

# **Syntactic Inversion Use among EFL University Students in Academic Essay Writing**

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## **Abstract:**

This study investigates the use of syntactic inversion in academic essays written by English as Foreign Language (EFL) university students. Combining both quantitative (corpus of 60 essays) and qualitative data tools (interview with eight students), findings reveal that despite its occurrence in their writings, students report their unawareness and less reliance on syntactic inversion. Additionally, noun phrase inversion is the most frequently used type followed by verb and adjective phrase inversions, while adverb and prepositional phrase inversions are less common. Moreover, students perceive inversion use positively as it adds more clarity, formality, and variety to their writing. Students also allude to some drawbacks that disrupt the overall flow, clarity, and cohesion of the essay when used inappropriately. They, therefore, suggest explicit instruction, guided practice, sufficient time for practice, and awareness of inversion drawbacks as key measures to improve the effective use of inversion in academic writing.

**Keywords:** Academic essays, academic writing, EFL, syntactic inversion, university students

## **1. Introduction**

Writing is often viewed as a difficult language skill as it consists of interwoven aspects of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. These aspects interplay coherently and cohesively to enhance students' ability and active role in producing meaningful and valuable piece of writing. Writing, as a productive skill, requires that language learners in general, and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in particular generally write for two main purposes: formally (essays, articles, reports), or for informal situations (social relationships). While the later does not require particular format to

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follow, the former is banned by certain aspects related to format, content and structure of the sentence. Therefore, in an academic context, guided principles and controlled conventions of, mainly, displaying a particular language structure are of utmost importance. The use of varied sentence structures, and not only sticking to the commonly used subject-verb word formation (order), would therefore seem to be a definite need for more quality to the text. This change in the typical word order is maintained through the use of a rhetorical device known as inversion. This later is defined as the reversal use of the word order in sentence construction for more emphasis, cohesion, and formality (Dorgeloh & Wanner, 2023). Despite its role in academic writing, very little is known about inversion frequent use by EFL students, the most commonly types applied, and the challenges that many EFL students encounter with its nuanced and appropriate use. Therefore, this study seeks to obtain data, which would help to address this research gap by asking three main questions:

1. To what extent is syntactic inversion frequently used by EFL students in their academic essays?
2. What type of inversion structures are commonly used?
3. How do Algerian EFL university students perceive the effectiveness of inversion in essay writing?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. An Overview of Academic Writing**

In an EFL setting, students' mastery of the language through the four skills (reading, speaking, writing and listening) is a key factor. Writing; however, needs more attention since its mastery is a desirable goal in education and nurturing its quality is vital. Being among the most difficult language tasks for many native or non-native learners to master, writing requires more effort, time, and practice (Jozef, 2001; Nunan, 1989) as it "is much more than an orthography symbolization of speech; it is more importantly a purposeful selection and organization of expression" (Brooks ,1960, p. 167). In this regard, Richards and Miller (2005) argue that students are required to craft a piece of writing that aligns with the requirements of the

situation being it formal or less formal. While the later is a more personal and less structured style, the former follows a more specific style known as academic style. It includes research papers, reports, articles, dissertations, and essays, and should conform to a more formal style and standards of clear structure, formal tone, and precise content. Academic essays as an academic writing type is the most commonly piece of writing that students produce in their academic journey before they develop their abilities in writing dissertations and research reports. Students first organize ideas logically and coherently in the paragraph level, then elaborate on them by writing an essay that should have a formal tone, precise particular ideas in the sentence, or even add more focus and variety. This is generally achieved through the so-called ‘syntactic inversion’.

## **2.2. Syntactic Inversion**

Mastery of writing necessitates proficiency in the diverse mechanisms of grammar, vocabulary, layout, spelling, and punctuation. Yet sometimes when a sentence within a particular piece of writing should have a certain structure within through the use of ‘cohesive ties’ (Yule, 2022), some writers prefer to violate the typical order of subject-verb construction, or put it simply inversion. The later might be deliberately used or sometimes obligatory in written discourse (Warner, 2007) to fulfil certain functions of formality, clarity, emphasis, and variety. Nevertheless, when used inappropriately inversion may negatively impact the overall quality of the production.

