994), short stories are used to communicate human experience. More importantly, precious moral lessons are then also conveyed through such experience.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data description

The data for this research is selected from the website <http://storyberries.com/>. As claimed in the homepage - ABOUT US, this innovative publisher of quality free children's stories is "*a beloved place in the hearts, homes, and schools of children all around the world, and currently enjoy more than a million reads a month.*" [27].

Storyberries was founded by a family driven by a passion to help as many children around the world as possible to access quality stories for free. It consists of 3000+ short stories in English. Their mission is threefold: (1) *To offer best quality collection of children's stories, allowing children the world over to easily read beautiful, age-appropriate stories, enhancing literary and fostering an early love of reading;* (2) *To foster cross-cultural understanding, and* (3) *To humanize technology by encouraging discussion over real-life issues around the pleasurable time of reading together.* [15]. The categories to be chosen are:

- AGE: Age 0 - 3, Age 4 - 6, Age 7 - 12, and Early readers;
- TIME: 5 Min Stories, 10 Min Stories, 15 Min Stories, and 20+ Stories;
- TYPE: Picture Books, Fairy Tales, Chapter Books, Poems for Kids, and Comic Books.

To address the aim of the present study, it is from the *Age* category that we selected the samples for the data. Given the large number of stories in three groups - 49, 171, and 218, we set some criteria for stories to be included in the corpus as follows. Firstly, the stories selected are those written by world-famous authors who specialize in writing stories for children such as Beatrix Potter, Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Katharine Pyle, and Danielle Noakes. Secondly, only the stories on bullying, empathy, kindness, honesty and truthfulness were selected due to their moral values. Finally, the choice of data was based on the length of the stories. The stories are of various lengths, ranging from less than 90 running words to up to above 1400. A preliminary analysis in terms of length unfolded the result that the stories of approximately 90 - 200, 300 - 1000, and of 900 - 1400 predominate the 0 - 3, 4 - 6, and 7 - 12 age groups respectively. In view of the number of aspects the stories were analyzed, a limitation to 30 stories is sizable. Therefore, 10 stories which meet the three aforementioned criteria from each age-group were chosen to serve as the corpus of this study. They are all included in the Appendix in terms of code, title, and name of author.

3.2. Data analysis

To address the aim set forth, we manipulated the mixed method. While the qualitative method was employed to identify and classify the units of analysis, the quantitative method helped the researchers approach the picture of the occurrence frequency of the types and subtypes of the structures in focus. We analyzed the data quantitatively to arrive at finding out the frequency of sentence and clause types and subtypes. On this basis, the syntactic characteristics of ESSKs were synthesized to find out their similarities and differences across the three groups. The result of the analysis of the 30 ESSKs in terms of sentences and clauses is summarized in Table 1. Next, the sentences were classified into four types - SS, CpdS, CplS, and CppSs. Then, the clauses in the data were identified and statistically analysed in terms of types and subtypes, according to those summarised in Section 2.1.

Table 1. *Number of sentences and clauses in the ESSKs of three age groups*

Number of Age group	Sentences	Clauses
0-3 (n = 10)	234	359
4-6 (n = 10)	435	1037
7-12 (n = 10)	526	1784
Total (N = 30)	1195	3180

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Syntactic features of ESSKs for three age groups

Thirty ESSKs of the three different age groups were analyzed in terms of clause and sentence construction. The results are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2. *The distribution of syntactic structures in ESSKs of the three age groups*

Structure	Age groups	Age group 0-3		Age group 4-6		Age group 7-12	
		<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Sentences	SS	140	59.8%	163	37.5%	102	19.4%
	CpdS	18	7.7%	84	19.3%	94	17.9%
	CplS	59	25.2%	111	25.5%	152	28.9%
	CppS	17	7.3%	77	17.7%	178	33.8%
	Total	234	100%	435	100%	526	100%
Clauses	FC	313	87.2%	861	83%	1484	83.2%
	non-FC	46	12.8%	126	12.2%	260	14.6%
	VIC	0	0%	50	4.8%	40	2.2%
	Total	359	100%	1037	100%	1784	100%

Generally, as can be seen from Table 2, the stories written for children in different age groups use a range of both sentences and clauses, with all the subcategories of these two levels. However, the proportions of each type and subtype vary from group to group.

