

## A Literary Approach to Grammar: Teaching Complex Sentence Structures Using Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how to teach students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) complex sentence structures through the use of literary texts, particularly drama, with a focus on Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The study explores how students' understanding, and application of periodic, loose, and antithetical sentences are improved through creative writing, enabled by the inductive test-teach-test method. Students' abilities to recognize and create complex sentences have significantly improved, according to pre-and post-test results as well as qualitative surveys. According to the research, drama can help improve language proficiency while also encouraging critical thinking and creativity.

*Keywords:* creative writing, drama, English as a Foreign Language, inductive method, Milton, qualitative, quantitative, test-teach-test method

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### Introduction

Despite the recent disregard for the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which placed great importance on literary texts, and the rise of interactive teaching methods that prioritize verbal communication, literature remains a highly valued teaching material in EFL classrooms. It is important to clarify what criteria help us decide whether a particular work is considered literature. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines literature as "writings in prose or verse, especially those having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest." Based on that definition, for a text to be considered literature, it should possess qualities akin to those of art.

Different scholars view literature differently in terms of its place in the EFL curriculum. Maley (1989) proposed The Critical Literary Approach and the Stylistic Approach, which state that literature can be used to teach students various literary elements like plot, character development, exposition, and the connotative meaning of words and sentences, as opposed to denotational meaning. However, some are against the use of literature in EFL classrooms. McKay (1982) and Savvidou (2004) claim that authentic literary texts are too difficult for students to comprehend due to the complex syntactic structures and obsolete vocabulary that are often present in classical literary works, which are a far cry from the standards of Modern English.

The selection criteria for literary texts are another aspect that these scholars see as an obstacle. Nevertheless, given that students have an opportunity to gain insights into cultural identities portrayed in short stories or novels, the role of literature in EFL classrooms cannot be underestimated. Carter and Long (1991) suggest the Literature as Content or Cultural Model. This model aligns with the cultural approach of language teaching, whose main aim is to teach cultural nuances along with the language, helping students gain a better

understanding of literary works and cultivate critical thinking skills. Carter and Long (1991) conclude that the benefits of literature for English learners transcend cultural understanding, in that it can help students nurture their personal and intellectual growth (The Personal Growth or Enrichment Model).

While most of the attention is placed on using literature to teach reading, this article will explore how literary texts, namely drama, can help teach writing skills. Writing, like speaking, is a productive skill, which means that to help students learn advanced writing skills, they need to be exposed to authentic language as extensively as possible. This research focuses specifically on creative writing.

Creative writing is a subtype of writing instruction that differs significantly from other types of writing tasks. The beginnings of creative writing can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century USA, when, according to Levy (1993), the handbook writers "... worked to build a consensus on the short story and on what constituted the national rules for a national form of expression" (pp. 26-27). An interesting question would be what exactly creative writing is. After all, is not creativity one of the five qualities of human language that distinguishes it from other types of communication found among animals? Linguistically, creativity is the ability to create an infinite number of sentences from finite resources. Based on this definition, any kind of writing, whether report writing or summary writing, could be considered creative in itself. However, relegating creative writing to the linguistically determined infinity of verbal or written realizations is wrong. Creative writing is a technique "characterized by originality and imagination rather than truthfulness or standardization of thoughts" (Brookes & Marshall, 2004, cited in Temizkan, pp.933-939). Based on this definition, it is suggested that creative writing is a less constrained form of written expression that frees a writer (or learner) from semantic limitations of thought expression. The definition provided by Brooks and Marshall is a fleshed-out version of what Harmer suggested in 2001. According to Harmer, (p. 265). creative writing is about suggesting "imaginative tasks such as writing poetry, stories, and plays." Both definitions are very similar, as they both argue that there is an element of imagination and creativity that comes into play

The Theory of Carnival formulated by Bakhtin (1984) elucidates that students tend to absorb vocabulary when they are immersed in a stress-free environment that reassures them that they are not being judged for the mistakes they make, stimulating their interest and helping them respond to external stimuli positively. Drama is one of the teaching methods that perfectly fits this definition. The main benefit of introducing drama in EFL classrooms is that it offers a chance to deviate from ordinary classroom instruction. Dougill (1987) believes that drama has the potential to transform an otherwise sterile classroom environment into a real hive of activity, fostering learner autonomy (Cannon 2017).