Overall, as the positioning of the verb phrase pre to the subject, researchers such as Dorgeloh and Wanner (2023), and Quirk et al. (1972) suggest that depending on the type of phrase within a given sentence, inversion is sub-categorized into:

### **2.2.1. Prepositional Phrase Inversion (PP inversion)**

As parts of speech, prepositions hold a privileged position in academic writing. They help in the construction of phrases and sentences, by strengthening relationships among their constituents. They generally refer to words that express locations, conditions, and time that should be positioned near to the word that they describe or

modify. PP inversion may sometimes appear in a sentence by reversing the typical syntactic order. To illustrate:

*A number of recent publications is on the top shelves (Typical order)*  
*On the top shelves is a number of recent publications (PP inversion)*

### 2.2.2. Noun Phrase Inversion (NP inversion)

The syntactic construction of a noun phrase is generally a noun (as a head) with one or without modifiers or qualifiers. For the inversion formation pattern, the subject is postposed as illustrated in the following:

*An important addition to this is the clarity of ideas (NP inversion),*  
*instead of: The clarity of ideas is an important addition to this.*

### 2.2.3. Verb Phrase Inversion (VP)

While the head in a noun phrase is a noun, the verb is the head in a VP. For VP inversion, VP appears in another position which reverses the ordinary structural pattern as shown in the example below: *Standing next to the headmaster were the teachers of English*

### 2.2.4. Adjective Phrase Inversion (AdjP inversion)

An adjective phrase as a whole acts as an adjective to modify a noun. The word order is reversed in the AdjP inversion by placing the phrase at the beginning of the sentence, then followed by the inverted subject-verb order such as: *More interesting than the content is the cover page itself.*

### 2.2.5. Adverb Phrase Inversion (AdvP inversion)

This type of phrase is generally built around head words (mainly adverbs) of frequency, time, place, direction. AdvP inversion is formed by placing the adverbial phrase at the beginning of a sentence, and the reversed usual subject-verb word (typically the verb before the subject). *Here is a good example* is a good illustration of AdvP inversion.

## 2.3. Related Studies on the Use of Inversion in Academic Writing

In EFL contexts, functions of inversion as the rearrangement of the normal subject-verb pattern of a sentence in academic writing have been a target of increasingly attention. Much of the current available literature on inversion pays particular attention to students'

difficulties, inaccurate, and inappropriate use of inversion in their writing. That is, EFL learners face difficulties in the deployment of inversion despite its potential to add clarity, emphasis and stylistic variety in their academic written discourses. An example of this is a study conducted by Yen (2018) in which he concluded that third- and fourth-year English major students at Thai Nguyen university of education (TUE) rarely use inversion in their writing because of the difficulties that they encounter. Those challenges are mainly related to students' lack of understanding of this linguistic phenomenon of inversion, lack of practice, and finally lack of materials about the accurate and concrete use of inversion. Another example is the study of Al-Azzawi (2009) carried out with EFL Iraqi university students. Findings demonstrate that the targeted students do not fully master the use of inversion in their academic writing so that they use it inaccurately and incorrectly.

In contrast, very little is known about the use of syntactic inversion in academic essay writing among EFL university students in Algeria. Therefore, the aim of this study is to shine new light on the views of EFL Algerian university students on the effectiveness of inversion in their essay writing, in addition to an analysis of their commonly used types of inversion in their academic essays.

### **3. Research Methodology and Design**

#### **3.1. Data Collection Tools**

This study followed an exploratory mixed method approach, in which both quantitative and qualitative research designs were adopted to provide in-depth data about the phenomenon under investigation. As the corpus of the present study, 60 randomly selected essays of Master one students majored in English Linguistics and Applied Language were analysed. Frequencies and percentages of inversion use and inversion types were generated.