4.1.1. Age group 0-3

All the types of sentences and clauses are used, but there is a significant disparity among their distributions. SSs are the most frequently used (59.8%), followed by CplSs, (25.2%). In contrast, both CpdSs and CppSs are found at merely less than 10% (7.7% and 7.3%, respectively). Constituting more than a half of the whole corpus, SSs are dominant among the four subtypes of sentence structure.

(16) *The sky was blue above. But she did not look up. The river gurgled below. But Little Goat did not listen to its song.* [GI-1]

(17) *But Little Goat didn't answer. She just walked along looking for the sweetest grass. As she walked along, Little Goat moved further and further away from Mother Goat. Little Goat found the sweetest grass. She ate and ate. She had walked far from Mother Goat.* [GI-9]

In (16), there are four sentences, all of which are constantly SSs. In (17), in the total of six sentences, SSs contribute four instances which are far more than the others. Moreover, according to Oshima & Hogue (2006), SSs include the ones containing a subject and a verb, a subject and two or more verbs, two or more subjects and a verb, or at least two subjects and two verbs. However, the findings show that most SSs in the 0 - 3 group have the simplest structure, with just one subject and one verb. In other words, only one certain action or state of each character in the story takes turns to be mentioned.

As regards Complex sentences, there are all subtypes of dependent clauses - adverb clauses, noun clauses, and adjective clauses, with a majority of the noun clauses. It is also noticeable that most CplSs consist of only one dependent clause. In spite of their small proportions, the role of the compound and compound-complex sentences in the stories is undeniable. That is to show the relationship between two or more activities carried out by the same subject. Most of the compound-complex sentences are of the basic form, containing two independent clauses and a dependent one.

(18) *She looked in the mealie patch, but Little Goat was not there.* [GI-9]

(19) *But she forgot about that hole in the duster; and when she untied it - there was no Mouse!* [GI-1]

As for the clauses, taking up more than four-fifths of the whole corpus (87.2%), FCs take the lead among the three subtypes. What's more, the number of FCs containing a simple finite verb phrases exceed those containing complex finite ones. Nonfinite clauses have the frequency of nearly seven times lower than that of finite clauses (12.8%). However, despite the small number, all the subtypes are used, with a considerable disparity in the proportions among them. The findings are in line with the assertion provided by Quirk, et al. (1985) that among the four types of nonfinite clauses, to-VCs and V-ingCs are more frequent, whereas bare infinitive clauses are relatively rare. It is also noticeable that not a single case of verbless clause is used in these ten stories.

4.1.2. Age group 4-6

The findings reveal that the four types of sentences are not markedly dispersed. At 37.5%, SSs are the most common type, marginally followed by the second most common, CplSs, at 25.5%; both of the others, CpdSs and CppSs, account for nearly one-fifth (19.3% and 17.7%, respectively).

As for the simple sentences, a majority contain a predicate of two or more verbs, emphasizing a series of actions rather than the doers of actions. Then, the second most common type of sentence displays all its three subtypes, with adverb dependent clauses being the dominant. Surprisingly, in addition to CplSs consisting of one dependent clause, a large number of CplSs consisting of two, three or even four dependent clauses are found in stories of this age group.

(20) *The stickleback floundered about the boat, pricking and snapping until he was quite out of breath.* [GII-8]

As regards CpdSs, the analysis shows that most independent clauses are joined with coordinators, especially *and* and *but*. Moreover, semicolons are also used; conjunctive adverbs are rarely utilized. In terms of CppSs, most of them belong to the basic structures which consist of two independent clauses combined with one dependent clause. Some others are constituted with at least a pair of independent clauses and a pair of dependent clauses, or especially of up to six dependent clauses.

(21) *Teddy Bear was at work on the big drum, and the clown was turning the organ to make music for the dolls to dance to.* [GII-3]

(22) *On the next day, as it was her turn to prepare the meals, the little mouse said to herself: "Now I will do as much for my friend as she did for me; we will have lentils for dinner, and I will jump into the pot while they are boiling", and she let the action follow the word, without reflecting that a simple sausage can do some things which are out of the reach of even the wisest mouse.* [GII-4]

The syntactic structure at the lower level of the clause also exhibits all its subtypes. Constituting 83%, finite clauses are used much more commonly than all the others. Moreover, with a meager proportion of about one-tenth (12.2%), nonfinite clauses display all four subtypes. Verbless clauses are apparently the least common type with 4.8%. The examples are for illustration.

