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EMERGING PRECISION IN LOWER SECONDARY STUDENT WRITING IN ENGLISH

For a number of years now, applied linguists and language educationalists have expressed a growing concern that the teaching of a *second* or *foreign* language seems to be starting from the wrong end. Instead of taking the learner's current language resources as their point of departure, grammarians advise English instructors to organise their grammar syllabus as add-on or parallel units rather than integrating the teaching of structure or form opportunistically along with communicative or message-oriented tasks in the classroom (Ellis 2002). Ellis deplores the fact that a thematically or task-based syllabus might not provide "full and systematic coverage of the grammar of the L2" (Ellis 2002: 21). Acknowledging a language learner's need to focus on form as well as meaning, the author proposes a model including remedial grammar units that target various "errors." His is an analytic (deficit) grammar syllabus; language forms seem to be disembodied bits and pieces out there that need to be put together at some point, in compliance with target language norms. The "correct" grammatical structure is to be *acquired* once and for all.

In opposition to this view, what seems more in line with current language and learning theory is an *emergent* view of language proficiency, one that takes *variability* as a natural feature of any human process. Language learning is not a linear process; learners continuously progress and regress, their so-called "inter-language" restructuring in the process.¹ There simply cannot be a final stage in this development if language users are themselves dynamic systems that keep adapting to the context in which they operate. In our study of writing in English, a growing command of the L2 or L3 in question is seen to emerge as language learners and language users try to assemble their language resources to make meaning in a given literacy event, i.e. on a given occasion of purposeful writing (and/or reading).

According to Norwegian curricular aims for lower secondary education, after 10th year of education students are supposed to be able to produce oral and written texts with "some precision, fluency and coherence" (Knowledge Promotion, 2006: English Subject Curriculum). The national guidelines do not, however, specify what does *precision* mean. It seems natural to subsume features of both lexical and

¹ As a matter of interest, the term "inter-language" itself may be somewhat problematic if the final state of near native-like acquisition is no longer a tenable model.

grammatical structure. Precision may be taken to imply an appropriate degree of *specificity*. For example, instead of using general, simple high-frequency verbs only, students are expected to be more explicit in their descriptions of events, actions, opinions, etc. We also expect precise language to include more descriptive or referential detail, in the form of an increasing number of pre- and post-modifiers in noun phrases, for instance. With an increased focus in Norway on challenges in connection with transitions from one major phase of basic education to another, greater precision is indeed called for when students are preparing for upper secondary education and beyond.

There are a number of studies in the literature that address language proficiency development in various ESL/EFL contexts around the world in terms of *accuracy*, *fluency*, and *complexity* (Skehan 2009, Birjandi 2008, Larsen-Freeman 2006, Yau and Belanger 1984). Many of these studies are devoted to quantitative studies of the effect on language performance by *task iteration*. In this study, we shall be concentrating on two subsystems of precision, namely *lexical* and *grammatical complexity*. Since the current project is only in its infancy, our aim is first and foremost to analyse the initial conditions from which any development or emergence can be recognised. Insights from this kind of analysis will inform future pedagogical decisions.

Case study: one literacy event in a Year 9 multilingual urban class

The data on which the present study is based are texts written by students in their second year of secondary education. The learners are 14–15 years old and participants in a multilingual urban class environment. For their exam at the end of the first half of Year 9, the students had to write texts in response to three different tasks, the second of which is rendered here, as a choice between two, given locally by their class teacher:

- 2a. Many inventions we use in our everyday life have first been created for use in space. Which inventions in your everyday life could you not “live” without? Write two paragraphs.
- 2b. Being a space tourist costs approximately 20 million dollars. It is a fact that a lot of money is spent by the American government on space research and space travels. Do you think it is worth it? Write two paragraphs where you explain your views.

