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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Syntax to Stanza: Leveraging a Computational Tool to Enhance the Poetry Knowledge of Language Students at Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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| ABSTRACT

In the context of English language education in Sri Lanka, the transition from linguistic competence to literary appreciation remains a significant challenge for undergraduates. This research investigates the impact of integrating computer technology over traditional pedagogical methods to develop sentential knowledge as a means of enhancing the overall poetry knowledge of language students. Specifically, the study focuses on simple sentence structures and the capacity of digital tools to deconstruct complex poetic syntax, thereby facilitating a deeper thematic understanding of the poetic works. Adopting a qualitative and descriptive research design, the study sampled 20 first-year B.A. students at Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL), who offered English as one of their core subjects. The research utilized a comparative framework, evaluating student performance through a traditional pre-test and a post-test with a developed computational tool, "*Digital Sentence Pattern Learner and Tester*", which bridges the gap between grammatical structure and poetic meaning. The findings reveal a marked improvement in the post-test results, demonstrating that technology-mediated instruction significantly outperforms traditional methods in fostering sentential clarity. Qualitative analysis of the results indicates that students developed a mastery of sentential knowledge as a more sophisticated ability to decode poetic syntax when supported by digital tools. The study concludes that the integration of computer technology is an effective catalyst for improving poetry knowledge among language learners. It recommends that university-level literature curricula in Sri Lanka adopt computer technology-incorporated sentential analysis to modernize literary instruction and improve student outcomes.

| KEYWORDS

EUSL, language students, sentential knowledge, poetry knowledge, qualitative research, computational tool.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The integration of computer technology into language learning has fundamentally redefined the landscape of university English language education, offering a departure from the perceived limitations of traditional, teacher-centered methodologies. In the realm of literature, language students often encounter a "syntax barrier", where the deviant grammatical structures of verse impede thematic comprehension. As far as English poetry is concerned, understanding poetic syntax is crucial for language students at universities because it unlocks a deeper comprehension of literary texts and enhances their analytical capabilities. As noted by Widdowson (1975), the ability to decode the "communicative act" of poetry depends heavily on the learner's grasp of its underlying linguistic framework. However, traditional lecture-based methods frequently overlook the technicalities of sentential

knowledge, i.e. the mastery of sentence-level syntax, leaving students ill-equipped to navigate complex poetic structures.

Modern language scholars suggest that digital intervention provides a more granular, interactive approach to deconstructing these barriers. According to Warschauer (1996), technology facilitates a shift from passive reception to active construction of knowledge, allowing learners to visualize and manipulate linguistic data. By utilizing digital tools to build sentential knowledge, language students can bridge the gap between basic literacy and sophisticated poetry knowledge. This is particularly critical in contexts such as Sri Lankan universities, where English is often taught in a second language environment. As Lazar (1993) argues, the systematic study of language through literature requires tools that help students recognize patterns of sentence structure. Consequently, this study posits that computer technology serves as a superior scaffolding mechanism compared to traditional methods. By focusing on the simple sentence patterns through digital mapping and interactive analysis, educators can empower students to unlock the semantic richness of poetry, fostering both linguistic precision and an authentic appreciation for the literary form.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the pedagogical shift in Sri Lankan higher education, particularly in the challenging domain of poetry, from traditional instruction to computer-technology incorporated methods. It specifically investigates how digital mastery of sentence patterns, especially simple sentence patterns, serves as a critical linguistic scaffold for enhancing poetry knowledge among university language students.

2.1. Technology-Mediated Sentence Mastery in Poetry Education

The intersection of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and literary appreciation represents a significant frontier in modern literary studies. In Sri Lankan universities, where English plays a pivotal role in language and literature studies, the transition from "chalk-and-talk" methodologies to computer-technology incorporated environments is increasingly scrutinized for its ability to bridge the gap between basic grammar and complex aesthetic appreciation.