Although according to Milton, *Samson Agonistes* was not intended for theatrical performance, but rather as a dramatic poem (closet drama), in this research paper, we will treat *Samson Agonistes* as a subtype of drama. The choice of this poem was determined by the fact that it is rich in vocabulary and complex sentence structures that we intend to test the students on. Even though the poem was written in the Early Modern English period, it is quite easy to understand for the modern reader. We will look at three different types of complex sentence structures: periodic sentences, loose sentences, and antithetical sentences (anthesis). Let us define each of them:

- **A periodic sentence** is a type of complex sentence in which the main clause comes at the end of the sentence after several independent clauses.

Example: "In prosperous days/They swarm, but in adverse withdraw their head/Not to be found, though sought" (*Samson Agonistes*, 191-193, Milton, J., 1671)

- **A loose sentence** is the opposite of a periodic sentence because the independent clause precedes all the other dependent clauses and is at the beginning of the sentence.

Example: “Your coming, Friends, revives me, for I learn/Now of my own experience, not by talk/How counterfeit a coin they are who friends/Bear in their Superscription” (*Samson Agonistes*, 187-190, Milton, J., 1671).

- **An antithetical sentence** is a sentence in which, according to Merriam-Webster, there is the “...rhetorical contrast of ideas using parallel arrangements of words, clauses, or sentences (as in 'action, not words' or 'they promised freedom and provided slavery').

Example: “The deeds themselves, though mute, spoke loud the doer. But they persisted deaf, and would not seem” (*Samson Agonistes*, 248-249, Milton, J., 1671).

### Method

Given the scope of our research, we will assess students’ creative writing skills at the sentence level. Sentence level analysis necessitates the assessment of the form and the mastery of sentence structures of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year English philology students (nine in number, level B1+ to B2).

Based on the purpose of this paper, we will use both quantitative and qualitative research methodology.

**Quantitative** research design intends the following:

1. Designing a pre-test to assess students’ initial understanding of complex sentence structures
2. After completing the intervention, post-testing takes place
3. Comparing results

**Qualitative** research involves conducting a survey to assess students’ confidence in using complex sentence structures after teaching. In the teaching process, an inductive teaching strategy coupled with a test-teach-test method will be used, which will allow us to activate students’ schemata via elicitation. The explanation of the subject matter (complex sentences) spans three consecutive lessons conducted in an informal environment.

### Results

Pre-test assessments:

**Figure 1**

*Pre-test results (loose sentence)*

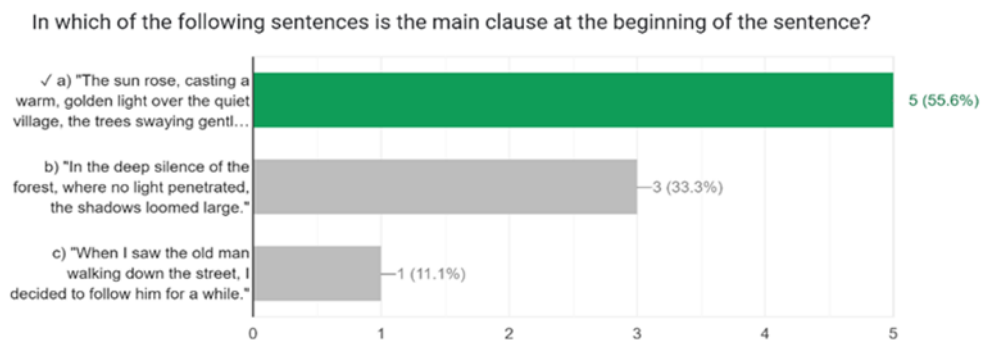


Figure 1. Five of 9 students correctly identified a sentence with the main clause at the beginning of the sentence.

