

Temporal Adverbial Clauses as Indicators of Syntactic Development in Student Writing at Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract: This study examines the use of temporal adverbial clauses as indicators of syntactic development in the academic writing of undergraduate students at Walter Sisulu University. Grounded in theories of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Complexity Theory in second language acquisition, the research positions temporal subordination as a key syntactic structure through which learners express textual cohesion, sequencing, and argumentation in written discourse. Given the university's multilingual context, where English often serves as an additional language, this investigation also engages with second-language acquisition (SLA) perspectives on clause combining and subordination. A corpus of 100 student essays across different academic levels and disciplines was compiled and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Temporal adverbial clauses were identified, coded for structural complexity and analysed in relation to their frequency, syntactic integration, and communicative function within the larger discourse. The results show a developmental trajectory in which more advanced writers employ a wider range of subordinators, such as *while*, *before*, and *as soon as*, and exhibit greater syntactic embedding and functional flexibility, indicating a maturing command of complex syntax. Additionally, a noticeable shift from additive coordination toward temporal subordination was observed, signalling increased syntactic sophistication. These findings support the claim that temporal adverbial clauses can function as reliable indicators of syntactic development and contribute to our understanding of learner language in academic contexts. The study has important implications for the assessment of writing proficiency, the design of academic literacy interventions, and the broader goals of language support in South African higher education, where English language proficiency remains a central concern for student success.

Keywords: Syntactic Complexity, Temporal Adverbial Clauses, Academic Writing, Second Language Acquisition, Multilingual Learner, Corpus Linguistics

Résumé : Cette étude examine l'utilisation des propositions adverbiales temporelles comme indicateurs du développement syntaxique dans les écrits académiques des étudiants de premier cycle de l'Université Walter Sisulu. Fondée sur les théories de la grammaire systémique fonctionnelle (GSF) et de la théorie de la complexité en acquisition des langues secondes, la recherche positionne la subordination temporelle comme une structure syntaxique clé permettant aux apprenants d'exprimer la cohésion textuelle, la séquence et l'argumentation dans le discours écrit. Compte tenu du contexte multilingue de l'université, où l'anglais est souvent utilisé comme langue additionnelle, cette étude s'intéresse également aux perspectives de l'acquisition des langues secondes (ALS) sur la combinaison et la subordination des propositions. Un corpus de 100 dissertations d'étudiants de différents niveaux et disciplines a été constitué et analysé de manière quantitative et qualitative. Les propositions adverbiales temporelles ont été identifiées, codées selon leur complexité structurelle et analysées en fonction de leur fréquence, de leur intégration syntaxique et de leur fonction communicative au sein du discours. Les résultats révèlent une trajectoire développementale où les rédacteurs plus avancés emploient une gamme plus étendue de subordonnants, tels que « pendant que », « avant que » et « dès que », et font preuve d'une plus grande imbrication syntaxique et d'une plus grande flexibilité fonctionnelle, témoignant d'une maîtrise croissante de la syntaxe complexe. De plus, un passage notable de la coordination additive à la subordination temporelle a été observé, signalant une sophistication syntaxique accrue. Ces résultats confirment l'hypothèse selon laquelle les propositions adverbiales temporelles peuvent servir d'indicateurs fiables du développement syntaxique et contribuer à notre compréhension du langage des apprenants dans un contexte académique. Cette étude a des implications importantes pour l'évaluation des compétences en écriture, la conception d'interventions en littératie académique et les objectifs plus généraux du soutien linguistique dans

l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain, où la maîtrise de l'anglais demeure un enjeu central pour la réussite étudiante.

Mots-clés : Complexité syntaxique, propositions adverbiales temporelles, écriture académique, acquisition d'une langue seconde, apprenant multilingue, linguistique de corpus

Introduction

Syntactic complexity is widely recognised as a key indicator of language proficiency and academic writing development, particularly in second language (L2) contexts. It refers to the range and sophistication of grammatical structures that writers use to express relationships between ideas (Bi & Wang, 2025; Kim & Ro, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). In academic writing, syntactic complexity performs important communicative functions: it enables writers to sequence information, articulate cause-and-effect relationships, frame arguments, and construct logically coherent texts. Corpus-based research has consistently shown that growth in L2 writing proficiency is associated with increased use of complex syntactic structures and greater integration of subordinate clauses (Lu & Ai, 2015; Kyle & Crossley, 2018). As learners develop, they typically move from simple coordination toward more hierarchically organised forms of subordination, reflecting expansion in both grammatical control and discourse competence.

Several studies demonstrate that increased use of complex syntactic structures, including temporal adverbial clauses, is closely associated with higher proficiency in second language (L2) writing. For example, Liu et al. (2025) show that both lexical and syntactic complexity generally rise with proficiency, although not always in a strictly linear pattern across learner levels, while Kim and Ro (2024) similarly find that the sophistication of verb and argument structures across genres reflects writers' proficiency. Beyond proficiency, other factors also shape syntactic development. Bi & Wang (2025) highlight the positive impact of extracurricular academic reading, noting that students exposed to additional reading opportunities demonstrate greater syntactic complexity, including more frequent use of adverbial clauses. The role of genre is equally significant, as argumentative writing tends to elicit more complex syntactic constructions than narrative forms, underscoring how task demands influence linguistic performance (Kim & Ro, 2024). In addition, Tao et al. (2025) emphasise the value of integrated reading-to-write tasks, arguing that exposure to varied linguistic input supports the development of syntactic sophistication. Finally, longitudinal research by Jiang et al. (2019) confirms that the use of adverbial clauses and other complex structures increases over time, reflecting clear developmental trajectories in L2 acquisition.