2.2. Traditional vs. Technology-Incorporated Methods

Traditional methods of poetry instruction in countries like Sri Lanka have long been characterized by a "teacher-centered pedagogy" and a reliance on "print-based materials" (Odhiambo, 2017). Wijesuriya (2023) observes that while these traditional methods provide a rule-based framework, they often fail to foster the engagement required for the "digital native" generation. Conversely, technology-incorporated methods have demonstrated a direct positive impact on students' achievement and attitudes (Aituganova et al., 2023). Perera (2025) highlights that multimedia tools such as interactive presentations and online platforms create a dynamic environment that fosters "learning retention" at a significantly higher level than the current curriculum-based traditional education.

2.3. Sentence Patterns as a Foundation for Poetry

A critical barrier to poetry knowledge among undergraduates is "syntactic anxiety" when encountering non-linear poetic structures. Scholarly consensus suggests that a strong grasp of simple sentence patterns is the necessary prerequisite for decoding poetic deviance. Koh (2021) emphasizes that understanding basic patterns allows students to 'transform' original structures, a skill vital for literary analysis. Traditional methods treat grammar and poetry as isolated silos; however, modern research suggests that syntactic diversity is the bedrock of "linguistic maturity" (Silva and Rajan, 2024). When technology such as word processing or grammar-checking software is used to drill these patterns, students can reduce their cognitive load, allowing them to focus on the metaphorical and thematic layers of poetry (Scirp, 2021).

2.4. Multimodal Tools and Aesthetic Knowledge

The multimodal nature of computer technology, such as integrating audio, video, and text is particularly effective for poetry education. Kumar and Saini (2025) found that the use of smart boards and digital databases in Sri Lankan classrooms led to higher student participation and improved comprehension of poetic nuances. Unlike static text-

based traditional methods, digital tools allow students to visualize the "simple sentence" within the "complex image", effectively demystifying the genre. Further, the use of interactive "word processing" and "electronic imaging" provides students with the tools to reassemble text structures, helping them understand the constructive techniques of literary content (Nikolaidou, 2009; Aituganova et al., 2023).

2.5. Contextual Realities and Challenges

Despite the clear benefits, the implementation of technology-incorporated methods in Sri Lankan universities faces "institutional bottlenecks". Issues such as inconsistent internet connectivity and a lack of digital literacy among academic staff remain significant hurdles (Jawaheer, 2021). Further, Rathnayake (2020) notes that university students in Sri Lanka often perform at a low level of English proficiency, making the 'scaffolding' provided by digital tools even more essential to prevent frustration during literary studies.

Thus, the literature underscores that while traditional methods provide a structural base, they are insufficient for the sophisticated task of poetic analysis in a digital age. By leveraging computer technology to automate and reinforce the mastery of simple sentence patterns, Sri Lankan educators can provide students with the linguistic tools necessary to appreciate and analyze the complexities of English poetry.

3. Simple Sentence Patterns

The pursuit of decoding the complex architecture of stanzas in English poetry begins with a return to its structural origins. Unlocking English poetic syntax requires an intimate familiarity with simple sentence patterns, as these foundational templates provide the 'norm' against which poetic creativity is measured. As noted by Bradford (1993), poetry is intrinsically different from other discourses precisely because it adds form to language, often by manipulating the very syntactic rules that govern prose. By first mastering the seven simple sentence patterns (Greenbaum and Quirk, 2001), readers develop a "syntactic expectation". This expectation is important for identifying foregrounding, a process where poets deliberately deviate from standard word order to create aesthetic attention. For instance, understanding the standard SVO pattern allows a reader to recognize the emotional weight of inversion or hyperbaton, where a poet might shift the object to the beginning of a line for emphasis. Leech (1969) argues that such "syntactic deviations" are only meaningful because they contrast with the simple, underlying structures of the language. Thus, to understand poetic language, learning the seven simple sentence patterns is basic and inevitable for language students. The patterns are as follows:

3.1. SV (Subject + Verb)

Syntactically, the subject and the verb are the two main functional categories in a sentence. At the heart of every simple sentence in English is the Subject-Verb relationship. The subject tells who or what is performing the action of the verb. A verb, on the other hand, shows an action or a state of being. For example:

- *The maiden sang.*
- *The sea breathes.*

Simple sentences with the SV pattern are formed with intransitive verbs, and they are very common in English.