Qualitative analysis was based on the data gathered from the semi-structured interview. This would supplement and extend the quantitative measures and gain more insights about students' awareness of inversion, their frequent use (as well as the commonly

used types), and also their views about inversion effectiveness in the development of their academic writing productions.

## **4. Discussion and Analysis of Results**

### **4.1. Quantitative Results (Corpus Analysis)**

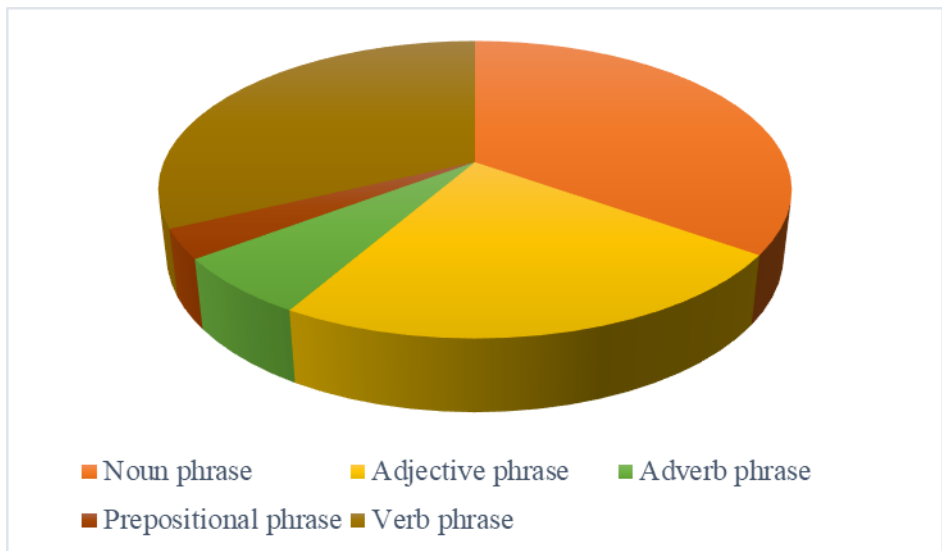
In order to identify the frequency and types of inversion structures, samples of students' essays were randomly selected. All the essays were of the same length and included an introduction, a conclusion, and only one body paragraph. The content of the essays was mainly related to the syllabus of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) module taught to Master one students. The teacher first provided the question with the instructions and students developed their essays on the following:

1. There was a gradual movement away from rather narrow language teaching methods towards broader integrated approaches in language teaching.
2. Teaching focuses on the manifestation of learning rather than on the internal processes.
3. Total Physical Response (TPR) espoused delayed production through actions as prompted by the imperative

After deciding on the essays, there was a manual annotation, in which the researcher read each essay and highlighted all the types of inversions included for each part of the essay separately. After that, the frequency (occurrences) and the distributions of each type were counted. That is, how many times each inversion type occurred in the introduction, the body, and the conclusion and in how many essays each type occurred. The results obtained are presented in the subsequent tables and figures.

**Table 1. Most Frequent Types of Inversion Used in Students' Essay**

Type of inversion	Frequency	Number of essays	Examples
<b>NP</b>	163	50(83.33%)	A good example of this is the audiolingual method
<b>AdjP</b>	110	10(16.66%)	More important than repetitions drills is the correction of grammar mistakes
<b>AdvP</b>	30	20(33.33%)	Here is a brief summary of the principles of the method
<b>PP</b>	15	05 (8.33%)	Next to their teacher are students standing and listening carefully to the audiotapes
<b>VP</b>	150	40(66.66%)	Creating good language habits is the main focus of the audiolingual method