Among subordinate structures, temporal adverbial clauses are particularly significant. Introduced by subordinators such as *when*, *after*, *before*, *while*, and *as soon as*, these clauses allow writers to express temporal sequencing, simultaneity, and logical progression. Although temporal clauses may be introduced relatively early in language learning, their structural variation and functional integration into academic discourse represent more advanced stages of development (van Hell & de Bot, 2017; Roca de Larios, Coyle & Nicolás-Conesa, 2016). The use of non-finite forms, expanded subordinators, and embedded constructions reflects increasing syntactic economy and rhetorical sophistication (Biber & Gray, 2016; Bi & Wang, 2025). Longitudinal studies

further identify temporal subordination as a reliable marker of developmental progression in writing tasks that require sequencing, explanation, and argumentation (Ortega, 2015).

These issues are especially relevant in multilingual higher education contexts such as South Africa, where English serves as the primary medium of instruction despite being an additional language for most students (Van der Walt & Dornbrack, 2018). Students are required to acquire disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously mastering the conventions of academic English. Research indicates that many South African university students experience difficulty producing grammatically complex and cohesive texts, particularly when managing subordinate structures and extended argumentation (Makalela, 2019; Hlalele & Alexander, 2021). Institutions such as Walter Sisulu University (WSU), which serve linguistically diverse and historically marginalised populations, operate within this demanding linguistic landscape.

Despite a substantial body of international research on syntactic complexity, most studies have been conducted in English-dominant contexts in North America and Europe (Lu & Ai, 2015; Kyle & Crossley, 2018). Comparatively limited research has examined how multilingual learners in Global South contexts develop and deploy complex syntactic structures in academic writing. While scholarship on multilingualism in South African higher education has expanded in recent years, fewer studies have provided detailed corpus-based analyses of specific syntactic constructions as developmental indicators. This gap limits context-sensitive understanding of how students negotiate academic English within multilingual settings. Recent work in African applied linguistics has called for closer examination of academic language practices within local sociolinguistic realities rather than relying exclusively on Global North models (Nomlomo & Katiya, 2020; Rudwick & Makoni, 2022). A focused investigation of temporal adverbial clauses in student writing directly responds to this need.

This study, therefore, investigates the role of temporal adverbial clauses as indicators of syntactic development in the academic writing of students at WSU. It analyses the frequency with which these clauses occur in a corpus of student essays and compares patterns across first- and third-year students to trace potential developmental trajectories. In addition, the study examines structural characteristics such as finiteness, range of subordinators, clause positioning, and patterns of embedding, as these features reflect varying degrees of syntactic complexity. Beyond structure, the study explores the discourse functions of temporal adverbial clauses, particularly their roles in organising narratives, framing arguments, sequencing procedures, and contributing to textual cohesion.

Guided by these objectives, the study examines how frequently students at different academic levels employ temporal adverbial clauses in their writing and what structural patterns characterise their use. It further considers how these clauses function within academic discourse and evaluates the extent to which patterns of frequency, structural variation, and functional deployment may be interpreted as indicators of syntactic maturity. By doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on academic literacy and multilingualism in higher education, offering empirically grounded insight into how

multilingual students develop complex syntactic resources in an English-medium university context.

1. Literature Review

Understanding how multilingual students develop syntactic competence in academic writing requires a close examination of theoretical and empirical studies in second-language acquisition, syntax, and writing pedagogy. This section reviews existing literature on two key areas central to this study: syntactic complexity in academic writing and the specific role of temporal adverbial clauses.

1.1. Syntactic Complexity in Academic Writing

Syntactic complexity is a central construct in the study of second language (L2) academic writing and has been widely used to measure linguistic development and proficiency in educational contexts. Broadly defined, syntactic complexity refers to the range, variety, and sophistication of syntactic structures employed in spoken or written discourse (van Hell & de Bot, 2017; Tao et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). In academic writing, syntactic complexity is not only indicative of linguistic competence but also plays a functional role in supporting disciplinary argumentation, cohesion, and logical reasoning (Biber & Gray, 2016).

Several frameworks have been developed to operationalise and measure syntactic complexity, with a particular focus on metrics such as clause density, subordination, phrasal elaboration, and the use of non-finite verb structures. One influential model is that of Norris and Ortega (2009), who proposed a taxonomy of syntactic complexity measures widely adopted in L2 writing research. The authors emphasised that no single measure is sufficient; rather, a multidimensional approach is necessary to capture developmental variation. Kyle and Crossley (2018) and Lu and Ai (2015) have employed computational tools to analyse syntactic features across learner corpora. These studies have shown that increased use of subordination, particularly adverbial clauses, is associated with advanced stages of L2 writing development. This observation is further supported by Liu et al. (2025), who demonstrate that both lexical and syntactic complexity tend to increase with proficiency, albeit not always in a linear progression across learner levels. Similarly, Kim and Ro (2024) show that the sophistication of verb and argument structures across genres reflects writers' proficiency levels, reinforcing the link between syntactic development and academic writing competence. Additionally, Bulté and Housen (2020) argue for a dynamic approach to syntactic complexity, stressing that complexity should be seen not only in structural terms but also in terms of how learners utilise syntactic resources to achieve discourse-level goals.

