Exploring Grammatical Complexity across Proficiency Levels in Argumentative Essays by Iranian EFL Learners

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Gaining competence in writing academic texts has been considered as a challenging and important task in the process of second and/or foreign language learning; and "this realization is not surprising, given the similar difficulties related to the development of first language (L1) writing competency" (Whalen & Ménard, 1995, p. 382). As a result, teaching and making language learners aware of common linguistic measures in different kinds of academic registers can be significant and useful. In this regard, Ortega (2003) has suggested that this construct—grammatical complexity—is of significance in "second language research because of the assumption that language development entails, among other processes, the growth of an L2 learner's syntactic repertoire and her or his ability to use that repertoire appropriately in a variety of situations" (p. 492). Ortega (2003) has also noted that "measures of syntactic complexity are important research tools not only in the field of second language acquisition but in a variety of language-related disciplines" (p. 492). In this regard, some studies have demonstrated that clauses and clausal subordination are the best measures of grammatical complexity. Larsen-Freeman (1978), for example, has pointed out that the "percentage of error-free T-units and the average length of error-free T-units, proved to be the best discriminators among the five levels of ESL proficiency" (p. 439). However, Lu (2011) has noted that previous studies have only analyzed a limited number of measures and therefore there is not enough
information available on the best measure(s) for analyzing syntactic complexity in academic prose. Lu (2011) has subsequently classified 14 syntactic complexity features in five categories. These include length of production, sentence complexity, subordination, coordination, and particular structures. As few studies have examined these 14 syntactic complexity measures proposed by Lu (2011), the aim of the present study is to analyze these features in a corpus of argumentative essays written by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL).

2. Methodology
The present study has made use of a corpus of argumentative essays by EFL learners from three levels of proficiency (upper-intermediate, intermediate, and pre-intermediate). Following this, for analyzing the measures of syntactic complexity, the online L2 syntactic complexity analyzer which is designed by Lu (2010) was employed. Considering its function, this analyzer "produces frequency counts of nine linguistic units in the text—word, sentence, clause, dependent clause, T-unit, complex T-unit, coordinate phrase, complex nominal, and verb phrase—and generates 14 indices of syntactic complexity for the text" (Yang, Lu, & Weigle, 2015, p. 58). In the next stage, the data was entered into the SPSS software and a one-way ANOVA was run.

3. Discussion
The statistical results of the one-way ANOVA revealed that five features of grammatical complexity show significant differences (p < 0.05). The results also show that features that are related to phrasal complexity can be regarded as a better criterion for assessing grammatical complexity in essays compared to features of subordination, coordination, or sentence complexity. The results of the present study are in line with the findings of Biber and Gray (2013) and Biber, Gray, and Poonpon (2011) who underscored the importance of phrasal and noun phrasal complexity in academic prose. In analyzing three types of texts, namely argumentative, descriptive, and narrative texts, Lu (2010) also found that mean length of T-unit, mean length of clause, complex nominals per T-unit and complex nominals per clause show a statistically significant difference. Therefore, Lu (2011) has suggested that there is a need for more studies to analyze phrasal complexity.

4. Conclusion
The results of the current study are of considerable significance for the evaluation of argumentative essays written by EFL learners. Therefore, becoming more familiar with grammatical complexity measures of academic
writing may lead to more comprehensive and thorough assessment. Moreover, writing instructors can make their learners aware of the importance of noun phrasal complexity in their writing. It could also be of great benefit if material developers and language instructors were to highlight the differences among various registers of academic writing while teaching grammar lessons. In this regard, Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1994) have mentioned that there is no "single register that can be identified as 'general English', and that advanced instruction based on our intuitions about 'general' or 'core' English is not likely to provide adequate exposure to the actual linguistic patterns found in the target registers" (p. 183). As a result of this suggestion, future studies are recommended to concentrate on features of grammatical complexity in different registers of academic writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing, corpus studies, argumentative essays, grammatical complexity, noun phrasal.

**References**


