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GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY: PHRASAL AND CLAUSAL FEATURES IN THE CONTEXT OF L2 WRITING

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Abstract. *This study aims to evaluate the developmental trajectory of grammatical complexity for L2 writers by investigating how clausal and phrasal complexity is associated with L2 writing proficiency. Our findings demonstrated an association between writing proficiency and clausal and phrasal complexity. Especially noteworthy was that the main source of complexity at each proficiency level (i.e., finite adverbial clauses, WH relative clauses, of phrases as nominal postmodifiers) showed a gradual increase in complexity in terms of two parameters: structural type and syntactic function. A qualitative follow-up analysis described differences among developmental levels, especially concerning the linguistic associations of particular complexity features. Pedagogical implications are for using empirically derived developmental stages in creating detailed rating scale descriptors and providing more customized writing courses accordingly.*

Keywords: phrasal nominal modifiers, academic writing, L2 writing development, clausal complexity, phrasal complexity

Açar sözlər: ifadəli nominal dəyişdiricilər, akademik yazı, L2 yazı inkişafı, cümlə mürəkkəbliyi, ifadə mürəkkəbliyi

Ключевые слова: фразовые именные модификаторы, академическое письмо, развитие письма на втором языке, сложность предложения, сложность фразы

A range of studies has indicated that grammatical complexity is a reliable indicator of L2 writing development. Particularly noteworthy is Biber et al's corpus-based register research that hypothesized the developmental progression from clausal to phrasal complexity, specifically noun phrase (NP) complexity. Numerous studies based on Biber et al's developmental index lend further credence to their hypothesis, demonstrating a strong correlation between phrasal nominal modifiers and L2 writing proficiency (e.g., Kim 2020; Lan et al., 2019a; Parkinson and Musgrave, 2014), or L2 writing quality (e.g., Kyle and Crossley, 2018; Taguchi et al., 2013). Some L2 writing studies, however, have yielded conflicting results, suggesting that NP complexity has little predictive power, particularly for writing quality. As Lu pointed out, one possible reason underlying this inconsistency might be the use of corpus data from learners of heterogeneous first language (L1) backgrounds in most of these studies, despite potential L1 influence on grammatical complexity of L2 writing. Besides, despite substantial empirical evidence on differences across registers in the lexical associations of each grammatical feature, there is a paucity of research investigating the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between lexico-grammatical patterns produced by L2 writers and those characteristic of the target register—academic writing.[3,408] Moreover, little is known about how lexical association patterns in L2 writing gradually align with those observed in formal academic writing throughout various stages of development. Thus, this study aims to elucidate the developmental patterns of grammatical complexity first by

investigating the extent to which the use of clausal and phrasal features is associated with the quality of argumentative essays of L2 writers with the same L1 background (i.e., Korean), then by examining differences among developmental levels in the actual use of these features, especially in terms of their lexical realizations.

Grammatical complexity is a subconstruct of linguistic complexity that has two different interpretations: system complexity and structure complexity, or more specifically, breadth (“diversity of different structures”) and depth (“formal and functional complexity of an L2 feature”) (p. 25). Similarly, many L2 writing researchers have described grammatical complexity from two common perspectives. For instance, Ortega conceptualized it as “the range of forms that surface in language production and the degree of sophistication of such forms” (p. 492). Rimmer conveyed a similar perspective by defining range of grammar as “the number of different grammatical forms used and their complexity” (p. 498). Lu also posited two facets of grammatical complexity: syntactic variation and sophistication, defined as “the range of syntactic structures” and “the degree of sophistication of such structures,” respectively (p. 36). Following Ortega and Lu, Crossley and McNamara associated grammatical complexity with “the sophistication of syntactic forms” and “the range or variety of syntactic forms produced” (p. 67). The shared argument captured in these definitions is that L2 writers produce increasingly diverse and sophisticated grammatical structures as proficiency develops. In other words, the diversity of grammatical structures and their degree of sophistication can be useful indicators of writing proficiency. Scholars of register variation, such as Biber et al. go further by pointing out that grammatical complexity is highly context-dependent and needs to be evaluated in consideration of specific registers. Similarly, recent grammatical complexity research from a genre-based perspective underscores the significance of employing functionally appropriate complex structures within specific genres. [4, 337] This is true for written academic discourse, where such structures are utilized to increase conciseness and informativeness. Considering these views, the following section discusses how grammatical diversity and sophistication within a specific register of L2 writing can be best captured.