In South African multilingual higher education contexts, research has increasingly pointed to the need for pedagogical strategies that support the development of syntactic complexity in English as an additional language. For instance, Hlalele and Alexander (2021) found that many students struggle to produce structurally complex texts, which affects their ability to engage effectively with academic genres. Similarly, Madiba and

Mabiletja (2023) emphasise that syntactic development is often constrained by the lack of explicit instruction in grammatical complexity in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curricula. Beyond classroom instruction, Bi and Wang (2025) highlight the importance of extracurricular academic reading, showing that students exposed to additional reading opportunities demonstrate greater syntactic complexity, including increased use of adverbial clauses. Thus, understanding how specific syntactic structures, such as adverbial clauses, are used in student writing is essential for both theoretical and pedagogical purposes. It allows for a more nuanced view of linguistic development, particularly in under-researched multilingual contexts such as Walter Sisulu University.

1.2. Temporal Adverbial Clauses

Temporal adverbial clauses are a subtype of subordinate clauses that function to situate events in time relative to other events. Typically introduced by subordinators such as *when*, *before*, *after*, *as soon as*, and *while*, these clauses serve a range of functions including sequencing, simultaneity, and causality (van Hell & de Bot, 2017; Roca de Larios, Coyle, & Nicolás-Conesa, 2016). They are commonly used in both narrative and expository writing to structure information chronologically and logically. From a structural perspective, temporal adverbial clauses can be classified according to their finiteness, clause position, and the variety of subordinating conjunctions used. Research has shown that learners typically acquire finite adverbial clauses earlier than non-finite constructions, which require greater syntactic and semantic control (Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Madiba & Mabiletja, 2023). Moreover, the use of diverse subordinators is seen as a marker of syntactic maturity, reflecting the ability of a learner to convey nuanced temporal and logical relationships (Biber & Gray, 2016).

The integration of dependent clauses into more complex sentence structures (clause embedding) is also a key indicator of syntactic development. Learners at higher proficiency levels tend to produce more deeply embedded adverbial clauses, which contribute to denser, more cohesive academic texts (Ortega, 2015; Kyle & Crossley, 2018). In a corpus-based study of L2 academic writing, Ai and Lu (2023) found that temporal clauses often co-occur with causal and concessive clauses in complex syntactic packaging, underscoring their role in advanced writing. This aligns with the findings of Tao et al. (2025), who emphasise that exposure to varied linguistic input through reading-to-write tasks enhances the development of syntactic sophistication, including the effective use of complex clause structures, such as temporal adverbials.

Although research on temporal adverbial clauses has been robust in European and North American contexts, it remains limited in African multilingual settings. However, the functional significance of these clauses in organising discourse is just as relevant, particularly for students who must navigate complex syntactic and rhetorical demands in a second or third language. Recent studies in African contexts (Nomlomo & Katiya, 2020; Rudwick & Makoni, 2022) have called for greater attention to local syntactic practices and the pedagogical scaffolding required for their development.

1.3. Clause Combining and Developmental Sequences

Clause combining, particularly through subordination, is a key indicator of syntactic and cognitive development in second language acquisition (SLA). In academic writing, the ability to effectively combine clauses enables learners to produce complex, cohesive texts that convey nuanced meanings and relationships among ideas. Research in SLA has established developmental hierarchies in the acquisition of clause structures, in which coordination tends to emerge earlier, followed by subordination, and eventually by the embedding of dependent clauses (Pallotti, 2015; Ortega, 2015; Madiba & Mabiletja, 2023). Within these developmental sequences, adverbial subordination, such as temporal, causal, and concessive clauses, plays a significant role. According to Van Valin (2020), learners acquire simpler adverbial clauses, such as *when* and *before*, before progressing to more abstract and cognitively demanding structures, such as *while*, *since*, and *once*. This progression reflects increased syntactic control and improved discourse planning skills.

Longitudinal studies (Bulté & Housen, 2020; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021) have shown that the frequency and variety of clause-combining strategies expand over time and are influenced by factors such as task type, language exposure, and instructional support. These findings are further supported by Jiang et al. (2019), who found that the use of adverbial clauses and other complex syntactic structures increases over time, reflecting clear developmental trajectories in language acquisition. These studies reinforce the view that syntactic complexity is not static but develops incrementally, often through the acquisition and refinement of clause integration techniques. In the context of L2 academic writing, researchers such as Yoon and Polio (2017) and Ai and Lu (2023) argue that genre expectations and disciplinary conventions also shape the developmental trajectory of clause combining. Kim and Ro (2024) further emphasise that different genres elicit varying levels of syntactic sophistication, with argumentative writing typically prompting more complex structures than narrative forms. Temporal adverbial clauses, for instance, may be more frequent in explanatory and procedural genres, which require the sequencing of ideas or events. Thus, clause combining should not only be seen as a grammatical achievement but also as a discourse strategy that reflects the writer's ability to meet academic and rhetorical demands.

1.4. Multilingualism and Academic Literacy in South Africa

The South African higher education system is characterised by a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity, in which English often serves as the primary medium of instruction despite being a second or third language for most students (Heugh, 2021; Madiba & Mabiletja, 2023). This linguistic reality presents both opportunities and challenges for academic literacy development, particularly in terms of how students acquire and apply advanced syntactic structures in their academic writing. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the need to recognise multilingualism not as a deficit but as a resource that can enrich academic practices (Nomlomo & Katiya, 2020; Makalela, 2023). However, a persistent gap persists between students' home languages and the language of academic discourse,

often resulting in reduced access to the full range of syntactic and rhetorical tools needed for success in higher education (Van der Walt & Dornbrack, 2018).