**Figure 2**  
*Pre-test results (periodic sentence)*

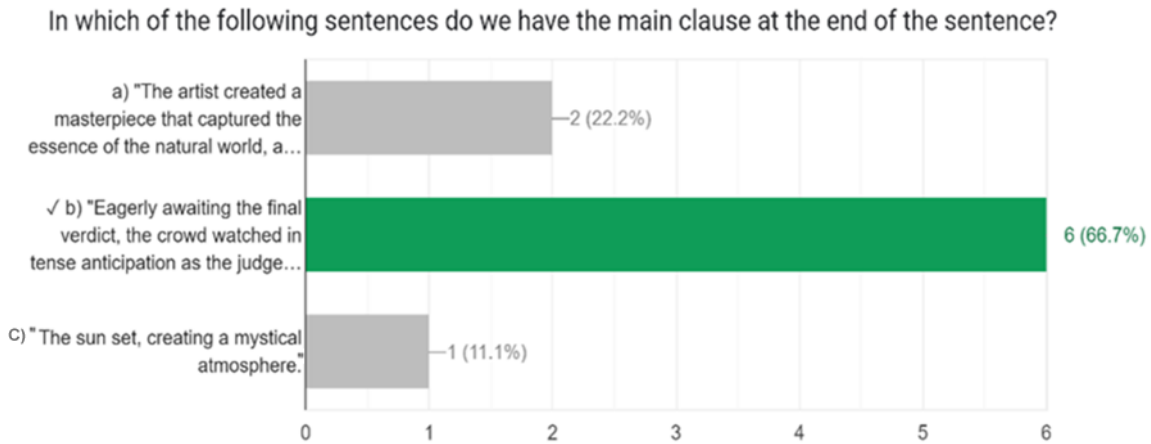


Figure 2. Six of 9 students correctly identified a sentence with the main clause at the end.

**Figure 3**  
*Pre-test results (antithetical sentence)*

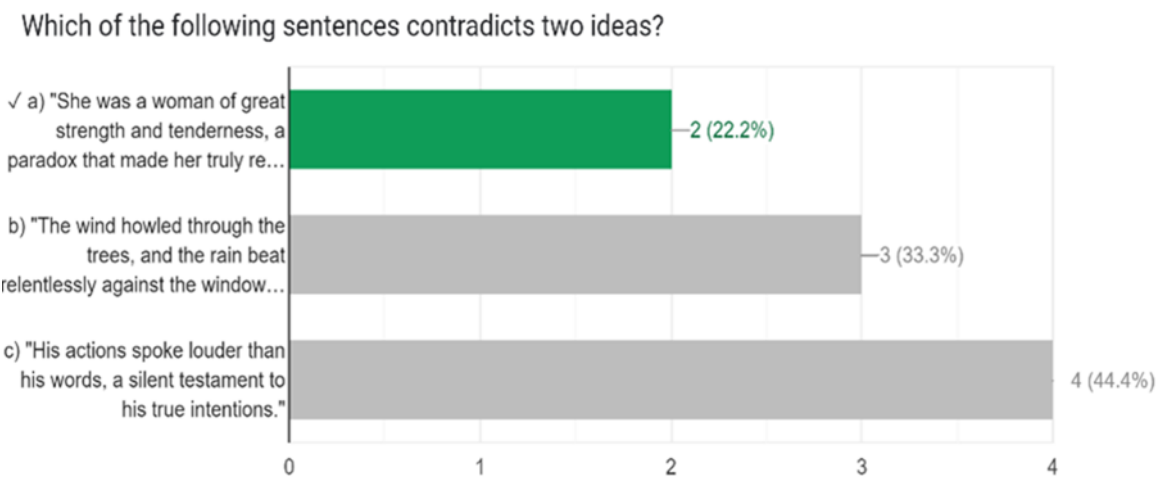


Figure 3. Only 2 of 9 students identified a sentence showing contrasting ideas.