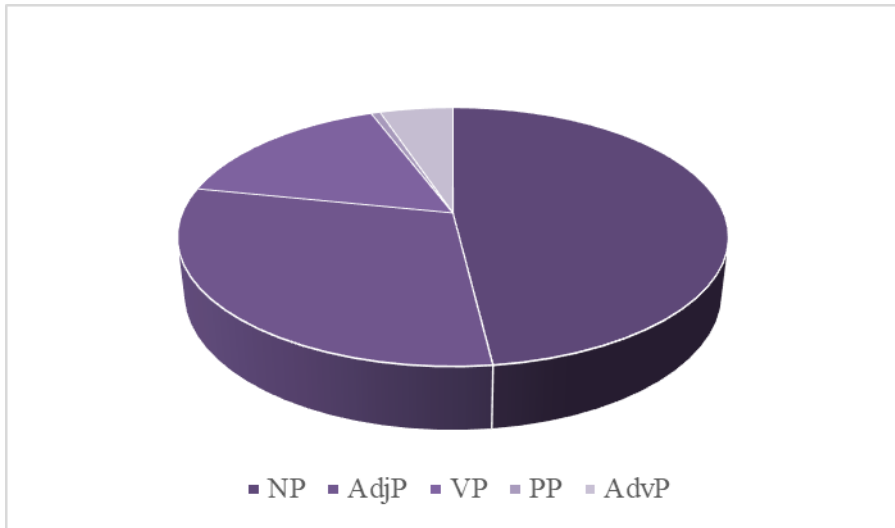
**Figure 1. Types of Inversion in Students' Essays**

As can be seen from the table and the pie chart above, noun phrase inversion is the most commonly and frequently used by students. It was repeated 163 times in 50 essays (83.33 % of the essays) followed respectively by verb phrase inversion which represents 66.66% of the essays and adjective phrase inversion (110 times). While only a small portion of students' essays contain adverb phrase inversion (33.33%) and prepositional phrase inversion (8.33%). Overall, these results suggest that adverb phrase and prepositional phrase inversions are less common in academic writing for EFL students for their less formality and conventionality. Students might find it more difficult and less stylistic to refer to prepositional and adverb phrases in general, and inversion more particular in their academic writing productions.

**Table 2. Use of Inversion Types in the Essays' Introduction**

<b>Introduction</b>					
<b>Type of inversion</b>	<b>NP</b>	<b>AdjP</b>	<b>VP</b>	<b>PP</b>	<b>AdvP</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	75	47	25	01	08
<b>Number of essays</b>	48 (80%)	10 (16.66)	27 (45)	01 (1.66)	04 (6.66)

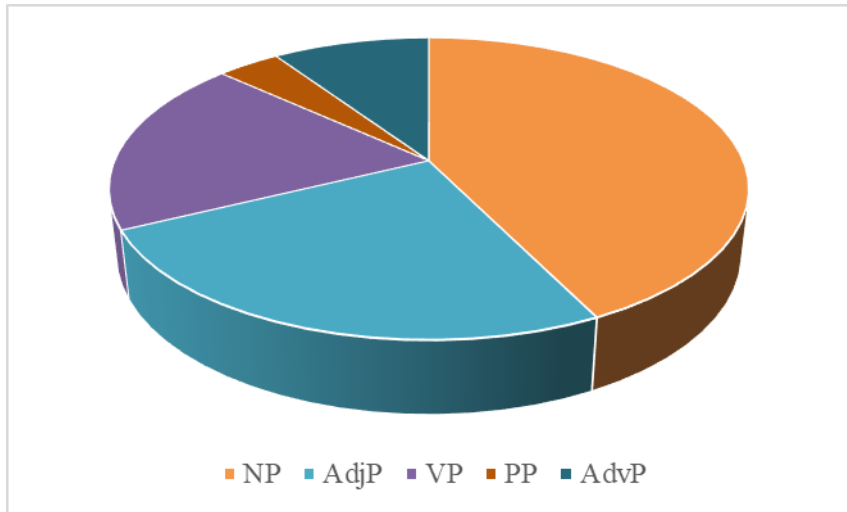
**Figure 2. Frequent Use of Inversion Types in the Introduction Part**