The disconnect between institutional language policy and classroom practice further exacerbates these challenges. While some universities have adopted additive multilingualism policies, their implementation is often inconsistent, leaving students without the necessary scaffolding to develop syntactic complexity in English (Rudwick & Makoni, 2022). As Hlalele and Alexander (2021) argue, academic writing instruction in South Africa still tends to emphasise surface-level grammar and vocabulary at the expense of deeper syntactic development. In response, researchers and educators are calling for more nuanced pedagogical approaches that integrate students' multilingual linguistic repertoires into the academic literacy curriculum (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). There is also growing recognition, as in studies by Tao et al. (2025) and Bi and Wang (2025), of the importance of increased exposure to rich linguistic input, whether through reading or integrated literacy practices, in supporting the development of syntactic sophistication. Furthermore, there is a growing need for corpus-based studies and diagnostic tools that can provide localised insights into the syntactic development of South African university students.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Complexity Theory in SLA. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar, language is viewed as a resource for making meaning, with grammatical structures shaped by the communicative functions they serve. In this view, temporal adverbial clauses function within the ideational meta function to organise experiences in time and in terms of causality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Their role in clause complexes reflects higher-order cognitive abilities, such as logical reasoning, sequencing, and abstraction, all of which are essential for academic discourse. SFG also provides tools for analysing the structural variation of these clauses, including their embedding, coordination, and thematic positioning within texts.

Complexity Theory in SLA, on the other hand, offers a dynamic account of language development, emphasising that syntactic growth is nonlinear, variable, and sensitive to contextual factors such as language input, task demands, and individual learner histories (Larsen-Freeman, 2017; Bulté & Housen, 2020). This framework moves beyond static competence models by focusing on how learners adapt their linguistic resources over time to meet increasingly complex communicative challenges.

By combining the emphasis on meaning-making of the SFG with the developmental perspective of the Complexity Theory, this study is positioned to examine both the form and function of temporal adverbial clauses in multilingual academic writing. Such an integrated framework allows for an exploration of how students not only acquire but also deploy syntactic structures in contextually and rhetorically appropriate ways. Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which the use and development of temporal adverbial clauses can be understood as both a grammatical and functional phenomenon.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a corpus-based approach to investigate the syntactic complexity of temporal adverbial clauses in student academic writing at WSU. The methodology was designed to explore patterns of clause usage across a range of academic levels and disciplines, to identify developmental trends in L2 writing within a multilingual South African context. The study employed a descriptive, exploratory corpus-based research design, which is well-suited to investigating linguistic patterns in naturally occurring language data (Biber et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2025). It facilitated the quantitative analysis of syntactic features across the collected data and supported qualitative insights into usage, variation, and function (Flowerdew, 2015). A mixed-methods approach was used to triangulate the findings. While quantitative data provided measures of clause frequency and structural variety, qualitative analysis focused on the discourse roles of temporal clauses in context. This dual perspective aligns with previous studies on L2 syntactic development, which emphasise the importance of combining frequency-based measures with functional interpretations (Lu & Ai, 2015; Bulté & Housen, 2020).

Participants in the study included first-year and third-year undergraduate students enrolled in various disciplines in the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Science (FLHSS), specifically in the departments of African Languages, Arts, Social Sciences, and the School of Law at WSU. A stratified sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across academic levels and departments, allowing the study to explore possible developmental differences in clause usage.

Data for the study were drawn from a purpose-built corpus of student essays collected throughout the 2025 academic year. The corpus includes 100 student-written essays totalling approximately 200,000 words. The texts were sourced from authentic classroom assignments submitted for assessment purposes. Essays were selected based on their alignment with common academic genres, namely argumentative, explanatory, and reflective essays, which are known to elicit clause-level complexity (Ortega, 2015; Yoon & Polio, 2017).

The essays were first digitised, anonymised, and carefully edited to ensure consistency before analysis. The texts were then analysed using corpus methods to identify temporal adverbial clauses. Temporal clauses were located by searching for common temporal subordinators such as *when*, *after*, *before*, *while*, *once*, and *as soon as*. Each identified clause was manually checked to confirm its accuracy. For each clause, relevant structural features were recorded, including its position in the sentence (initial or medial), whether it was finite or non-finite, and the type of subordinator used.

The data analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the breadth and depth of temporal adverbial clause usage. On the quantitative side, frequency counts were used to measure the following: i) The overall occurrence rate of temporal adverbial clauses per 1,000 words; ii) The distribution of different structural types and subordinators; and iii) Differences across academic levels. Descriptive statistics were generated in SPSS, and group comparisons were tested for significance. Inferential

analyses included independent-samples t-tests to compare the mean frequencies of temporal adverbial clauses across the two academic levels. A significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ was adopted, indicating that results with a probability of 5% or less of occurring by chance were considered statistically significant. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested; when violated, nonparametric alternatives were used. On the qualitative side, a discourse-functional analysis was conducted on a stratified subset of 30 essays (15 from each academic level). These texts were examined holistically to understand how temporal clauses contributed to the following: i) Textual cohesion and logical flow; ii) Argument sequencing and development; and iii) Expression of procedural knowledge or cause-and-effect logic in academic discourse. This qualitative layer followed a thematic coding approach, using inductively derived categories informed by the data and existing discourse analysis literature (Hyland, 2021; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Ethical considerations were followed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. All participants gave informed consent for the use of their written work in anonymised form. To safeguard privacy, all identifying details (names, student numbers, course titles) were removed from the texts prior to analysis. The corpus was securely stored on a password-protected laptop accessible only to the researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Given the focus on student writing in a historically underrepresented and multilingual context, particular care was taken to present the data equitably and constructively, avoiding deficit framings and emphasising developmental insights over evaluative judgments. The research aligns with calls to decolonise linguistic inquiry by valuing local linguistic trajectories and treating multilingualism as a pedagogical and cognitive asset (Makalela, 2023; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

3. Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study, organised according to the frequency and structural characteristics of temporal adverbial clauses identified in the collected data. The results are drawn from a corpus of 100 student essays, stratified by academic level (first-year and third-year), and analysed for syntactic and functional indicators of development in academic writing.

