Investigating Development of Syntactic Complexity in L2 Chinese Writing

Abstract

Syntactic complexity refers to the extent of elaboration, variety and sophistication of syntactic structures in language production (Ellis, 2003; Lu, 2011); its development over time reveals the scope of expanding or restructured L2 knowledge (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998). It is one of the essential subsystems of second language (L2) performance and closely related to linguistic development. Systemic Functional Linguistics posits a dynamic-synoptic continuum of syntactic development, illustrating the increasing use of coordination, subordination and nominalization at different stages (Halliday & Mathiessen, 1999), which indicates that the production of L2 learners at different developmental stages vary in not only degree but also sources of syntactic complexity. In line with this argument, Norris and Ortega (2009) proposed a multidimensional measurement framework that reflects syntactic complexity both overall and at coordinate, subordinate and phrasal levels. It has been applied to research on L2 English and L2 German writing (e.g., Bulté & Housen, 2014; Byrne, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Lu, 2011).

However, no such study has been done on L2 writing in Chinese, a topic-prominent language that differs from Indo-European languages in a wide range of syntactic features, such as topic-comment constructions, serial-verb construction, verbal complements, and compound sentences, and poses challenges for L2 writers. This study uses Norris and Ortega’s (2009) framework in a cross-sectional investigation of syntactic complexity in L2 Chinese writing at intermediate, pre-advanced and advanced levels. Three research questions are asked:

1) How does syntactic complexity in L2 Chinese writing develop across proficiency levels?
2) What are the specific sources of verb-phrasal complexity in L2 Chinese writing?
3) How do the sources of verb-phrasal complexity in L2 Chinese writing differ across proficiency levels?

A total of 100 college L2 Chinese learners participated in this study. Each participant spent around one hour writing two prompt-based essays in Chinese. Proficiency levels were operationalized by learners’ reported institutional status (Thomas, 1994), holistic rating method using ACTFL Guidelines (Swender, Conrad, & Vicars, 2012), and analytic rating method using adapted ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981; Polio, 2013). Correlations among the three methods for defining learners’ levels were examined.
To answer the research questions, a variety of measures in the framework, including mean length of clause, coordinate clause/clause ratio, subordinate clause/clause ratio, complex verbal phrases/clause ratio, and complex nominal phrases/clause ratio, were used to compare the degree of syntactic complexity in the writing samples across three proficiency levels. Furthermore, a qualitative search was performed to identify learners’ use of syntactic structures to form complex verbal phrases, and these results were then compared quantitatively across the proficiency levels.

The analyses revealed that the L2 Chinese learners generally followed the patterns of syntactic complexity development proposed by SFL with some characteristics specific to Chinese. Increased proficiency was correlated with increases in overall syntactic complexity in writing, as well as greater phrasal complexity and less reliance on coordinate and subordinate complexity. Higher-level learners had a wider repertoire of complexification resources, including verbal complements, prepositions, pre-verbal modifiers, and serial-verb construction, whereas lower-level learners still struggled to create meaning in their writing and relied on a limited number of complexity resources. The writing of higher-level learners was also more semantically oriented. The findings will also guide instructors to design focused practice in line with learners’ development as well as to address specific difficulties at different proficiency levels.
Reference:


Polio, C. (2013). *Revising a writing rubric based on raters’ comments: Does it result in a more reliable and valid assessment?* Midwest Association of Language Testers, Michigan State University.