(23) *There were tin spoons, and lead knives and forks, and two dolly-chairs - all so convenient!* [GII-6]

4.1.3. Age group 7-12

As can be seen from Table 2, though all four sentence types are present in the stories for this age group, they hardly share the similar frequencies of occurrence. Firstly, the stories for this age group are characterized with the predominance of the compound-complex structure. Accounting for 33.8%, CppSs take the lead, followed by the complex sentences (28.9%). It is also noticeable that ranking in the third place is the simple structure (19.4%). Compound sentences are the least popular in the stories for this group. Moreover, of all of the subtypes of dependent clauses, adjective clauses are used much more commonly than the others.

(24) *He found a canoe of shining white stone, tied to the shore.* [GIII-5]

(25) *It was something so new and strange to her to hear the tones of love and courtship, a thing so unusual to be told she was beautiful, that it is not wonderful her head was turned by the new incident, and that she began to think the voice of her lover the sweetest she had ever heard.* [GIII-8]

The finding indicates that all the subtypes of the clause are utilized in the stories of this group. Finite clauses are the most dominant, making up more than four-fifths (83%), leaving the three other subtypes, non-finite clauses, bare infinitive clauses, and verbless clauses far less frequent. Nevertheless, all the subtypes of non-finite clauses are found in the data. Still, there is a considerable difference in the frequencies of the subcategories, with the to-infinitive clause taking the lead (57.3%) and the V-ing clause ranking the second (32.7%). The bare-infinitive clause and the V-ed Clause share the same rate of merely 5%. Finally, the verbless clauses make up only 2.2%; they, nonetheless, make a contribution to the variety of clause types.

(26) *Though so very ugly, there was one faculty she possessed in a more remarkable degree than any woman of the tribe.* [GIII-8]

4.2. Similarities and differences of the structures across the three age groups

4.2.1. The sentence level

Firstly, all the four types of structures - simple, compound, complex and compound-complex - are utilized by writers of these online ESSKs. This reveals a feature of range of sentence structures in ESSKs for all three age groups. The most noticeable feature is the decrease of the percentage of the simplest structure when the age of children targeted at increases. Whereas nearly 60% of the sentences in the ESSKs for group 0 - 3 are simple, the analysis displays a gradual decrease in this type of structure to approximately 40% in those for group 4 - 6, and about 20% in those for group 7 - 12. The decrease in the proportion of the simplest structure goes hand in hand with the increase in that of the most complicated structure, namely the compound-complex sentence. Thus, we can see a steady increase of the compound structure from approximately 8% in ESSKs for group 0 - 3, to approximately 18% in ESSKs for group 4-6, and then up to nearly 34% in ESSKs for group 7 - 12. Another noticeable feature is the nearly equal proportions of the complex sentence among all groups, ranging from 25.2% to 28.9%. The result of the analysis also displays a very slight increase when the age of the targeted group increases.

4.2.2. The clause level

Finite clauses rank first in the ESSKs of the three age groups, which accounts for over four-fifths of the whole corpus. However, close analysis reveals the popularity of this structure gradually decreases in 0 - 3, 4 - 6, and 7 - 12 groups, though the dissimilarity in their percentages is inconsiderable (87.2%, 83% and 83.2% respectively). Furthermore, the second most popular clause type in ESSKs of the three age groups belongs to nonfinite clauses. The disparity among the proportions of this subtype across three groups is insignificant (by no more than 2%). What is more, the frequencies of the subtypes of nonfinite clauses among three age groups are quite similar with the predominance of to-V clauses and V-ing clauses. The V-ed clauses and bare infinitive clauses are rare in the stories. Finally, in all groups, the verbless clause is the least

common. While there is not any verbless clause in the ESSKs for the youngest group, the other groups can enjoy this structure, but with very limited proportions - 4.8% and 2.2% in age groups 4 - 6 and 7 - 12 respectively.

4.3. Discussion

The present study is aimed to investigate whether or not the online ESSKs are suitable for the different age groups they are targeted at, in terms of syntactic structures. From the in-depth description of the findings in the above section, we can now look at the underlying significance of the similarities and differences.

There is no doubt that children aged 0 - 3 are at the first stage of language formation; hence, the writers of ESSKs in this group have a tendency to employ mostly short, simple sentences to get the very young readers start on their road to reading and grasping the moral lessons of the stories easily and quickly. In addition, it is worth noting that most of the SSs in this group are the ones containing a subject and a verb. The predominance of such simple structures emphasizes single actions of the characters, facilitating the young readers' understanding and memorizing the contents. It is likely out of the same pedagogical reasons that the story writers utilize fewer complicated sentence structures, namely compound, complex, and compound-complex structures in the ESSKs for 0 - 3 age group. At the clause level, the finite clauses take the top priority, conveying explicitly the states and actions in terms of tense and aspect. The non-finite structures are much less frequent, just contributing to clarify extra details about the actions. Then, because verbless clauses take syntactic compression one stage further, which may present young readers with difficulties in inferring the missing information in those clauses, they are virtually absent.

