This study explores the effects of L1 syntactic complexity, L2 proficiency, and L2 learning background on L2 syntactic complexity in oral performance. Syntactic complexity has shown to be an important concept in SLA research due to the assumption that language development entails, among other processes, the growth of the L2 syntactic repertoire as speakers become more proficient in their L2 (Ortega, 2009). Research has also shown that there is a relationship between different L1 skills and L2 performance (e.g. Cummins, 1979, 1984; Proctor et al., 2006; Sparks et al., 2009; Verhoeven, 1994), and that there could be no fundamental difference between L1 and L2 production process (Kormos, 2006). Thus, the use of more complex syntactic features may depend, besides L2 proficiency, on individual differences in the L1 and the transfer of a preference for a specific syntactic structure from L1 to L2 (Ortega, 2003). The present study seeks to investigate whether L1 syntactic complexity would predict L2 syntactic complexity. Participants were 30 Catalan native speakers with two different levels of proficiency in L2 English. The subjects performed an oral film-retelling task in both L1 and L2. Oral narratives were analyzed in terms of four measures of syntactic complexity and L2 proficiency was assessed by means of two vocabulary tests. Correlational and regression analysis showed that L2 proficiency had a strong association with some measures of L2 syntactic complexity. Neither L1 syntactic complexity nor L2 learning background measures were good predictors of L2 syntactic performance.

Keywords: L2 proficiency, Syntactic complexity, L1 transfer.