

Different topics, different discourse: Relationships among writing topic, measures of syntactic complexity, and judgments of writing quality

Weiwei Yang^{a,*}, Xiaofei Lu^b, Sara Cushing Weigle^c

^a College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 29 Jiangjun Ave., Nanjing, Jiangsu 211106, China

^b Department of Applied Linguistics, The Pennsylvania State University, 304 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA

^c Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL, Georgia State University, P.O. Box 4099, Atlanta, GA 30302-4099, USA

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between syntactic complexity of ESL writing and writing quality as judged by human raters, as well as the role of topic in the relationship. Syntactic complexity was conceptualized and measured as a multi-dimensional construct with interconnected sub-constructs. One hundred and ninety ESL graduate students each wrote two argumentative essays on two different topics. It was found that topic had a significant effect on syntactic complexity features of the essays, with one topic eliciting a higher amount of subordination (finite and non-finite) and greater global sentence complexity and the other eliciting more elaboration at the finite clause level (in particular, coordinate phrases and complex noun phrases). Local-level complexity features that were more prominent in essays on one topic (i.e., subordination and elaboration at the finite clause level) tended not to correlate with scores for that topic. Rather, a reversed pattern was observed: the less prominent local-level complexity features for essays on one topic tended to have a stronger correlation with scores for that topic. Regression analyses revealed global sentence and T-unit complexity as consistently significant predictors of scores across the two topics, but local-level features exhibited varied predicting power for scores for the two topics.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Syntactic complexity; ESL writing performance; Topic effect

Introduction

The inquiry into syntactic complexity of writing and its relationship with writing quality is not new. However, as Ortega (2003) points out, many early second language (L2) studies in this area suffer from problems of small sample sizes and homogeneity of learner proficiency, often yielding conflicting findings. Furthermore, given the relatively large number of syntactic complexity measures that have been used (see Lu, 2011; Ortega, 2003; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998), we cannot assume that the relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality is the same across the different measures (Norris & Ortega, 2009). The number of measures that exist also invites the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 15261807574.

E-mail addresses: weiwei.yang@outlook.com (W. Yang), xxl13@psu.edu (X. Lu), sweigle@gsu.edu (S.C. Weigle).

question of what the construct really is and what measures are appropriate. Norris and Ortega (2009) usefully propose examining syntactic complexity as a multi-dimensional construct. To date, however, this proposal has been adopted by very few studies (see, e.g., Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010). Additionally, while some research suggests that variations in writing tasks can influence the linguistic features of texts and the writing scores given to those texts, the role of writing topic has not been given due attention in studies of the relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality, although the very few studies that touched upon this issue suggest that topic effects can be expected (Crowhurst & Piche, 1979; Tedick, 1990). In this study, we hope to circumvent the limitations of previous studies by measuring syntactic complexity as a multi-dimensional construct and using a larger sample size. We also explore the role of writing topic in the relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality. In the rest of this section, we review related literature, by first establishing syntactic complexity as a multi-dimensional construct and then synthesizing related studies. Then, we present the methodology and results of our study and discuss the findings as well as their implications for syntactic complexity research and L2 writing assessment.

Syntactic complexity as a multi-dimensional construct

In linguistic theories, syntactic complexity traditionally refers to compound and complex sentences, i.e., clausal complexity (see Diessel, 2004; Ravid & Berman, 2010). In some linguistic traditions, the notion of syntactic complexity has not extended to phrasal complexity (see, e.g., Givón (2009); Givón & Shibatan, 2009). However, in another view emerging in L1 and L2 developmental studies focusing on syntactic maturity (e.g., Cooper, 1976; Crossley, McNamara, Weston, & McLain Sullivan, 2011; Hunt, 1965; Lu, 2011; Ravid & Berman, 2010) and discourse analysis of texts in different genres (e.g., Biber, 2006; Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011; Ravid & Berman, 2010), phrasal complexity (particularly noun phrase complexity) has been considered an integral part of syntactic complexity.

What complicates the construct of syntactic complexity further is that the notion of clause has not been defined consistently across disciplines. Notably, linguistic theories of grammar (Cristofaro, 2003; Givón, 2009; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Langacker, 2008) count both finite and non-finite clauses as clauses. In writing research, however, following Hunt's (1965) definition, the term clause has been predominantly used to refer only to finite clauses. Therefore, when calculating an index such as number of clauses per sentence as a syntactic complexity measure, discrepancy in results may arise due to the different definitions of clause adopted. There may be no easy answer as to which definition of clause is more appropriate, but we adopt the view that both finite clauses and non-finite elements should be examined as part of the construct. However, to maintain consistency with previous writing research, we use the term clause to refer to finite clauses only and use the term non-finite element to refer to non-finite clauses. In alignment with grammar theories, we see both finite dependent clauses and non-finite elements as representing

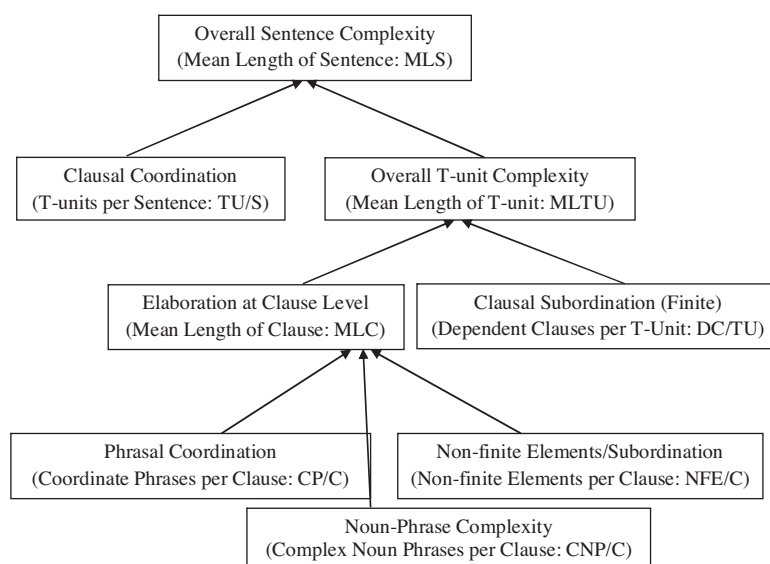


Fig. 1. A multi-dimensional representation of syntactic complexity.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/363969>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/363969>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)