3.1 Frequency of Temporal Adverbial Clauses

Quantitative analysis revealed that temporal adverbial clauses were present in 82% of the student essays, suggesting that learners across academic levels regularly use these structures to convey temporal relationships and sequence ideas. However, the frequency per 1,000 words differed significantly by academic level. First-year students used temporal clauses at approximately 9.2 per 1,000 words, while third-year students used them at 13.7 per 1,000 words. This increase aligns with previous research suggesting that subordinate clause use tends to increase with proficiency, reflecting greater syntactic flexibility and planning capacity (Ortega, 2015; Bulté & Housen, 2020).

Common subordinators included high-frequency items such as *when*, *after*, and *before*, while third-year students also employed less frequent and more specialised forms such as *as soon as*, *once*, and *by the time*. This variation in subordinator choice aligns with Kyle and Crossley's (2018) assertion that lexical diversity in clause linkers is a reliable proxy for syntactic and rhetorical maturity in academic writing. Below are some examples from the two student categories. First-year students produce simple, more literal time relationships, as seen in examples 1-3.

1. *When I arrived at the university, I was nervous.*
2. *After I submitted my assignment, I went home.*
3. *Before the class started, many students were already waiting.*

On the other hand, third-year students produced higher frequency and a more formal register, as illustrated in examples 4 to 6.

4. *Once ethical approval was granted, data collection commenced.*
5. *As soon as the intervention was completed, post-tests were administered.*
6. *By the time the final report was submitted, all data had been analysed.*

From these examples, the third-year examples show a higher frequency of use in formal academic contexts, with more advanced subordinators (*once*, *as soon as*, *by the time*) and embedded structures. They demonstrate not only the use of more sophisticated subordinators but also a more formal tone and passive construction, which are characteristic of advanced academic discourse (Hyland, 2021).

3.2. Structural Patterns

Beyond frequency, the structural characteristics of temporal adverbial clauses provide critical insights into students' syntactic development. The complexity of clause construction, such as whether clauses are finite or non-finite, the variety of subordinators used, and the depth of clause embedding, reflects both grammatical control and rhetorical sophistication. These structural patterns serve as indicators of how learners manage linguistic resources to produce cohesive and hierarchically organised academic texts. The analysis of the structural patterns focused on three key dimensions, namely finiteness, subordinator type, and embedding depth, highlighting developmental differences between first-year and third-year student writing.

3.2.1 Finiteness

Most temporal adverbial clauses identified were finite constructions. They constituted 78% of the overall finite clauses. However, non-finite clauses, which require more control over reduced verb forms, were notably more common in the writing of third-year students. Common examples included "*when the study was conducted*" and "*after the results were analysed.*" In the writing of first-year students, temporal adverbial clauses predominantly appeared in finite form, characterised by the presence of explicitly marked subjects and fully inflected verb tenses. These constructions typically followed basic syntactic patterns, in which the temporal clause was clearly distinguished from the main clause by

subordinators such as *when*, *after*, and *before*. This reliance on finite constructions suggests that first-year students tend to use syntactic forms that are more familiar and less cognitively demanding, consistent with early stages of second-language syntactic development (Lu & Ai, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021; Liu et al., 2025). This is shown in the examples below from first-year scripts.

7. *When I finished writing, I checked her work.*
8. *Before I started, I read the instructions.*
9. *After I completed the survey, I handed it to the lecturer.*
10. *Before I write the report, I read the article.*

In contrast, the writing of third-year students demonstrated a noticeably greater use of non-finite temporal adverbial clauses, reflecting increased syntactic sophistication and control over more condensed grammatical structures. These clauses typically omitted explicit subjects and used verb forms such as gerunds or past participles, enabling a more compact, stylistically formal expression. This shift from finite to non-finite constructions aligns with findings in second language acquisition research, which suggest that non-finite clauses often emerge as learners develop more advanced proficiency and seek greater efficiency and cohesion in academic writing (Ortega, 2015; Biber et al., 2021; Ai & Lu, 2023; Kim & Ro, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Below are some of the examples.

11. *Before completing the literature review, I refined the research questions.*
12. *After analysing the results, we discussed the implications as a team.*
13. *While preparing the methodology section, I consulted multiple sources.*
14. *Before writing the report, I reviewed the literature.*

The shift from “before I write” to “before writing” illustrates development in syntactic economy, a marker of advanced proficiency (Biber et al., 2021; Kim & Ro, 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

3.2.2 Subordinator Type

Analysis of subordinator variety showed a narrower range among first-year students, who predominantly used *when* (47%), *after* (26%), and *before* (19%). In contrast, third-year students used a broader repertoire, including *once*, *as soon as*, *while*, and *by the time*, collectively accounting for 34% of their temporal clauses. This expanded variety not only increases lexical diversity but also allows for more nuanced temporal relationships, reflecting a deeper integration of syntactic forms into academic discourse practices (Ortega, 2015).

