

MARKEDNESS IN WRITING: A CASE OF EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This article explores the concept of "markedness" in the written discourse of EFL students. The study aims to identify linguistic challenges faced by learners when utilizing typologically complex structures in academic writing.*

Key words: *markedness, EFL students, linguistic typology, written discourse, error analysis, structural complexity, language acquisition.*

Annotatsiya: *Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilini chettili sifatida o'rganayotgan talabalar yozma nutqida "belgilanganlik" (markedness) tushunchasi va uning lingvistik tahlili yoritilgan. Tadqiqot talabalarning tipologik jihatdan murakkab strukturalarni qo'llashdagi qiyinchiliklarini aniqlashga qaratilgan.*

Key words: *markedness, EFL students, linguistic typology, written discourse, error analysis, structural complexity, language acquisition.*

Абстрактный: *В данной статье рассматривается концепция «маркированности» в письменной речи студентов, изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Исследование направлено на выявление трудностей студентов при использовании типологически сложных лингвистических структур.*

Key words: *маркированность, студенты EFL, лингвистическая типология, письменная речь, анализ ошибок, структурная сложность, овладение языком.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of markedness remains one of the most pivotal frameworks in modern generative linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) theories. Originally formulated by the Prague School of Linguistics, markedness distinguishes between "unmarked" forms—those that are simpler, more frequent, and more natural—and "marked" forms, which are complex, infrequent, and linguistically specific. For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, the transition from utilizing basic unmarked structures to mastering sophisticated

marked structures represents a significant hurdle in achieving academic proficiency. The Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) suggests that areas of the target language that are more marked than the native language will be more difficult to acquire [3, B. 45]. In the context of writing, markedness manifests in syntax, lexicon, and discourse organization. This study investigates how EFL learners navigate these complexities, particularly looking at how they avoid or misuse marked structures such as passive voice, inverted word order, and complex subordinating conjunctions. Understanding these patterns is essential for developing targeted pedagogical interventions that move beyond basic fluency toward stylistic and structural maturity in student writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical foundation of markedness was significantly expanded by Greenberg in his typological studies, where he posited that unmarked forms serve as the "default" in human cognition [1, B. 12]. In the realm of SLA, Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis remains the cornerstone for predicting learner errors based on the relative complexity of linguistic features [2, B. 88]. Previous literature suggests that EFL learners often rely on "unmarked" strategies, such as simple Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) patterns, even when a "marked" structure would be more rhetorically effective. The methodology for this research involved a corpus-based analysis of 50 academic essays produced by upper-intermediate EFL students. The data was analyzed using a qualitative and quantitative approach to identify the frequency of marked versus unmarked grammatical structures. Specifically, the research focused on the usage of the passive voice (a marked form in many contexts) and the use of relative clauses. By comparing student output against standard academic corpora, the study identifies specific "avoidance strategies" where students opt for simpler, unmarked alternatives to avoid potential errors in more complex, marked constructions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed a strong correlation between the degree of linguistic markedness and the frequency of errors. Students demonstrated a high level of accuracy in unmarked structures (e.g., active voice, direct word order), but their performance dropped significantly when attempting marked constructions. Interestingly, the data suggests "over-generalization" of unmarked forms, leading to a stylistic "flatness" in academic writing.

Table 1: Frequency of Marked vs. Unmarked Structures in EFL Writing

Linguistic Feature	Structure Type	Usage Frequency (%)	Error Rate (%)
Word Order	Unmarked (SVO)	88%	4%

Word Order	Marked (Inversion)	12%	42%
Voice	Unmarked (Active)	76%	7%
Voice	Marked (Passive)	24%	31%

As shown in Table 1, students heavily favor unmarked SVO patterns, using them in 88% of instances. However, when they attempt marked inversion (often used for emphasis in academic English), the error rate jumps to 42%. This confirms that markedness serves as a reliable predictor of difficulty.

Table 2: Types of Errors in Marked Constructions

Error Category	Specific Feature	Percentage of Total Errors
Syntactic	Incorrect Passive Formation	35%
Morphological	Wrong Inflection in Marked Forms	25%
Stylistic	Misuse of Emphasis (Inversion)	20%
Avoidance	Simplification of Complex Clauses	20%

Discussion of Table 2 indicates that syntactic errors are the most prominent when dealing with markedness. Students often struggle with the auxiliary requirements of the passive voice or the verb-subject agreement in inverted sentences. Furthermore, "avoidance" (20%) shows that students are consciously or subconsciously bypassing complex structures to minimize risk, which ultimately limits their expressive range in English [4, B. 112].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, markedness is a fundamental factor that shapes the developmental trajectory of EFL writing. The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL students exhibit a distinct preference for unmarked linguistic forms, which results in grammatically correct but stylistically limited writing. The high error rate in marked structures—particularly in passive voice and syntactic inversion—suggests that these features require more explicit pedagogical focus. Instructors should recognize that errors in marked forms are not merely signs of failure but are evidence of a learner attempting to bridge the gap between intermediate and advanced proficiency. To improve student outcomes, academic writing curricula should incorporate

"Markedness-Aware" teaching strategies. This includes providing students with structured practice in transforming unmarked sentences into marked ones to achieve specific rhetorical effects, such as cohesion and emphasis. By deconstructing the perceived complexity of marked forms, educators can help students overcome the "avoidance" trap, leading to more sophisticated, varied, and professional academic discourse. Future research should examine whether the influence of markedness varies across different native language backgrounds to further refine the MDH in diverse educational settings.

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