Understanding syntactic complexity: The measurement of change in the syntax of instructed L2 Spanish learners

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Abstract: This study investigated the extent to which a variety of syntactic complexity measures can be reliably and validly used for gauging developmental change and task-related variation in L2 discourse. Data were collected from 23 third-year U.S. college L2 Spanish learners in two intact classes over the course of a semester, yielding a corpus of 69 academic papers, 246 journal entries, 136 written picture narratives, and 70 spoken picture narratives. In addition, a grammaticality judgment task and an elicited imitation task were administered at the beginning and end of the semester in one of the intact classes (N=18), and ACTFL ratings on the Spanish Speaking Test provided an estimate of these students' global oral proficiency at the end of the semester.

Using CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000), several ratios based on length, amount of coordination, and amount and type of subordination were computed, and a developmental analysis of relative clause types produced over the semester was undertaken.

The findings indicate that a complete characterization of syntactic complexity in IL development minimally calls for the combined use of three measures tapping distinct qualities: overall length (MLTU), phrasal elaboration (MLC), and amount of subordination (C/TU). They also suggest that relative and (to a lesser extent) noun subordination, but not adverbial subordination, contribute to the syntactic complexity of L2 discourse produced by learners at intermediate levels of L2 ability. Task-related differences were found for length-based measures and type of subordination measures but not for measures of amount of coordination and subordination. Only weak evidence of longitudinal change in syntactic complexity was found over the short span of a single semester. The attainment of OPREP stage and the gradual retreat from zero relativizer errors were identified as apparently critical landmarks in the development of relativization for the 23 intermediate-level learners, and on this basis, six L2 Spanish relativization profiles were proposed. Although no direct relation was found between outcomes of syntactic complexity measures and learner stage of development in relativization, the findings suggest that future research in this area is warranted.
Syntactic complexity was measured with the average number of clauses per T-unit. The limited number of subjects and only one measure used in the assessment of complexity were the limitations of this study, but the main (quantitative) finding was that every CAF domain improved at the group level although individual differences were still significant (Larsen-Freeman 2006: 598–560). For the present study, the clause is defined after Foster, Tonkyn and Wigglesworth (2000), i.e. as a structure which does not need to include a finite verb. A clause is a structure that consists of a verbal element plus an Unauthenticated Download Date | 7/25/15 10:22
Understanding the development of syntactic complexity would enable SLA researchers to determine trajectories of the learners’ development and set benchmarks for certain time points or across a given time span. Syntactic Benchmark (SyB) is an Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning (ICALL) system that analyzes the syntactic complexity of a text produced by a learner and places the text onto a developmental scale constructed from a comprehensive pedagogic corpus. The system aims at helping learners place the syntactic complexity level of their writings with regard to the pedagogic benchmark and identify the syntactic areas where further improvement is needed.