3.2. SVO (Subject + Verb + direct Object)

This is the simplest and most basic clause pattern in English. Some verbs require a direct object which is generally a noun phrase or a pronoun that receives the action of the verb which is transitive in sense.

- *I saw her.*
- *I told my wrath.*

3.3. SVC (Subject + Verb + Complement)

This structure consists of the subject, verb, and complement (subject), which describes what the subject refers to as powerful in English. Further, the subject complement, which normally follows verbs like the forms of *to be, become,*

remain, seem, feel, look, grow, turn, appear, taste, sound, smell, etc., may consist of an adjective (phrase) or a noun (phrase). For example:

- *My foe was outstretched.*
- *Your hood is a strange flower.*

3.4. SVA (Subject + Verb + Adverbial)

This pattern is the combination of the subject, verb, and adverbial. An adverbial is a clause element that gives extra meaning about the event or state of affairs described in the sentence. For example:

- *The music lingered in my heart.*
- *The buffaloes stand in the dust.*

3.5. SVOiO (Subject + Verb + indirect Object +direct Object)

This structure is made up of the subject, verb, indirect object, and direct object. It is obvious that some verbs such as *want* and *must* need an object. When some verbs, however, usually have an indirect object, they need a direct object to complete the sense. Hence, the following sentence almost always feels incomplete, as it has a subject, a verb, and an indirect object:

I told my friend ……

To fix it, we need the 'what', i.e. a direct object, 'my wrath':

I told my friend my wrath.

Here, 'my wrath' is the direct object – it is what I told. 'My friend' is the indirect object because the friend is the one (the person to whom the wrath is being told) who receives the information or the expression of anger. This type of sentence can also be rephrased like this:

I told my friend my wrath → I told my wrath to my friend

Here, the verb *tell* takes two objects, and it is called a ditransitive verb.

3.6. SVOC (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Complement)

This pattern contains the subject, verb, object (direct), and the complement (object). Like subjects, objects also have complements. They occur in clauses constructed in the following pattern:

- *I made my wrath a tree.*
- *I saw her singing.*

In the above sentences, 'a tree' and 'singing' are object complements which serve to give more information about the objects, 'my wrath' and 'her', respectively.

3.7. SVOA (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Adverbial)

Some verbs like *sun* and *see* take an object and then also require an adverbial. For example:

- *I sunned it with smiles.* (Here, 'with smiles' is an adverbial of manner/ instrument, explaining how I sunned the object).
- *I saw her in the field.* (Here, 'in the field' is a locative adverbial, telling us exactly where the object is located).

Finally, a simple sentence acts as a navigational compass; without it, the "significant disorder" of poetic syntax remains an impenetrable mystery rather than a deliberate artistic choice. Learning these patterns transforms the reader from a passive observer into an active analyst capable of seeing how poets utilize the "grammar of expectation" to evoke specific rhythms and moods.

4. Computational Tools to Deal with Sentence Patterns

Advancements in computational technology have facilitated the development of sophisticated computational tools or software designed to scaffold the acquisition and assessment of fundamental sentence structures. Modern pedagogical frameworks increasingly leverage Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS), such as the *Intelligent Sentence Writing Tutor (ISWT)*, which utilize rule-based parsers to diagnose grammatical errors and provide real-time, corrective feedback (Katsarou et al., 2025). These tools often incorporate *Key Word in Context (KWIC)* engines to help learners identify syntagmatic generalizations and sentence patterns within large corpora (Huang, 1994). Further, AI-driven platforms like *MindTer* integrate transformer-based models to evaluate global coherence and local lexical patterns, allowing students to test sentence completion tasks that mirror standardized assessments (Giglio et al., 2025). By automating the identification of linguistic classes through hierarchical clustering, these computational environments reduce cognitive load and offer a personalized interactive dialogue between the student and the software (Zweig and Burges, 2011). Consequently, these technologies bridge the gap between theoretical grammar and practical application, ensuring that learners can systematically verify their understanding of sentence-level phenomena in a structured digital environment. Unfortunately, language learners often encounter significant barriers when trying to access these specialized software, as most tools are either costly or require subscriptions for use. Recognizing this limitation, the researcher developed a free, open-access digital tool titled "*Digital Sentence Pattern Learner and Tester*" to empower students in mastering fundamental sentence structures with greater ease and efficiency.

5. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive and qualitative methodology. A computational tool was developed to increase the knowledge of English poetry through the learning and testing of simple sentence patterns.

5.1 Research Participants

This study involved twenty first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts degree programme with English as one of their subjects at the Department of Languages, Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

5.2 Data Collection and Distribution

A total of sixty poetic lines were collected from relevant English poems, each incorporating one of the seven patterns of simple sentences. Of these, twenty sentences were utilized for a traditional pretest. Subsequently, another set of twenty sentences was fed into the developed tool, enabling participants to engage in practice sessions using their laptops and desktops. Finally, the remaining twenty sentences were employed in a post-test conducted on the computer using the developed tool.

5.3 Research Design

This study was conducted in three phases: *Phase 1, Phase 2,* and *Phase 3*.

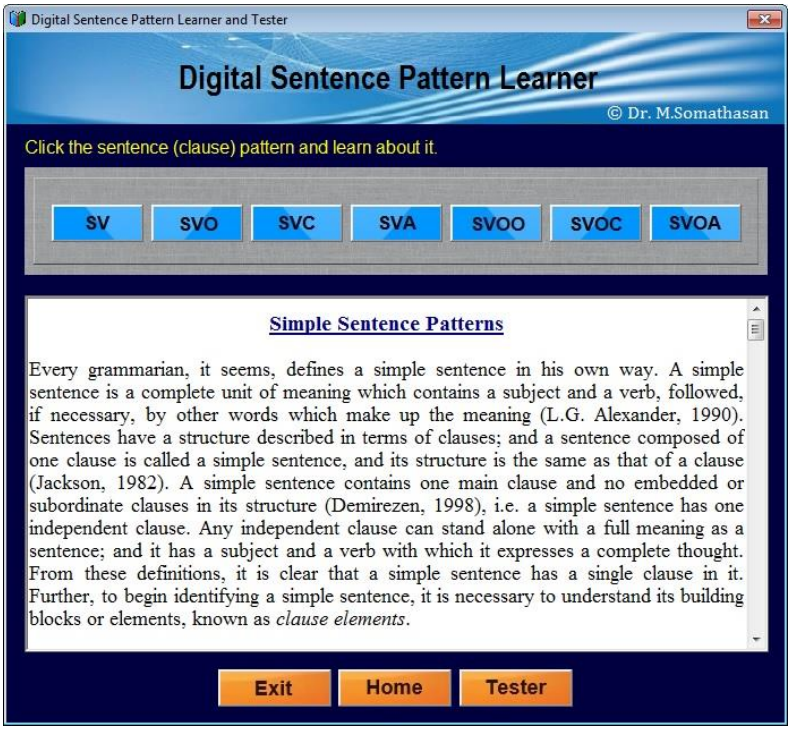
5.3.1 Phase 1: Pretest

During this phase, a conventional pretest comprising Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) was carried out to evaluate the participants' existing knowledge of simple sentence patterns. The pretest was scored on a scale of 100 marks. Subsequently, the responses were recorded for the purpose of results, analysis, and findings.