In table 2 and figure 2 above, there is a clear trend that noun phrase inversion is the most frequent in students' introductions with 75 occurrences in 48 essays. That is, 80% of the essays contained noun phrase inversion in their introductions. While adjective phrase inversion is ranked the second (47 occurrences) and identified in 10 essays representing 16.66%, verb phrase inversion has 25 occurrences in 27 essays. Adverb phrase and prepositional phrase inversions are rarely used with eight (08) and one (01) occurrence in four (04) and one (01) essay respectively.

**Table 3. Use of Inversion Types in the Essays' Body Paragraph**

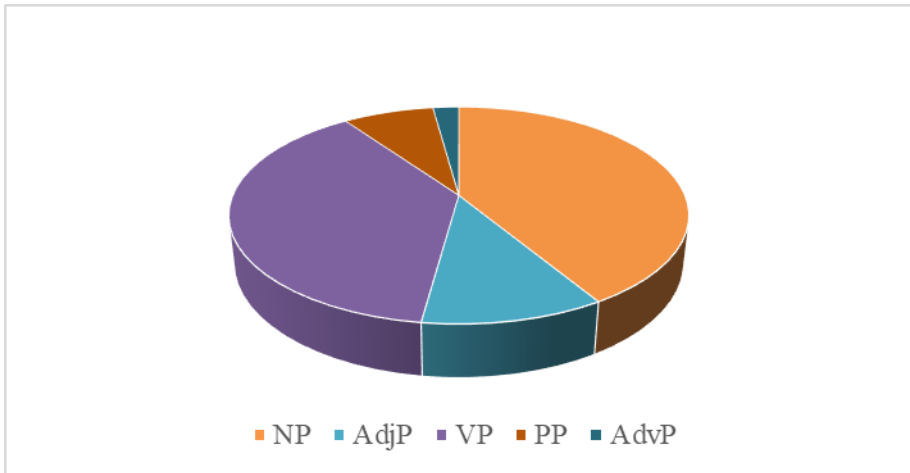
<b>Body</b>					
<b>Type of inversion</b>	<b>NP</b>	<b>AdjP</b>	<b>VP</b>	<b>PP</b>	<b>AdvP</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	90	53	40	08	20
<b>Number of essays</b>	50(83.33%)	39(65%)	08(13.33)	04(6.66%)	15(25%)

**Figure 3. Use of Inversion in the Body Part**

For the use of inversion in body paragraph of the essay, the vast majority of students (50) used noun phrase inversion. It appeared 90 times in the 50 essays representing 83.33% of the total number of essays, compared to adjective phrase inversion which has 53 occurrences in 39 essays. One fourth (1/4) of the essays used adverb phrase inversion representing 25% and was repeated 20 times as opposed to verb phrase inversion and prepositional phrase inversion which were found respectively in eight (08) and four (04) essays.

**Table 4. Use of Inversion Types in the Essays' Conclusions**

Conclusion					
Type of inversion	NP	AdjP	VP	PP	AdvP
Frequency	38	10	35	07	02
Number of essays	10(16.66)	10(16.66)	20(33.33)	03 (11.66%)	02(3.33%)

**Figure 4. Use of Inversion in the Conclusion Part**

As shown in table and figure 4, noun phrase inversion is the most commonly type of inversion used in the conclusion part of the essays. It appeared 38 times in 10 essays followed by verb phrase inversion which occurred 35 times in 20 essays. Similar to noun phrase inversion which was found in ten essays, adjective phrase inversion had only 10 occurrences in the ten essays. Prepositional phrase and adverb phrase inversions had the lowest frequency with only seven and two frequencies respectively in just three and two essays.