In the writing of first-year students, there was a strong reliance on core, high-frequency temporal subordinators such as *when*, *after*, and *before*. These subordinators are commonly introduced in early language instruction and are typically used to establish straightforward chronological relationships between events. This limited range of subordinators suggests that first-year students are still developing the linguistic repertoire necessary to express more nuanced or varied temporal relationships. Such patterns are consistent with earlier stages of syntactic development, where learners tend to prioritise

clarity and basic clause linking over rhetorical variety (Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021). This is seen in the examples that follow.

15. *When the teacher spoke, the class was quiet.*
16. *After lunch, we continued with our group discussion.*
17. *Before the exam, I revised all my notes.*

In contrast, third-year students exhibited a greater variety of temporal subordinators, including several less frequent and more advanced forms such as *once*, *as soon as*, and *by the time*. These subordinators allow for more nuanced temporal relationships and contribute to a more sophisticated and varied syntactic style. This expanded range reflects not only a broader lexical knowledge but also a deeper understanding of temporal nuance in academic discourse. Such development is aligned with findings in second language writing research, which link subordinator diversity to increased linguistic proficiency and rhetorical control (Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Ai & Lu, 2023; Kim & Ro, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). The examples below illustrate the views echoed in this paragraph.

18. *Once participants had signed the consent forms, interviews were scheduled.*
19. *As soon as the data were collected, coding began.*
20. *By the time the semester ended, students had submitted all assignments.*

This wider range of subordinators among third-year students supports claims that lexical and functional variety in clause linkers signals increased proficiency (Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Kim & Ro, 2024).

3.2.3 Embedding and Complexity

The writing of first-year students was characterised by simple, single-layered subordination, in which temporal adverbial clauses typically consisted of a single subordinate clause linked directly to a main clause, without additional embedding or internal coordination. These constructions were structurally straightforward and reflected a linear approach to expressing time. The clauses are syntactically complete but lack the layering or complexity found in more advanced writing. This reliance on basic clause structures suggests that first-year students are still developing the ability to manage more intricate syntactic relationships, a trend commonly observed in earlier stages of L2 writing development (Bulté & Housen, 2020; Ai & Lu, 2023; Kim & Ro, 2024). Examples include:

21. *When the lecture ended, I went home.*
22. *After I read the article, I wrote my summary.*
23. *Before it started raining, I left the campus.*
24. *When the lecture ended, I went to the library.*

In contrast, third-year students demonstrated a greater capacity for multi-clause embedding and coordination within subordinates, producing more syntactically complex temporal adverbial clauses. These students frequently embedded additional clauses within their temporal constructions or coordinated multiple actions within a single subordinate clause, reflecting a higher level of syntactic sophistication. This multi-layered subordination indicates a significant advancement in syntactic maturity and reflects the developmental progression toward more sophisticated academic writing (Biber et al.,

2021; Ai & Lu, 2023; Kim & Ro, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Below are some of the examples from the collected essays of third-year students.

25. *After the survey was administered and preliminary responses were recorded, the team began data cleaning*
26. *When the team reviewed the initial results, which showed inconsistencies, we revised the coding scheme.*
27. *Before submitting the final version, which included supervisor feedback, I reformatted the entire document.*
28. *After the intervention was introduced and student attendance improved, we began collecting post-intervention data.*

These third-year examples demonstrate higher clause density, coordination within subordination, and the use of embedded relative clauses, which are features associated with more advanced stages of syntactic development (Bulté & Housen, 2020; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021; Kim & Ro, 2024).

From the examples, it is evident that the writing of the first year relies entirely on simple, linear temporal subordination, with no additional syntactic layering, while that of the third year distributes across three complexity features, demonstrating i) multi-clause coordination within temporal subordinators; ii) Embedding (relative clauses); and iii) increased structural flexibility (non-finite clauses). This aligns closely with research on progressive syntactic maturation in L2 writers, which shows that complex embedding and clause integration emerge at higher proficiency levels.

The findings revealed in this section reinforce Bardovi-Harlig's (2021) observation that syntactic development in L2 learners progresses from single, finite clauses toward more integrated and hierarchically embedded structures.

3.3. Functional Use in Discourse

Temporal adverbial clauses in the student corpus served a range of discourse functions, notably within narrative, argumentative, and explanatory contexts. Their use contributed not only to the chronological sequencing of events but also to the logical organisation of ideas and the construction of coherent academic argumentation. In narrative passages, particularly in personal reflections and case-based assignments, temporal adverbial clauses were primarily used to sequence events. These clauses helped structure the flow of experiences or procedures, often marking the beginning, continuation, or conclusion of events, as seen in the following examples.

29. *When I entered the lecture hall, I noticed that many students were already seated.*
30. *After the meeting ended, we discussed our strategy for the next phase.*
31. *Before submitting the assignment, I double-checked all references.*

Such uses are typical of early academic writing, in which learners rely on temporal clauses to construct chronological narratives, a trend consistent with findings in second-language writing research.

In argumentative essays, temporal clauses often frame the timing or sequence of claims, causes, and effects. The third-year students used temporal structures to support critical reasoning, compare outcomes, or contextualise academic arguments, as demonstrated below.

32. *Once the policy was implemented, the dropout rate began to decline, suggesting a positive impact.*
33. *Before considering alternative theories, it is necessary to examine the foundational assumptions of the current model.*
34. *By the time this approach was challenged, the field had already shifted focus.*

These examples illustrate how temporal adverbials can function as rhetorical tools that organise evidence, frame premises, and highlight causal relationships, supporting findings from research on cohesion and logical development in academic writing (Biber et al., 2021).