Biber et al.’s large-scale corpus study showed that “the complexity of conversation is clausal, whereas the complexity of academic writing is phrasal” (p. 22). More specifically, according to two major parameters of register variation identified in their study, i.e., structural form and syntactic function, the most favored types of complexity in conversation are finite dependent clauses that function as clause constituents, whereas the most prominent types in academic prose are phrasal structures that function as NP constituents. Assuming that grammatical structures typical of written texts are acquired relatively later than those typical of conversation, Biber et al. created a developmental index of complexity that progresses from relying on clausal subordination to phrasal elaboration, specifically via compressed NPs. Biber et al.’s index can be argued to offer concrete measures to operate grammatical diversity and sophistication of L2 writing at differing proficiency levels by addressing multidimensional and developmental construct of complexity. This supports the suggestion by Norris and Ortega that “devising measures that include a wide range of developmentally ranked structures” is needed to “characterize L2 production that ranges along the full developmental continuum” (p. 567).

Lexical associations of grammatical complexity features

Writing development cannot be assessed solely by more or less usage of particular grammatical features, given the systematically different register-dependent lexical associations. The interconnected nature of grammar and lexis has been empirically demonstrated by Biber et al's corpus-based investigation on the actual use of grammatical features in four major registers. They found that grammatical structures typically co-occur with an associated set of lexical items and these lexico-grammatical associations are not arbitrary restrictions, but rather motivated by underlying communicative purposes. Thus, for example, the lexico-grammatical patterns identified in conversation differ significantly from those identified in academic writing because the communicative goals of conversational speakers and academic writers are quite different. [7,153-161]

Although Biber's index is composed mainly of grammatical features, they noted that lexico-grammatical information from Biber et al was utilized in postulating the developmental sequence. Specifically, that-clauses controlled by a restricted set of verbs that are particularly common in conversation (e.g., think, know) are placed in Stage 1, while the same structural types controlled by a broader spectrum of verbs are placed in Stage 2. Likewise, to-clauses occurring with conversational controlling verbs (e.g., want) are assumed to be acquired earlier (Stage 2) than complete command of these target features with more diverse verbs (Stage 3). Regarding these two types of complement clauses, reported that the patterns of lexical association found in L2 writing were "similar to those found in native conversation and fiction, but strikingly different from those found in native academic prose" (p. 157). In other words, the extremely frequent use of conversational controlling verbs such as think, know, and want was evident in L2 writing. More recent L2 writing studies found similar lexical association patterns that deviate from academic norms, observing the predominant use of few verbs suited for conversation. These studies consistently uphold the notion that greater use of particular grammatical features does not necessarily represent greater development and their lexical realization should be considered together from a register perspective.

However, most previous research on grammatical development in L2 writers has primarily focused on the frequency of complex structures without further investigating their lexical realizations.

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QRAMMATİK MÜRƏKKƏBLİK: L2 YAZI KONTEKSTİNDƏ FRAZA VƏ CÜMLƏ XÜSUSİYYƏTLƏRİ

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Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat bənd və fraza mürəkkəbliyi xüsusiyyətlərinin tezlikləri ilə L2 yazma bacarığı arasında əlaqəni nümayiş etdirdi. Daha da əhəmiyyətlisi, assosiasiyaya əsas töhfə verənlərlə bağlı tapıntı Biberin və digərlərinin L2 yazısı kontekstində irəli sürdüyü inkişaf ardıcılığını təsdiqlədi, o dərəcədə ki, sonlu adverbial cümlələr (Mərhələ 2) aşağı qiymətli esselərin əsas xüsusiyyətləri idi; WH nisbi müddələri (Mərhələ 3) orta qiymətli esselərin ən görkəmli mürəkkəblik cihazları idi; və postmodifikator kimi ifadələr (Mərhələ 3-5) yüksək reytingli esselərin mürəkkəb üslublarını ən yaxşı şəkildə təmsil edirdi. Müşahidə olunan inkişaf ardıcılığı iki parametrlə: struktur forma və sintaktik funksiya baxımından mürəkkəbliyin pilləli artımını göstərdi.

ГРАММАТИЧЕСКАЯ СЛОЖНОСТЬ: ФРАЗОВЫЕ И КЛАУЗАЛЬНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПИСЬМА L2

Магerrəmovə Сугра Ибрагимовна, Рустəмовə Ильгамə Сəлеховнə
Резюме

Это исследование продемонстрировало связь между частотой особенностей клаузуальной и фразовой сложности и навыками письма L2. Что еще более важно, данные об основных участниках ассоциации подтвердили последовательность развития, выдвинутую Biber et al. в контексте письма L2, в той степени, в которой конечные наречия (этап 2) были ключевыми особенностями эссе с низким рейтингом; Придаточные предложения WH (этап 3) были наиболее заметными средствами сложности в эссе со средним рейтингом; а фразы как постмодификаторы (этапы 3–5) лучше всего отражали сложные стили эссе с высоким рейтингом. Наблюдаемая последовательность развития показала ступенчатое увеличение сложности по двум параметрам: структурной форме и синтаксической функции.

Rəyçi: dosent Zahirə Əliyeva

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