



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Second Language Writing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/seclan

Syntactic and lexical development in an intensive English for Academic Purposes programme



Diana Mazgutova, Judit Kormos*

Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South, Lancaster LA1 4YL, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Second language writing
EAP writing
Lexical diversity
Lexical sophistication
Syntactic complexity
Writing development

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the lexical and syntactic characteristics of L2 learners' academic writing change over the course of a one-month long intensive English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme at a British university. The participants were asked to produce two argumentative essays, at the beginning and at the end of the EAP course, which were analyzed using measures that are theoretically motivated by previous research in corpus linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, and developmental child language acquisition. The results indicate improvements, with regard to lexical diversity, both for intermediate-level students who were preparing for undergraduate university studies in the UK and upper-intermediate level participants who were planning to continue their studies at postgraduate level. The academic argumentative texts of the students in the lower proficiency group also demonstrate development in noun-phrase complexity and in the use of genre-specific syntactic constructions. The findings suggest that despite no explicit focus on lexis and syntax in the EAP programme, by the end of the course the students' writing exhibited a developmentally more advanced repertoire of lexical and syntactic choices that are characteristic of expository texts in academic contexts.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Learning to write effectively in an academic context is very important, not only because it is often the only means by which students' content knowledge is assessed in a large number of disciplines, but also because producing academic texts helps students to become members of a discourse community as well as to gain new knowledge through writing (Hirvela, 2011; Hyland, 2011). The development of L2 learners' academic writing ability has mostly been investigated in terms of improvements in various assessment criteria, such as cohesion, coherence and organization, as well as overall grades (see, for example, Green & Weir, 2002). It is only recently that writing research and studies in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have started to focus on the linguistic features of students' writing and how they improve along with developments in proficiency in various instructional contexts (see, for example, the collection of studies introduced in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, guest edited by Connor-Linton & Polio, 2014). The development of the syntactic complexity of students' writing has been at the centre of a number of studies in recent years (e.g., Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes & Sinicrope, 2008; Crossley & McNamara, 2014; Shaw & Liu, 1998; Vyatkina, 2013), but only a few studies have considered lexical development in conjunction with syntactic changes in students' written production (for exceptions see Bulté & Housen, 2014; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Verspoor, Lowie, & van Dijk, 2008; Vyatkina, 2012). In our study, we

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: d.mazgutova@lancaster.ac.uk (D. Mazgutova), j.kormos@lancaster.ac.uk (J. Kormos).

investigated how the lexical and syntactic characteristics of L2 learners' writing changed during the course of an intensive EAP programme which aims to prepare international students for university studies at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the UK. This research helps us to understand how key linguistic features of academic writing develop and thereby contribute to supporting the more effective and efficient expression of L2 writers' thoughts and arguments.

Our research specifically focuses on linguistic features that have been shown to be typical of academic writing among L1 writers and that exemplify advanced and experienced writers' texts (Biber & Gray, 2010; Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes & Sinicrope, 2008; Halliday & Martin, 1993/1996). In this respect, we have taken a novel approach to analyzing complexity since, in line with Biber, Gray, and Poonpon (2011), we argue that the complexity of learners' output should be considered with reference to the mode, genre, and communicative demands of the particular task to be performed. This position is somewhat different from that of Bulté and Housen (2014), who describe absolute complexity as "objective inherent properties of linguistic units and/or systems thereof" and relative complexity as "the cost and difficulty of processing" (p. 43, italics in original). In this paper we propose that in addition to these two theoretically and empirically useful aspects of complexity, the operationalization of complexity in written and spoken performance should also consider the linguistic characteristics of the given genre or task-type. In the field of corpus linguistics, Biber and Gray (2010) and Biber et al. (2011), and, in systemic linguistics, Halliday and Martin, 1993/1996) have convincingly shown that different linguistic features characterize speech and writing. Academic writing relies more on phrasal embedding than speech and is typically characterized by complex nominalisation and the use of abstract and compound nouns (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Norris & Ortega, 2009). The complexity demands of writing and speech do not only differ across modes but also across genres. This is seen in the findings of Nippold (2004) and Berman and Nir-Sagiv (2007), in the field of developmental child language acquisition, which show that in expository texts one can find a higher number of relative clauses and passive constructions and more complex noun phrases than in narratives. In line with these arguments, our study uses measures of syntactic and lexical complexity that are theoretically motivated by previous research in corpus linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, and developmental child language acquisition.