Taken together these results suggest that noun phrase inversion is the most commonly type used in written academic essays, along with verb phrase and adjective phrase inversion. Yet, the latter appeared in fewer essays but with a relatively 110 occurrences. Only a small number of essays used adverb and prepositional phrase inversion. Therefore, there are several possible explanations for these results. It may be that these students preferred noun and verb phrase inversion and benefitted from them for their familiarity and easiness to use. Students may either find them easy to use and apply, or they perceive adverb and prepositional phrase inversion as less formal, hard to use, or inappropriate in academic discourse.

## 4.2. Qualitative Results (Interview Analysis)

Data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Students' responses to the questions were first audio recorded and transcribed before coding them using words and short phrases. The different codes were created and grouped into different themes related to students' awareness, use, views, and future insights on syntactic inversion in academic writing.

### 4.2.1. Students' Awareness of Syntactic Inversion in Academic Writing

When asked about the use of standard word order or other structures like inversion of the subject and verb, a common view amongst interviewees was their unawareness of the latter. Of the eight students interviewed, only two indicated that they are aware of the existence of the inversion structure in writing. As one interviewee indicated, *"My passion to read different types of academic products such as articles, dissertations and essays made me aware of the phenomenon of inversion in academic reading"*

The other students added that *"Having studied grammar and linguistics mainly syntax raised my thoughts and awareness that varying sentence structures may add more value to the work at hand. Here I would say inversion as the best example"*

### 4.2.2. Students' Frequent Use of Inversion in Essay Writing

Whilst a minority (two students) mentioned that they use inversion, all agreed that they do not frequently rely on syntactic inversion in their academic writing. As an illustration one interviewee reported *"I do not feel comfortable with sticking all the time to one sentence structure, thus I find myself unconsciously move to the unusual word order construction"*.

For the other student who also commented that she used inversion in writing essays, she argued that this structure would make the reader feel that the writer sound more professional. She put it *"I, myself, when engaged with a text which focuses on using inversion structures become overwhelmed with the feeling that the writer produces the text"*

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*with high standard of professionalism and academic integrity. So, I decide to apply the same in my pieces of writing”.*

#### **4.2.3. Students’ Views about the Effectiveness of Inversion in Academic Writing**

Two divergent and often conflicting discourses emerged in response to the question "How effective do you think it is for EFL students to use inversion in their academic writing?". That is, while five students supported its use, seeing it as a valuable resource for more formality and clarity, three students were hesitant. Therefore, both positive and negative attitudes were elicited as summarized below.

##### **a. Positive Attitudes (Benefits)**

Students agreeing on using syntactic inversion referred to its promising effects highlighted as:

- It helps to draw readers’ attention to key important information in the text.
- Inversion adds more cohesion by linking different ideas in a more stylistic way.
- It is also used for a more rhetorical function by making the writer sound more formal.
- When often encountered any piece of academic writing, inversion signals the writer’s mastery and proficiency in the language.
- It makes writing more powerful when used accurately and appropriately.
- It raises the reader attention and focus to scan the text for its cohesion, flow, and well formation.

##### **b. Negative attitudes (Drawbacks)**

For the interviewees alluded to the drawbacks of inversion, they commented that:

- It is sometimes misleading for the reader especially when it is not used properly and appropriately.
- It requires the writer to be highly qualified and native-like in the use of the target language which is not always the case for EFL students.

- The writer should not take inversion as a priority as this may not be easy for the reader to understand.
- While readers may quit reading a passage when encountered with particular sentence structures which are hard to understand, they simply persist reading when they feel comfortable with the form or the structure of the text.
- Instead of creating a more formal tone, readers may perceive inversion as distracting the overall flow and consistency of the passage.