As for ESSKs for the age group 4 - 6, although SSs are the most frequent, its proportion decreases by 22.3% in comparison to those for the younger group. Then, though the proportion of finite clauses slightly decreases, it remains the most common clause type in ESSKs for this age group. It is also noticeable that verbless clauses begin to be used as well. This way, the children aged 4 - 6 both get access to the new clause structure and master the basic types.

As regards the ESSKs of the age group 7 - 12, the percentage of SSs plunges, giving rise to the compound-complex and complex sentences, which are far much higher. This strategy of using sentence types in the group 7 - 12 seems to result from the intention that too many simple structures tend to make their stories appear childish, immature and boring to read. This high percentage of the complicated structures at the sentence level is coupled with a larger proportion of the nonfinite structures at the clause level. Furthermore, the writers of all three groups of ESSKs use a mixture of all sentence types in their own stories. This assists them in communicating and conveying the messages in those stories more flexibly and effectively. However, each sentence type is used with its own purposes of expressing; as a result, the distribution of each sentence type in the ESSKs of the three age groups is not the same.

In fact, the simple sentences are recognized as the most popular types in all three groups. By using a large number of SSs, writers of ESSKs facilitate the young children in their first attempts to reading. Then, once the children grow older, it is likely that they may lose their interests in reading if they are faced with stories with mostly choppy simple sentences. Therefore,

there is a preference for compound sentences to connect ideas of equal importance and relevance in ESSKs instead of just simple sentences for readers of 4 - 6 and 7 - 12. Besides, it is worth noting that the distributions of the complex sentences do not widely vary across three age groups. The justification for this may be that complex sentences play an essential part in smoothening the flow of information in stories, helping the readers focus on the main or subordinate ideas and contributing variety to the ESSKs. In the stories written for more grown-up readers, the occurrence frequency of the complex sentences increases stably, helping children be acquainted with this sentence structure step by step, without inhibiting their understanding. What's more, the proportion of the compound-complex sentences the ESSKs for the oldest age group is nearly five times and twice as high as that in the group for the youngest and younger age groups, respectively. This suggests that the story writers carefully observe the readers' cognition ability and language proficiency.

Similarly, at the clause level, ESSKs also display a wide range of clause types, which enables the writers convey their ideas effectively while attentive to the age of the various groups. Finite clauses make up over four-fifths of the whole corpus, resulting from the fact that they may be used in both main and subordinate clauses. Besides, being the second most popular clause type used in ESSKs, nonfinite clauses add variety to the range of clause structure, thereby helping writers conveying meanings in their stories in a more economical way. In addition, it is worth discussing the fact that of all four subtypes of nonfinite clauses, the to-V clause and V-ing clause are the dominant, whereas the V-ed and the bare infinitive are quite rare. This finding is in line with the general tendency of use of these different structures of the clause, as observed by Quirk, et al. (1985). Finally, the smallest proportion of the verbless clauses in the whole data may be attributed to its minimum structure of either a noun phrase, an adjective phrase or an adverbial phrase, which may pose incomprehensibility to the young readers.

The findings of this study, which concern short stories for young children, are to some extent contradict to those revealed from Wulandari's (2015) study on sentence structures in the story *About Barbers* written by Mark Twain. The results of Wulandari's analysis shows that compound sentence structure takes the lead in this short story, followed by compound-complex sentence structure, complex sentence structure and simple sentence structure in the order of the frequency percentages. The difference is highly likely due to the age of the readers targeted at. In Upreti's (2012) study on the challenges and issues of making use of short stories as supplementary resources, he states that teachers face a lot of difficulty due to long structures and difficult vocabulary. On this basis, some suggestions which are put forward to reduce the challenges in teaching short stories such as trainings, workshops, refreshers courses are given regarding teaching short stories.