Some recent longitudinal studies of L2 writing have examined the development of syntactic complexity, but these were mostly conducted with university learners of German at beginning (Vyatkina, 2012, 2013) and advanced levels (Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes & Sinicrope, 2008). The studies of Byrnes (2009) and Byrnes and Sinicrope (2008) reveal that – parallel with developments in proficiency – increase in nominalisation, the use of relative clauses, and grammatical metaphor can be observed. Vyatkina (2012) found that beginner learners' writing in German became lexically more varied and was characterized by longer sentences and finite verb-units and more frequent subordination as they progressed in their language studies. Verspoor et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal case study on the development of the lexical and syntactic features of academic writing in English. Their participant, a Dutch university student, demonstrated development in terms of word and sentence length in his writing, but the growth in these features was complementary; when one of them increased, the other decreased. Vyatkina's (2012) longitudinal study showed parallel development in lexical and syntactic features of students' writing at a lower level of proficiency.

The findings concerning linguistic development in EAP programmes have been mixed. Most of these courses are relatively short and are not, or only indirectly, focused on the syntactic and lexical aspects of writing; hence, it is understandable that limited development in these areas can be observed (see e.g., Ortega, 2003). In a study conducted in a UK university context, Shaw and Liu (1998) found that linguistic accuracy in terms of the frequency of errors and complexity with regards to nominalisation and subordination did not change. Nevertheless, their research revealed that, in a number of other areas, such as the level of formality and impersonality, students' writing exhibited increased use of the characteristic features of academic genres at the end of the programme. In contrast, the results of Polio, Fleck, and Leder, (1998) and Storch and Tapper (2009) indicated significant improvement in the accuracy of students' writing in an EAP programme. Storch and Tapper's results also revealed that there were significantly more academic words found in the students' essays at the end of the EAP course.

In a recent series of analyses of writing development in the Michigan State University (MSU) corpus of descriptive essays (for a description of the corpus see Connor-Linton & Polio, 2014), Bulté and Housen (2014) found that students' writing exhibited increased use of less frequent words and a higher complex sentence ratio, compound complex sentence ratio, and subclause ratio at the end of the academic writing programme. They also observed that finite clauses, sentences, and T-units became significantly longer in students' descriptive essays. In Crossley and McNamara's (2014) computational analysis of the same dataset, "longer noun phrases, less syntactic similarity between sentences, fewer verb phrases, more words before the main verb, and more negation" (p. 73) were the differentiating features of students' writing at the beginning and at the end of the academic writing course. A multidimensional analysis of the linguistic characteristics of the texts also showed that the learners' essays were increasingly characterized by a nominal writing style and elaborated description by the end of the programme (Friginal & Weigle, 2014). However, no parallel improvement in accuracy could be observed (Polio & Shea, 2014).

Although previous studies offer useful insights into lexical and syntactic development in L2 writing in general, their findings might not apply to expository and argumentative academic texts, which have specific genre and linguistic characteristics. Most previous longitudinal research has used a variety of task types, prompts, and genres for data elicitation at different time points, which makes it difficult to separate the effect of linguistic development on students' output from potential task and genre effects (for an exception see the series of studies using the MSU corpus reviewed above). No previous studies have been conducted in the contexts of the short and highly intensive pre-sessional EAP courses, which are frequently offered to students in the UK who fall short of the language requirements for university by a small margin.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/363975>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/363975>

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