5.3.2 Phase 2: Development of the Digital Tool and Practice

In this phase, the tool, "*Digital Sentence Pattern Learner and Tester*" was developed by the researcher using the computer language VB 6. The sample visual of the developed digital tool is represented below:

Sample Visual of the Developed Digital Tool



5.3.2.1 Mechanism of the Developed Digital Tool

The tool operates through dual functionality: *Learning Mode* and *Testing Mode*. In Learning Mode by clicking the 'Learner' button, students access comprehensive explanations of the seven fundamental sentence patterns in English, supported by examples drawn from relevant classic literary works. Once they grasp the concepts, they transition to Testing Mode by clicking the 'Tester' button. Here, the student engages with an interactive quiz: pressing the 'Sentence' button generates a randomly selected simple sentence aligned with a list of seven simple sentence patterns. Students then evaluate the sentence and select the corresponding pattern from the list. The 'Check' button allows for immediate feedback, i.e. marking responses as 'Right', 'Wrong', or 'Not Attempted', with the flexibility to review answers at any point during the exercise. Right identifications earn 5 marks, while wrong guesses or unanswered questions receive 0. Navigation is intuitive: the 'Next' button advances to a new sentence, 'Refresh' resets the session, and 'Exit' concludes the activity. This tool was field-tested over one week, with participants using computers to interact with and assess its effectiveness. Design-wise, the system prioritizes clarity, engagement, and instant feedback to reinforce learning through practice.

5.3.3 Phase 3: Post-test

During this phase, a post-test was conducted using the developed tool to assess the participants' acquired understanding of simple sentence structures. The test was scored out of a total of 100 marks. The responses to the test were documented for the purpose of results, analysis, and findings.

6. Analysis of the Results

The study analyzed the results presented in *Table 1* to draw findings by comparing the pretest and post-test results regarding the participants' knowledge of simple sentence patterns and their functions in poetry:

The Results of Pretest and Post-test on Simple Sentence Patterns in Poetry				
Marks Range	Number of Participants (20)			
	Pretest	Percentage (%)	Post-test	Percentage (%)
0-24	2	10%	0	0%
25-29	3	15%	0	0%
30-34	3	15%	0	0%
35-39	5	25%	0	0%
40-44	3	15%	2	10%
45-49	2	10%	3	15%
50-54	1	5%	3	15%
55-59	1	5%	4	20%
60-64	0	0%	3	15%
65-69	0	0%	2	10%
70-84	0	0%	2	10%
85-100	0	0%	1	5%
	20	**100%**	**20**	**100%**

Table 1 – The results of pretest and post-test on simple sentence patterns in poetry