In explanatory or expository writing, temporal clauses often serve to describe procedures or processes, particularly in scientific and social science disciplines. These clauses were used to clarify temporal stages of an activity, data collection protocols, or sequential steps in analysis, as seen below.

35. *After collecting the responses, the data were coded according to the research categories.*
36. *When the measurements were complete, the results were entered into SPSS.*
37. *Before interpreting the outcomes, we ensured the reliability of the instrument.*

The above usage demonstrates a more discipline-specific functional deployment of temporal clauses, supporting cohesive and methodical exposition in academic texts (Hyland, 2021).

3.4 Developmental Trends Across Proficiency Levels

A comparison between first-year and third-year student writing revealed clear developmental trends in both the frequency and complexity of temporal adverbial clause use, which correlate with broader markers of syntactic maturity and academic language proficiency. As shown in earlier sections, third-year students used temporal adverbial clauses more frequently and for a broader range of rhetorical functions. While first-year students predominantly used these clauses in narrative contexts, third-year students demonstrated a more deliberate deployment of temporal structures in argumentative and explanatory writing. This suggests that syntactic structures become more functionally integrated into academic discourse as students advance (Norris & Ortega, 2009; Ortega, 2015). The third-year students also produced more complex clause structures, including non-finite forms, coordinated elements within subordinators, and embedded relative clauses. These constructions reflect greater clause packaging density and a deeper understanding of how to express nuanced temporal and logical relationships efficiently, a hallmark of academic writing development (Bulté & Housen, 2020; Ai & Lu, 2023; Tao et al., 2025).

The findings support the view that temporal adverbial clauses can serve as reliable indicators of syntactic development in L2 academic writing. Their increasing frequency, structural sophistication, and discourse-functional range align with broader developmental trajectories documented in second-language acquisition research (Biber et al., 2021; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021). These patterns also reflect improved control over complex syntax, metadiscourse, and rhetorical organisation, skills essential for academic success in multilingual university settings. Figure 5 below shows the developmental trends.

In summary, first-year students use temporal adverbial clauses less frequently and primarily for narrative sequencing. In contrast, third-year students use these structures more often and for a broader range of rhetorical purposes, including argumentation and explanation. This aligns with research showing increased functional integration at higher proficiency levels (Ortega, 2015). In addition, first-year writing remains structurally simple, dominated by single-layered subordination. At the same time, that of third-year students shows advanced structure, including coordinated subordination, embedded relative clauses, and non-finite temporal constructions. These reflect increased syntactic density and maturing control of clause packaging (Bulté & Housen, 2020; Ai & Lu, 2023). Also, temporal adverbial clauses serve as reliable indicators of syntactic development, as third-year students demonstrate more frequent use, greater structural sophistication, and broader discourse functions. These matches established developmental trajectories in L2 writing (Biber et al., 2021; Bardovi-Harlig, 2021; Tao et al., 2025).

4. Discussion

This section interprets the study's results in relation to the research questions and broader theoretical and empirical frameworks in second language acquisition (SLA), academic literacy, and syntactic complexity. The analysis moves beyond surface-level descriptions to consider what the use of temporal adverbial clauses reveals about students' developmental trajectories in multilingual academic settings. By examining how these structures function syntactically and rhetorically across different levels of proficiency, the discussion highlights their diagnostic value as markers of linguistic maturity. Furthermore, the findings are contextualised within existing literature to assess the extent to which they align with, diverge from, or extend established knowledge in both global and locally grounded studies of L2 writing development.

The results of this study show that the use of temporal adverbial clauses in student writing is a meaningful indicator of syntactic development and broader academic language proficiency, particularly in a multilingual context such as Walter Sisulu University. The differences observed between first-year and third-year students highlight a clear developmental trajectory in how these grammatical structures are used. At the initial stages of academic writing, students predominantly employed finite, single-layered clauses introduced by high-frequency subordinators such as *when*, *after*, and *before*. These structures were used in largely narrative contexts, often to mark chronological progression. This pattern reflects the early stages of L2 writing development, in which students rely on familiar forms to organise basic discourse and express temporal relationships (Bardovi-Harlig, 2021; Kim & Ro, 2024).

By contrast, the third-year students demonstrated greater syntactic maturity, including the use of non-finite constructions, a wider range of subordinators (e.g., *once*, *as soon as*, *by the time*), and increased clause embedding and coordination. These structural advancements coincided with more functional sophistication, particularly in argumentative and explanatory writing. Here, temporal clauses were used to establish logical relationships, mark procedural sequences, and contextualise claims, functions crucial to the development of academic discourse (Biber et al., 2021; Ai & Lu, 2023; Tao et al., 2025). Importantly, the findings reinforce the idea that temporal adverbial clauses are not merely grammatical tools but also serve rhetorical and cognitive functions in constructing cohesive, hierarchically organised texts. Their use, particularly when embedded or coordinated with other clause types, demonstrates a learner's ability to manage linguistic complexity, a key marker of academic literacy in L2 contexts (Norris & Ortega, 2009; Ortega, 2015).

The patterns identified in this study largely align with global research on syntactic complexity in second-language writing, particularly regarding clause combining and the development of functional language. Scholars such as Ortega (2015), Norris and Ortega (2009), and Bulté and Housen (2020) have shown that as L2 learners gain proficiency, they tend to produce more structurally diverse and hierarchically organised sentences. The developmental progression observed at Walter Sisulu University mirrors these findings, suggesting that temporal adverbial clauses function similarly in multilingual African academic contexts as they do in more commonly studied environments.