At the intervention stage, the students were introduced to a literary excerpt with choppy sentences (sentences that are very short and simple) and they had to make comments on the aesthetic value of the piece. After concluding that the passage was devoid of any art-like qualities, they analyzed example sentences from *Samson Agonistes* and learned about three different complex sentence structures. They also looked at non-literary examples to help better understand the structural differences. They had to match non-literary examples with the excerpts from *Samson Agonistes* based on the structural similarities. After that, the students had to

transform the choppy sentences into complex sentences in groups. At the end of this stage, the students summarized the main points and received feedback.

At the post-intervention stage, the students showed remarkable improvement in their ability to recognize complex sentence structures. The main weakness was shown in grammatical accuracy at the production stage. The students found it extremely easy to identify the three types of sentence structure correctly. As far as their productive skills are concerned, the following trends emerged:

1. The students found it easy to use noun phrases beginning with WH-question words in loose sentences. Let us look at what they produced. (Note: occasional grammatical mistakes made by the students were NOT corrected.)

**Student A:** *“I knew that he didn’t meet my nephew, who has been sitting in his armchair and contemplating about how vain this life was.”*

**Student B:** *“Mrs. Janin was sitting on the balcony which has not been touched by a hand of war.”*

**Student C:** *“I wondered what she was doing all along, not knowing that it was not me who committed a crime.”*

2. The students demonstrated a partial ability to use subordinating conjunctions in concessive clauses (although, even though, in spite of, despite) in both periodic and loose sentences. They mainly used concessive clauses that require a subject and a verb in place of concessive clauses that require either a noun phrase or an *ing*. The main obstacle with using time conjunctions (as soon as, while, before, after) was using the right tense. The students often mixed the tenses and used simple tenses in place of perfect tenses and future simple instead of present simple. Let us observe the following examples:

**Student D:** *“Despite the heavy rain was falling and the clouds were warning against leaving the coziness of our homes, we dared to venture into the uncharted territory.” (periodic sentence)*

**Student E:** *This student's response was not relevant.*

**Student F:** *“After they arrived and started to settle into, the guests realized that it was not as bad as people made out.” (loose sentence)*

3. In loose sentences, at the post-intervention stage, the students had trouble with prepositional clauses. Seven out of 9 students could not use prepositional clauses correctly. Only 2 students were able to use prepositional phrases in the following way:

**Student 1:** *“She listened to me, with her heart beating loudly.”*

**Student 2:** *“She was dragging his leg, with his heart staying behind.”*

4. As far as antithetical sentences are concerned, the students were able to identify one without any difficulty at the post-teach stage. However, some of the sentences that they produced were not antithetical in nature. Surprisingly, one student came up with the following sentence: *“Lily lost her purse and happiness.”* This specific student used a zeugma quite skillfully, though unwittingly. Some of the sentences written by the students:

**Student G:** *“The city was teeming with life, yet the countryside was fast asleep.”*

**Student H:** *“His ideas were very dull, but hers were brilliant.”*

5. It is noteworthy that the participants demonstrated a good ability to use coordinating conjunctions (as yet, but, or, for, nor) in partially antithetical sentences.

6. The students were able to recognize parts of compound-complex sentences, namely dependent and independent clauses. They were also able to identify coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, which further helped their understanding.

7. With the help of the sample sentences from *Samson Agonistes*, the students' motivation further increased for various reasons. *Samson Agonistes* proved to be interesting for students because it allowed them to study one more work of Milton's, apart from *Paradise Lost*, which is part of their curriculum. They made thoughtful comparisons and drew parallels between the two pieces. The students commented on the elevated style that is present in both *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, the latter of which added to their understanding of Biblical allusions. The participants also noticed that Milton's use of *weird* (i.e. inverted structures) along with heroic characters and moral instruction are the hallmarks of his works.

8. Another notable insight that the students reported was that the blank verse, iambic pentameter, made it easier for them to produce their own sentences that had natural rhyme while maintaining a formal poetic structure.

9. The students reported that the test-teach-test method allowed them to see how much they knew about complex sentence structures before being presented with the new material.