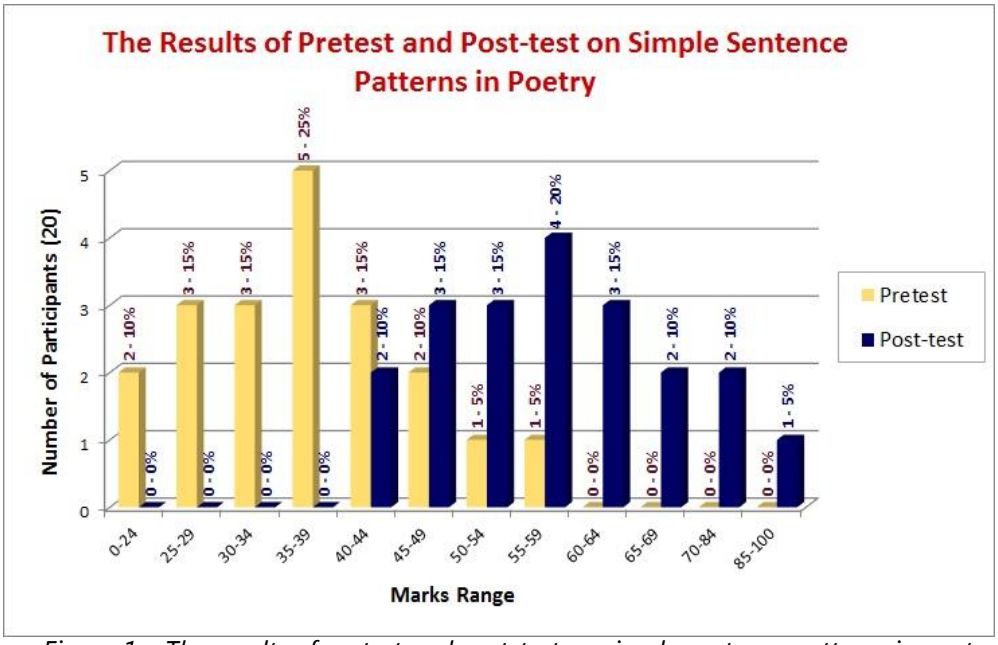


Figure 1 – The results of pretest and post-test on simple sentence patterns in poetry

Figure 1 illustrates a comparison between participants' pretest and post-test scores, highlighting their progress in understanding simple sentence structures and their functional roles in English literature, particularly within poetic texts. The data reveal a substantial improvement in comprehension after participants used a newly designed digital learning and testing tool, indicating its effectiveness in enhancing knowledge of sentence patterns in poetry.

To further substantiate the extent of this improvement and to focus specifically on the group that achieved proficiency, *Table 2* is presented. This table offers a detailed quantitative breakdown by isolating and presenting the statistical measures, i.e. specifically the mean and standard deviation, for the subset of participants who demonstrated the most significant mastery, defined operationally as those who received marks falling between 50 and 100. The comparison of the scores from the pretest (baseline evaluation) and post-test (post-intervention

evaluation) for this high-achieving subgroup serves to rigorously quantify the depth, consistency, and magnitude of the knowledge transfer facilitated by the intervention:

Marks Range	Tests	Number of Participants (Out of 20) and Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
50-100	Pretest	2 – 10%	0.33	0.52
	Post-test	15 – 75%	2.5	1.05

Table 2 – The mean and standard deviation values of the pretest and post-test for the marks between 50 and 100

The above results (*Table 2*) clearly show that seventy five (75%) percent of the total participants within the marks range of 50-100 have enhanced their understanding of simple sentence patterns by employing the innovative tool, "*Digital Sentence Pattern Learner and Tester*".

7. Findings

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of an innovative digital tool in deepening English undergraduates' comprehension of poetic concepts by reinforcing foundational sentence structures. In contrast to conventional pedagogical approaches, the interactive tool cultivated a dynamic and immersive learning environment, significantly enhancing students' grasp of literary analysis. Notably, learners expressed a strong preference for the technology-enhanced method, with many highlighting the real-time feedback as a main factor in their rapid skill development and growing confidence in deconstructing poetic forms.

8. Conclusion

This research underscores a pivotal shift in English language pedagogy at Eastern University, Sri Lanka, demonstrating that the integration of computer technology significantly outperforms traditional methodologies in bridging the "syntax barrier" inherent in English poetry. By focusing on the seven fundamental simple sentence patterns as a linguistic scaffold, the study successfully moved students from a state of "syntactic anxiety" towards a level of analytical maturity. The development and implementation of the "*Digital Sentence Pattern Learner and Tester*" tool served as a critical intervention, transforming passive learners into active analysts capable of deconstructing poetic deviance. The findings reveal that the interactive nature of the digital tool, specifically its capacity for immediate feedback and multimodal engagement, directly correlates with a marked increase in student performance from the pretest to the post-test. While traditional "chalk-and-talk" methods provide a theoretical base, they lack the dynamic reinforcement necessary for students to internalize the "grammar of expectation" required for literary analysis. Despite institutional challenges such as digital literacy and connectivity, the success of this open-access tool suggests that localized, cost-effective digital solutions are essential for modernizing the Sri Lankan higher education landscape. Ultimately, mastering sentential knowledge through technology does not merely improve grammatical accuracy; it empowers language students to unlock the aesthetic and thematic depths of poetry. This study concludes that for language students to truly appreciate the "communicative act" of verse, computer-assisted scaffolding must become a cornerstone of the curriculum, ensuring that the complexities of literature remain accessible and engaging in the digital age.

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