However, this study also contributes unique insights by situating syntactic development within the specific linguistic and educational context of South African higher education. While much of the complexity literature has emerged from studies in North America, Europe, or Asia, few have addressed how syntactic resources are mobilised by students working within multilingual, postcolonial settings where English is often a second or third language. As such, this study complements recent work by Makalela (2018), Nomlomo & Katiya (2018), and Banda (2020), which emphasise the need to decolonise academic literacy research by considering local language ecologies and student trajectories.

Notably, the increased clause complexity in third-year students' writing challenges deficit narratives that often surround L2 academic writers in African universities. Instead, the evidence points to clear syntactic growth, with students developing the ability to express complex ideas using advanced temporal constructions. This reinforces the value of longitudinal or level-based analyses in capturing progression in L2 writing skills, especially in under-researched higher education contexts (Van Dyk & Van de Poel, 2013; Ngwenya, 2021; Tao et al., 2025). Moreover, the study supports the integration of functional grammar approaches (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) into L2 writing pedagogy, as these frameworks emphasise the relationship between structure and meaning, particularly the role of adverbial clauses in constructing temporal, logical, and causal relationships in texts.

The findings of this study have implications for academic writing instruction, particularly in contexts where English is an additional language. The observed progression in the

frequency, structural complexity, and discourse functions of temporal adverbial clauses suggests that these features can serve as diagnostic indicators of syntactic development. Writing instructors can leverage this knowledge by incorporating clause-level analysis into formative assessment practices and curriculum design. Specifically, instruction that draws attention to the range of temporal subordinators, the use of non-finite constructions, and multi-layered subordination can help students move beyond basic narrative sequencing toward more rhetorically complex writing. Activities that focus on transforming finite clauses into non-finite forms, practising clause embedding and coordination, and exploring how temporal structures support argumentation and explanation can scaffold students' movement toward advanced syntactic performance (Hyland, 2021; Kim & Ro, 2024).

In multilingual higher education settings such as South Africa, the role of English as a medium of instruction presents both opportunities and challenges for academic literacy development. The findings from Walter Sisulu University reinforce the view that multilingual students are capable of significant syntactic and rhetorical development throughout their academic trajectories. Temporal adverbial clauses, as a case in point, illustrate how L2 writers increasingly manage complex structures to convey temporal logic, argument structure, and cohesion. This progression underscores the importance of context-sensitive language support that respects students' linguistic repertoires while equipping them with the tools to engage with academic discourse conventions. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as a deficit, institutions should adopt additive approaches that affirm multilingual identities and scaffold students' growth in academic English (Makalela, 2018; Banda, 2020). Programs such as writing centres, academic literacy modules, and genre-based instruction can integrate findings from this and similar studies to target specific areas of development, such as clause-level grammar and discourse organisation.

Moreover, the study speaks to the broader movement toward decolonising academic literacies, which involves recognising the legitimacy of diverse linguistic trajectories and designing interventions that are grounded in local educational realities (Nomlomo & Katiya, 2018; Ngwenya, 2021). By centring the syntactic development of African L2 writers within the research and pedagogical agenda, this study contributes to more inclusive models of language development that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric norms in academic writing instruction.

Conclusion

In sum, supporting multilingual students in higher education requires pedagogical and institutional strategies that are developmentally informed, linguistically inclusive, and functionally oriented, all of which are reinforced by this study's insights into how temporal clause use evolves across academic levels. The study examined the use of temporal adverbial clauses as indicators of syntactic development in the academic writing of students at Walter Sisulu University, a multilingual South African institution. By analysing a corpus of student essays across academic levels, the research identified clear developmental patterns in the frequency, structure, and discourse functions of temporal adverbial clauses. It revealed that first-year students typically employed finite, single-

layered clauses introduced by high-frequency subordinators (*when, before, after*) and used them primarily for chronological sequencing in narrative contexts. By contrast, third-year students demonstrated increased syntactic maturity, employing non-finite constructions, a wider range of less common subordinators (*once, as soon as, by the time*), and embedded or coordinated clause structures. These more advanced structures were deployed in argumentative and explanatory writing to support discourse cohesion, logical progression, and rhetorical sophistication. The findings confirm that temporal adverbial clauses serve not only grammatical but also discursive functions, and their complexity correlates with learners' broader academic language development.

The study contributes to the expanding fields of second-language academic writing and syntactic complexity research in several ways. To begin with, it provides empirical evidence of syntactic development in a previously under-researched multilingual African context, thereby enriching global SLA scholarship with localised insights. The paper emphasises the diagnostic value of temporal adverbial clauses as indicators of syntactic and rhetorical growth, adding to the literature on clause-level complexity and L2 writing development (e.g., Ortega, 2015; Ai & Lu, 2023). It also supports the pedagogical application of complexity analysis in writing instruction, curriculum design, and assessment, especially in linguistically diverse higher education settings. By foregrounding student writing in a South African university, the research contributes to decolonial perspectives in applied linguistics, centring African learners' trajectories in the broader conversation on academic literacy.

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The corpus size was limited to selected essays from a single faculty at WSU, which may affect the generalisability of the findings to other institutions or contexts. The focus was restricted to temporal adverbial clauses, excluding other types of subordination, such as causal and conditional, which might offer complementary insights into syntactic development. Also, the analysis was primarily cross-sectional, comparing first-year and third-year students, rather than longitudinally tracking individual learners over time. However, these limitations offer direction for future research and suggest areas where more expansive inquiry could further deepen understanding.

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