10. An integration of an inductive technique in creative writing seems to be useful from students' viewpoint. Most of the students reported that an inductive teaching method helped them see the importance of varying sentence structures in creative writing and that a deductive approach (being taught the material without any prior elicitation or a warm-up exercise) would not have been as interesting and useful.

11. Eight students reported that approaching dramatic works with sentence-level instruction is advantageous to fully appreciate the aesthetic value of a literary piece. Breaking down sentences and analyzing them in terms of their structure enabled students to 'read between the lines' and understand the connotative meanings of phrases.

### **Post-teach survey**

The Pie Charts below show the results of the survey carried out to determine the effectiveness of the teaching methods, students' understanding of complex sentence structures, and the effectiveness of *Samson Agonistes* in teaching complex sentence structures.

As shown in Figure 4, the post-teach survey illustrated that 44.4% of students feel very confident about using complex sentence structures. An additional 33.3% of students think their knowledge of complex sentence structures has improved after the intervention.

As illustrated in Figure 5, the effectiveness of a test-teach-test method was rated 4 (effective) and 5 (highly effective) by all 9 participants.

Figure 6 highlights the efficacy of an inductive method. Of 9 students, 88.9% think that the inductive method was successful and they would use it in their own classrooms.

Figure 7 reveals the students' attitudes regarding the value of integrating *Samson Agonistes* into the teaching process. Eight of the 9 students, 88.9%, were in favor of using *Samson Agonistes* to teach creative writing. Of that group, 22.2% thought that although it was challenging, it was interesting. Only 1 student said they would prefer something less challenging.

In conclusion, Figure 8 documents that 88.9% of participants rated the effectiveness of using *Samson Agonistes* to teach creative writing as high, 22.2%, or very high, 66.7%. It is a valuable teaching tool.



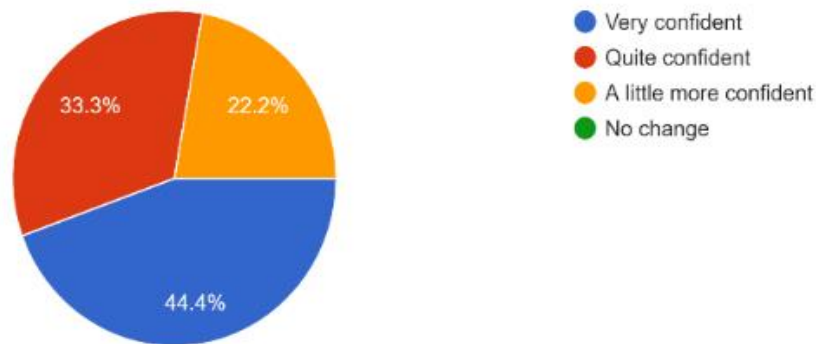
**Post-test survey**

**Figure 4**

*Post-test survey, using complex sentence structures*

How confident are you in using complex sentence structures?

9 responses

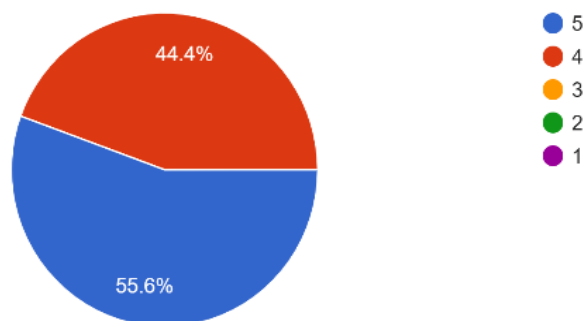


**Figure 5**

*Post-test survey: effectiveness of test-teach-test method*

How would you rate the effectiveness of test-teach-test method on a scale 1-5 (5 being very effective and 1 being very ineffective).

