



# Syntactic complexity in L2 writing: Progress and expansion



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## ABSTRACT

In this commentary to the Special Issue, I first identify four themes that arise from the contributions that each study makes to the study of syntactic complexity in L2 writing. I then explore several other themes that stem from the collective findings from the five studies and which connect with the general landscape of the research domain. Two questions guide the domain. One question is substantive: What do we know about how syntactic complexity grows, and what factors affect this growth? The other question is methodological: How can one best measure syntactic complexity? Both, of course, are interrelated. An overarching conclusion is that much progress has been made in what is already known, substantively and methodologically. An emerging insight is that we can look forward to several areas of expansion that are imminent in the domain.

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## 1. Introduction

Syntactic complexity is understood broadly as the range and the sophistication of grammatical resources exhibited in language production. Synonyms such as variety, diversity, and elaboratedness of deployed grammatical features are also often seen in all contemporary definitions of high currency among second language (L2) researchers. The construct is typically investigated as a dependent variable, a quality of language production that is expected to systematically vary as a function of other forces. Undoubtedly, the force of most central interest is linguistic development: It is posited that syntactic complexity indexes the expansion of the capacity to use the additional language in ever more mature and skillful ways, tapping the full range of linguistic resources offered by the given grammar in order to fulfill various communicative goals successfully. In the first half of this article, I examine the five studies that comprise the present Special Issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, using four themes that directly derive from the main findings reported in each: Instructed development, first language (L1) influence, syntactic complexity in the new modality of computer-mediated communication, and the meaning dimension of syntactic complexity. The collective sum of the five studies suggests that any changes in syntactic complexity that are observed—either cross-sectionally or longitudinally—must be understood as a reflection of the interplay among the following factors at least: instructed development, first language, and modality. Any of these factors can be treated as independent variables worthy of study in and of themselves. Any of them can at times be seen as moderating forces. In either case, these forces will modulate, often jointly, in mutual interaction, the range of observations that are possible, as well as the interpretations that researchers can make about syntactic complexity. If left unchecked in research designs and analyses, these factors can also introduce error and obscure results and interpretations.

While the understanding of syntactic complexity in the field is formally and structurally oriented, an opportunity arises in the Special Issue to engage with a functional rationale and a fuller definition of the construct. Some of the contributions in the special issue explicitly or implicitly venture in this new direction. In the second half of my commentary, I suggest several

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areas of expansion for the research domain. First I sketch possible expansions by studying the relationship of syntactic complexity to successful L2 writing, to genre, and to proficiency. Then I finish by touching on other ways in which we can deepen theoretical motivations for the study of syntactic complexity in the future, if diverse functional and usage-based rationales are pursued, balanced by a developmental perspective which is at the core of the phenomenon of L2 syntactic complexity. Particularly when studying syntactic complexity in the context of writing, it behooves L2 writing researchers to explore alternative understandings that go beyond the purely structural and formal. Writing becomes formally and structurally more complex only because emergent and skilled writers are challenged and seek to challenge themselves with the creation of meanings that are, conceptually and socially, also increasingly more complex.

An overarching conclusion after reading the studies in this Special Issue is that much progress has been made in what is already known, substantively and methodologically. An emerging insight is that we can look forward to several areas of expansion that are imminent in the domain.

## 2. Progress: contributions of this special issue to the study of L2 writing complexity

### 2.1. What is the relationship between syntactic complexity in L2 writing and instructed development?

Writing is a social activity that can happen in the workplace and for leisure, but the bulk of L2 writing research takes place in educational contexts. For this reason, it is helpful to think about development and instruction jointly as instructed development. Two of the studies in the special issue, Mazgutova and Kormos, and Vyatkina, Hirschmann, and Golcher particularly bolster the claim that the syntactic complexity of writing increases as the capacities to deploy the language resource in an additional language mature over time and with more instruction.

Mazgutova and Kormos were interested in the instructed development of syntactic complexity within a short (but intensive) time frame of a 60-h, 4-week course, and with writers at a high enough level of English L2 proficiency that they had arrived in the UK and were preparing to initiate and eventually complete a university degree through the medium of English. Would such a short instructional experience—rich in writing practice, close written feedback, and conferencing—result in any measurable progress in doing academic writing more skillfully, in terms of syntactic (as well as lexical) complexity? They found that growth was indeed seen in syntactic complexity for their younger and less proficient international student group. By the end of the 4-week course, these 14 students (18-to-21 year-olds with an IELTS mean global score of 5.9 and a mean writing score of 5.8) had higher levels of complexity in the following specific areas: (a) noun modification via adjectives and prepositional phrases, (b) complex nominals in subject position, (c) multiple modifiers after the same noun, (d) syntactic structure similarity, a measure of the density of sentence tree nodes (i.e., reflecting the layeriness or nestedness of syntax, as Brandes & Ravid, *in press*, put it), (e) conditionals, and (f) relative clauses. An interesting secondary finding is that Mazgutova and Kormos arrived at different patterns of growth for the two sample groups they examined and attributed these differences to L2 proficiency. Specifically, the benefits from the same 60-h, 4-week intensive writing course were clearly noticeable in their less advanced (and slightly younger) Group 2 learners, and much smaller and in fewer areas of complexity when the data were inspected for their more advanced (and older) Group 1 learners.

Vyatkina, Hirschmann, and Golcher designed their study with the goal to investigate the assumption that, even from the very beginnings of instructed development, linguistic development gradually enables language learners to tap an increasingly wider range of resources offered by the given target grammar, which in turn should translate into observable growth in written syntactic complexity. These authors analyzed whatever proto resources for syntactic modification they could uncover in the 2-year curricular writings produced over the first four semesters of German study in college by 12 beginners. They represent a clearly much lower band of proficiency than the learners in Mazgutova and Kormo, as by the end of the first 2 years they typically reach no higher than level A2, a Basic User level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe Modern Languages Division Strasbourg, 2001) (Nina Vyatkina, personal communication, June 4, 2015). The data are publicly available in the KanDeL corpus as part of the Falko corpus family created by Lüdeling, Walter, Kroymann, and Adolphs (2005). Their examination of 17 waves of data took care of carefully mapping nonlinear development at the individual trajectory level against the group means, via graphing techniques (trend lines, confidence intervals) that helped visually and statistically assess smooth vs. abrupt growth curves. In this, they join an increasingly thriving line of research that examines inter- and intra-individual variation of syntactic complexity, accuracy, and fluency in L2 writing from complexity and dynamic systems perspectives (e.g., Baba & Nitta, 2014; Polat & Kim, 2014; Verspoor et al., 2012). Vyatkina et al. found the 12 emergent bilingual writers were able to write in their beginning German making use of simple but varied modification devices, gradually diversifying some of them and eventually using also more elaborated modification with some modifiers at the clause level. They used uninflected predicative and inflected attributive adjectives, prepositional phrases, and (later over the 2 years) adverbial clauses, and relative clauses. In other words, over the first two years of instructed development, they increasingly engaged in gradually more varied syntactic modification at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels, although exhibiting important inter- and intra-individual variation in some (but not all) areas of growth.

In sum, development can happen over different time frames, from one month as in Mazgutova and Kormos to two years as in Vyatkina, Hirschmann, and Golcher. What these two studies share, interestingly, is a curriculum that devotes central time and space to the activity of writing in an additional language. Moreover, the instruction was not specifically focused on writing in one case (Vyatkina et al.) and did not direct writers explicitly to using more complex structures when writing in

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