Developing L2 complexity through sentence writing practice

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Along with accuracy and fluency, complexity is considered one of the major indicators of language proficiency development (Skehan, 1989). One major focus within research on complexity is syntactic complexity, which is especially important for adult learners who need to express more sophisticated ideas. However, little is known about the role of different activities in developing complexity in the writing of English language learners. This presentation will report on an ongoing study that examines the relationship between targeted sentence writing practice and syntactic complexity. Sentence-based pedagogies such as grammar translation and sentence-combining have a long history in language instruction, but very little is known about the benefits of these activities, particularly for developing syntactic complexity in writing. This longitudinal study investigates the effects of different sentence-based writing practice on the writing of 105 first year Japanese university students. The researcher compares three groups who received regular targeted sentence writing practice in either sentence-combining, grammar-translation, or timed writing over the course of one academic year. Writing samples were collected at three times throughout the year and analyzed based on five measures of syntactic complexity: mean length of sentence, mean length of T-unit, mean length of clause, clauses per T-unit, and T-units per sentence. In addition to the quantitative data, stimulated recalls were conducted in order to investigate the cognitive processes underlying these sentence-based writing activities. The researcher will discuss the research design, report on issues that arose during the study, share the preliminary data and discuss the implications of the results. Based on the results, the researcher will provide ideas on how instructors can help writing students develop more complex sentence structures in their English writing.

Keywords: writing, sentence, syntax, complexity.