9 responses

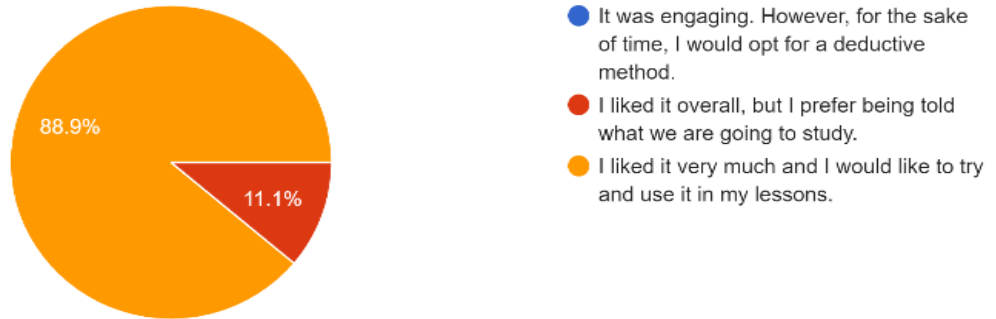


**Figure 6**

***Post-test survey: effectiveness of inductive method***

What would you say about the use of an inductive method?

9 responses

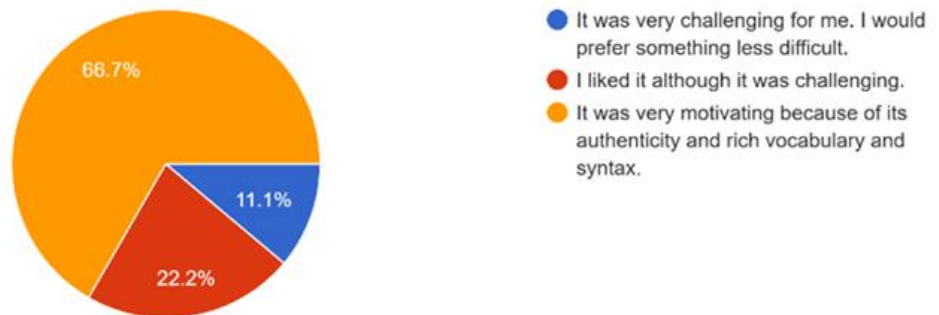


**Figure 7**

***Post-test survey:effectiveness of using Samson Agonistes to teach critical thinking***

What is your opinion on using *Samson Agonistes* for teaching creative writing?

9 responses



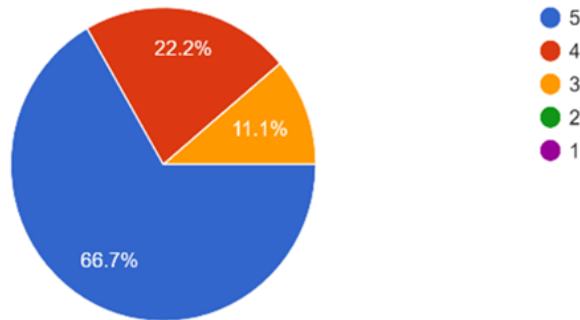


**Figure 8**

***Post-test survey: effectiveness of using Samson Agonistes to teach complex sentence structures***

How would you rate the effectiveness of *Samson Agonistes* in teaching complex sentence structures? (on a scale 1 to 5) where 5 is highly effective and 1 least effective.

9 responses



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### Author's Note



**Tedo Sharadenidze** is a 25-year-old scholar, teacher, and published author of poetry and prose from Batumi in western Georgia. He obtained a Bachelor's degree in Humanities (English Studies) from Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University. During his undergraduate program, he studied for a year at the University of Alcalá de Henares in Madrid, Spain, in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. After finishing his BA degree, he continued at Batumi State University in the Faculty of Education and Exact Sciences, completing the Teacher Certification Program. He then obtained a Master's degree in Humanities (English Linguistics) at Batumi State University.

As an IELTS instructor, Tedo teaches English as a Second Language (AP Language and AP U. S. History) to high school seniors at the American School Nike in Batumi where he is also the newly appointed head of Quality Management. He is also an Invited Lecturer at BAU International University in Batumi, teaching a course in Medical Communication in English.

Tedo's writings mainly address the themes of alienation, indifference, eccentricity, internal conflict, childhood mirth, and the inability "to defy what fate has thrown at you."

He is motivated to write by the desire "to turn simple, day-to-day occurrences into something magical... something that would inspire others to put pen to paper."