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Shifting structural complexity: The production of clause types in speeches given by English for academic purposes students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the structural complexity in oral "sentences" produced by English L2 (ESL) learners (n = 66) during 227 two-minute topic-based monologues in an EAP across three academic semesters. The 5,056 clauses in these ESL speeches were coded by clause type (main, coordinate, adverbial, relative, complement-taking predicate, nonfinite) to determine what types are produced as learners complexify their speech. This study is unique in that it examines all clause types produced during an ESL speaking task across three proficiency levels in an EAP.

The results revealed that the learners produced increasingly complex language as measured by subordination, and that the clause types employed to complexify the speeches changed across instruction levels. Adverbial clauses were the most common subordinate clause at the lowest proficiency level, but nonfinite clauses became the most common dependent clause type at the high-intermediate level and were increasingly produced. This description of the clause types found in free-production speeches suggests a developmental order for the clause types in EAP contexts: adverbial, nonfinite, relative, complement-taking predicate clause. These findings, which show that learners produce nonfinite constructions perhaps earlier than expected, can inform curriculum design, instruction approach, and future studies of the development of L2 linguistic complexity.

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1. Introduction

With the goal of advancing students' language proficiency, EAP curriculums have included explicit instruction on the structure and function of individual clause types. Finite dependent clauses, in particular, have been extensively covered in grammar classes (Biber & Gray, 2010). EAP instructors have encouraged students to build complexity into their speech and writing, and they may direct students to identify and/or create specific clause types, such as relative clauses, in isolated tasks. The assessment of student writing and speeches usually has included the requirement to produce a variety of structures. Research (e.g., Mancilla, Polat, & Akcay, 2015) has found that even advanced nonnative English speakers, however, produce fewer dependent clauses than native speakers in written online discussion posts in a college class. The explicit coverage of the various clause types is crucial in EAP curriculums because of their extensive use in academic settings. For instance, a popular freshman composition book, *They say/I say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff, Birkenstein, & Durst, 2012),

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describes a template for writing which is focused on the use of multi-clause constructions to organize writing. Further, Deroey (2012) has called for more EAP instruction of a particular subtype of this clause, the wh-cleft (such as, *what he says is …*), because of its frequent use in academic lectures.

Correspondingly, EAP research has shown increased interest in investigating structural complexity. Banerjee, Franceschina, and Smith (2007) included measures of complexity when reviewing IELTS texts and speeches and found differences in subordination ratios between written and spoken modes. Biber and Gray (2010) reported that dependent clauses are more common in spoken language whereas academic writing tends to complexify at the phrasal level. Informed by Biber and Gray's findings, Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) investigated the development of complexity by focusing on different structures used by advanced EAP students to complexify noun phrases in written texts. Yet, similar work has not been done to fully describe the verbal structures used by EAP learners to complexify speech.

Describing the development of structural complexity (clause relations) in L2 oral data is necessary because language modality is expected to have a clear and distinct impact on language performance, specifically dependent clause types (Biber & Gray, 2010; Biber, Gray, & Staples, 2014). Kormos and Trebits (2012), though, did not find differences in syntactic complexity between EFL texts and speeches, measured by clause length, subordination ratio, and one clause type (relative clauses). A full description of complexity, however, must consider all of the clause types produced (Rimmer, 2006). A description of all clause types produced by students across proficiency levels may suggest a developmental order for the clauses types in ESL speech. Mancilla et al. (2015) recommended a teaching intervention to address the deficit in production of dependent clauses in nonnative EAP language, but it is unclear which clauses are underused. The current study has applications for the comparison of oral production and (the more commonly researched) written production, for understanding the sequence of development, and for planning EAP instruction and curriculum design. Our goal is to describe the various clause types produced by EAP students during a free-production speaking task across three instruction levels in an intensive English program (IEP) in order to determine which clauses are produced as structural complexity develops.

Because multiple terms are used in the field, the next section explains the clause types as defined in this study with a discussion of the suggested influences on development. We then describe our study's methodology. The results are given and discussed in light of previous findings. The article ends with our conclusions and pedagogical implications, including notes on the study's limitations and future research.

2. Clause types and development

Clauses are the "basic structural unit" (Townsend, 1997) of language, and complexity is based on clause relations, with either reciprocal (coordination) or hierarchical (subordination) relationships between elements (Rescher, 1998). Multiple clause types exist, with dependent clauses defined in relation to the main (or independent) clause. In discussions of clause development (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2007; Diessel, 2004; Ioup, 1983), finite and nonfinite clauses (e.g., gerunds, infinitives) are often classified separately, even though the same clause types (e.g., adverbial, relative, complement) can be used to describe finite and nonfinite constructions. Moreover, finite and nonfinite clauses are generally taught separately in IEPs. Thus, in this paper, nonfinite clauses are discussed separately from finite clauses.

In this study, adverbial clauses are finite clauses connected to a main clause by a subordinate conjunction and give information, often about time, place, reason, purpose, condition, or concession (Collins & Hollo, 2010). Adverbial clauses are grammatically optional in the sentence (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973) and thus are syntactic adjuncts (Collins & Hollo, 2010). Example (1) from the EAP learner data begins with an adverbial clause (bolded).

(1) ***when I was studying in college*** *I just played with my classmates.*

Although adverbial clauses are often considered subordinate clauses (Holmes, 1995), Chafe (1988) stated that main clauses and adverbial clauses have equal status with bidirectional linking. According to Diessel (2013), coordinated clauses and adverbial clauses both develop from the combining of two independent sentences whereas relative, complement, and nonfinite clauses develop from clause expansion and are embedded into the main clause. Creating multi-clause utterances by clause combining is expected to be an easier process than clause expansion. For instance, the production of adverbial clauses is easier than embedded relative clauses (Kazemi, 2011).

Relative clauses further specify, identify, or give more information about the referenced noun phrase and, therefore, are often called "adjective clauses" in pedagogical texts. Even though relative clauses are embedded clauses, they are not grammatically required and are also syntactic adjuncts.

(2) *there is many thing* ***that I like*** *in it.*

Syntactically, relative clauses are gapped clauses (O'Grady, 2011), which means that some element within the relative clause is not overtly expressed but is understood from information in the matrix clause. For instance, in (2), the direct object of the verb *like* is not expressed within the relative clause as the "gap" is filled by the noun phrase *many thing* in the main clause. Relative clauses are generally considered more difficult than other structures (Kormos & Trebits, 2012), such as coordination

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