Therefore, the results of the analysis uncover an encouraging fact that in terms of 'syntactic complexity', the stories under analysis, though selected by a native speaker of English for children around the world, are classified appropriately to be exploited in order of age and accordingly in order of grades of the YLs of EFL. Due to their prominent role, English stories have continually attracted extensive research. They have long been investigated from different perspectives, providing in-depth and comprehensive descriptions of this genre, such as in terms of semantic and syntactic features (Nguyen, 2012; Wulandari, 2015), of discourse markers (Altikriti, 2011; Youran,

Amoli & Youran, 2013), of conjunctions (Suswati, Sujatna, & Mahdi, 2014), or of meta-functions (Vu, 2014; Widayat, 2006). Concerning the practice of TEFL, studies have been conducted to explore the effectiveness of the using short stories in developing reading skill (Handayani, 2013; Pham, 2016), in immersing young children in moral values (Rahim & Rahiem, 2012), as well as to gauge the challenges and issues of making use of short stories as supplementary resources (Upreti, 2012). The present study is hoped to extend this fruitful area of research, contributing some practical insights into this ever-rich resource.

5. Conclusion

This paper reports part of our endeavor to investigate the potential practicability of the online resources of English short stories to the benefits of YLs of EFL. The findings confirm the age-specific appropriateness of these quality free resources in terms of syntactic structures and thus point to the feasibility of immediate use, and preferably of further research of the inherent linguistic characteristics in tandems with the practice of exploiting them in various settings.

The major limitation of this study lies with the small size of the data confined to only one website <https://www.storyberries.com/>. Besides, this research focuses on only the syntactic structure of the sentence and the clause. An investigation with a larger corpus comprising stories form other websites popular and most commonly accessed by children in a specific context in terms of the grammatical points and lexical loads covered in their formal English classes would have practical significance. Secondly, the websites which provide both the scripts and the voice may serve as another source of data to investigate the prosodic aspects for the same pedagogical purposes. Finally, a study into the teachers', learners', and parents' attitude and practice, if any, and/or effectiveness of harnessing these online resources to the TEFL for YLs may also yield substantial benefits.

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APPENDIX: List of Samples in Data (GI: Age 0 - 3; GII: Age 4 - 6; GIII: Age 7 - 12)

Code	Title of story & Name of author
GI-1	<i>The Story of Miss Moppet</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GI-2	<i>Londi the Dreaming Girl</i> (Lauren Holliday & Nathalie Koenig)
GI-3	<i>The Happy Hat</i> (Jade Matre)
GI-4	<i>The Best Thing Ever</i> (Melissa Fagan)
GI-5	<i>What Is It?</i> (Kate Sidley)
GI-6	<i>Hippo Wants to Dance</i> (Sam Beckbessinger)

GI-7	<i>Little Ant's Big Plan</i> (Candice Dingwall)
GI-8	<i>Jimmy the Cat and Bobik's Birthday</i> (Katty Melnichenko)
GI-9	<i>Little goat</i> (Mirna Lawrence)
GI-10	<i>Whose Button Is This?</i> (Paul Kennedy)
GII-1	<i>Monsieur-le-dot</i> (Jade Matre)
GII-2	<i>The Princess and the Pea</i> (Hans Christian Andersen)
GII-3	<i>Dolly Dimple</i> (H.W. Mabie, E. E. Hale and W. B. Forbush)
GII-4	<i>The Mouse and the Sausage</i> (H.W. Mabie, E.E.Hale and W. B. Forbush)
GII-5	<i>Fox and the Pine</i> (Danielle Noakes)
GII-6	<i>The Tale of Two Bad Mice</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GII-7	<i>The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GII-8	<i>The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GII-9	<i>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GII-10	<i>The Tale of Tom Kitten</i> (Beatrix Potter)
GIII-1	<i>Rabbit's Eyes</i> (Katharine Pyle)
GIII-2	<i>The Faithless Parrot</i> (Charles H. Bennett)
GIII-3	<i>The Musicians of Bremen</i> (Brothers Grimm)
GIII-4	<i>The Little Match Girl</i> (Hans Christian Andersen)
GIII-5	<i>The White Stone Canoe</i> (H. W. Mabie, E. E. Hale and W. B.Forbush)
GIII-6	<i>In Search of a Baby</i> (H.W. Mabie, E. E. Hale and W. B.Forbush)
GIII-7	<i>The Three Little Pigs</i> (Joseph Jacobs)
GIII-8	<i>The Maiden Who Loved a Fish</i> (H.W. Mabie, E. E.Hale and W.B. Forbush)
GIII-9	<i>Fundevogel</i> (Brothers Grimm)
GIII-10	<i>Old Sultan</i> (Brothers Grimm)