#### **4.2.4. Future Insights on the Use of Inversion in Academic Writing**

##### **a. Explicit Instruction on Syntactic Inversion**

Students were asked to suggest ways to benefit from the use of syntactic inversion in academic writing. Three interviewees recommended **explicit and guided instruction** on the different types and functions of inversion in academic contexts. As an illustrated one interviewee commented *“If I have to encourage inversion in writing, I highly recommend that there should be clear and systematic guidelines on its definition, types, and functions. Having known that I then decide whether this would help in improving or diminishing the quality of my writing”*

##### **b. Sufficient Time Devotion for Practice with Teachers’ Scaffolding**

Five students felt a need for much time to practise the inversion construction in their written productions through practical activities, and with assistance from the teacher. One interviewee stated that *“It’d be of great importance for the teacher to give a chance to practise inversion with different activities and samples of works”*. And another commented *“Inversion really requires scaffolding of the teacher within a sufficient time for practise and hence mastery of the process of inversion”*

##### **c. Raising Students’ Awareness about Inversion Pitfalls**

All the interviewees expressed the belief that teachers are responsible for making their students aware of the many risks that inversion may cause. Inversion when not used appropriately and

correctly may result in grammatical inaccuracy and inappropriate rhetorical functions. To illustrate an interviewee stated “*All above, the teacher is the first who can help students use inversion appropriately and hence producing a sound-academic piece of writing*”.

Together these results provide important insights into students’ lack of awareness and infrequent use of inversion with divergent opinions on its value in academic writing. That is, on the one hand, where most students acknowledged their limited awareness and frequent use of inversion in their essay writing, they reported that it can enhance the quality and the clarity of their writing if used accurately and appropriately. On the other hand, if misused, inversion may have a detrimental effect by distracting the overall flow and consistency of the academic writing passage. Furthermore, data gathered from the interview also provide some future insights to effectively deploy syntactic inversion in the development of academic discourse productions. Explicit instruction, guided practice, sufficient time for practice, and awareness of potential inversion pitfalls are the essential steps recommended by students to use inversion more properly, effectively and accurately.

To sum up, in contrast to earlier quantitative findings which indicated students’ frequent use of syntactic inversion in their academic essays, however, qualitative findings demonstrated students’ less reliance on inversion. It is difficult to explain this result, but it might be related to students’ unawareness of the use of inversion. Students might have applied inversion when writing without being aware of this linguistic phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the results of the present study indicate students’ preference for noun phrase inversion in academic essay writing, followed by verb and adjective phrase inversions. Adverb and prepositional phrase inversions were remarkably uncommon and avoided for either their complexity, inappropriateness, or students’ unfamiliarity. Additionally, although the introduction and the body parts of the essays contained more noun and adjective phrase

inversions, verb phrase inversion was relatively more common with noun phrase inversion as the most frequent type. Moreover, the qualitative data from interviews offers more insight into students' familiarity, use, attitudes, and future insights about inversion in academic writing.

The overall findings of the interview suggest that students are less familiar and less aware of the syntactic structure of inversion in essay writing. They do not frequently apply inversion in their written productions though they hold positive views in the sense that inversion adds more clarity, formality, and variety to the piece of writing. Students also referred to some drawbacks of inversion if misused which may negatively impact the overall flow, clarity, and cohesion of the essay. Furthermore, students felt that explicit instruction on the types and functions of inversion, guided practice, sufficient time for practice, and awareness of inversion drawbacks are the key to improve the effective use of inversion in academic writing.

These results would seem to suggest that there is a definite need for a systematic teaching of inversion in academic writing (when, why, and how to apply inversion) to enhance the clarity and the quality of the piece of writing. Additionally, teacher and peer feedback are an essential part of the scaffolding of the process of teaching and practising inversion in writing. It is through feedback that learners might raise their awareness of the appropriate way to use inversion in their writing. Another possible recommendation is that teachers should provide sufficient and supplementary resources on the use of inversion for students to rely on. Detailed description of the process of inversion including its definition, types, function, benefits and pitfalls might assist students in their further productions.

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