As will be clear from this instruction, the students were told to write only two paragraphs. Most of them chose the first task (16 students out of 22). The topic of space tourism had been addressed in lessons in connection with a unit in their textbook. Our motivation for selecting these particular tasks for diagnostic study was that since a personal response was called for, students were likely to feel engaged and motivated, despite the potentially dampening effect of having to hand in their text as part of a timed examination. In the first task, the students are asked to identify something that is close to their hearts or essential for their wellbeing. The second option calls for an explanation of their views. The first one does not require a justification, but most texts in the data do in fact include arguments in support of their choice of object(s). An interesting effect is that quite a few students depart from the specific focus in the instruction to describe material inventions in their

everyday lives that they cannot live without; some students' lists feature mums, dads, family and friends:

(1) I can't live without my family because them is everything for me (L22: 1)²

What our analysis brings out quite clearly is that in this class of 22 individuals, there is considerable variation in lexical and grammatical complexity as far as numerical measures are concerned. This result is hardly surprising; research into Norwegian classrooms has revealed a huge spread of abilities in individual classrooms. Figure 1 below depicts the vocabulary range in particular classroom as it applies to one short text as part of one literacy event. It is important to keep this point in mind; we are not in a position yet to *describe* "emergent precision" in these students' writing. Rather, our main ambition at this stage is primarily to get as clear a picture as possible of the initial conditions of the different learner systems in our case-study population.

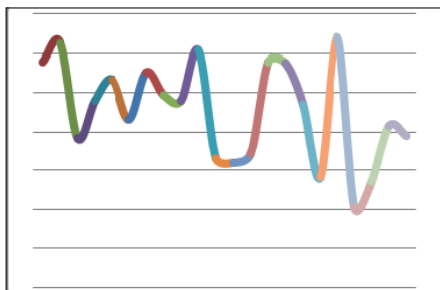


Figure 1. Lexical complexity across the class

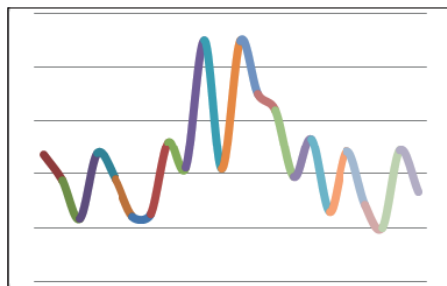


Figure 2. Grammatical complexity across the class

We have adopted a sophisticated way of calculating vocabulary complexity copied from Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 143–144), invented to avoid the problem of considerable variation in sentence length both within and across texts. The index for lexical complexity has been worked out as the ratio of number of word types (rather than tokens) and the square root of two times the total number of words in a given text. On the basis of this calculation, vocabulary complexity varies from 1.03 as the lowest and 3.21 as the highest measure in these texts. In absolute figures, the student with the lowest vocabulary range uses 12 different lexical (content) words per 68 words; the highest range measures 64 lexical word types out of a total of 199 words.

According to Larsen-Freeman, measures like *fluency* (average number of words per t-unit) *lexical complexity* (as defined above), *grammatical complexity* (average number of dependent clauses per t-unit) and *accuracy* (the proportion of t-units without errors to number of t-units) are "best measures of second language development in writing" (2008: 144). The key word here is "development"; the truly interesting part will be to compare individual scores at various future intervals to try to chart progress. However, given our view of learning as a non-linear and unpredictable process, new counts will only be indicative of possible development.

² "L22: 1" refers to line 1 in the text written by (anonymous) learner number 22.

At any point, a given student might use fewer resources than before rather than more. A more qualitative analysis of the lexical tools that are being exploited in students' texts is called for and will be more informative for the teacher's preparation of affordance-rich tasks for learners.

It is interesting to report one qualitative discovery, which materialised as a side-effect during a quick scan to check for students' possible used of topic-relevant verbs depicting likes and preferences. What sprang to mind was that in their texts only very few students used verbs at all that consist of more than one syllable. These texts abound in verbs like *live, love, need, like, take, have, know, think, see, use, pay, say, fly, cost, make, watch, send, chat*, etc. Of course, we also find odd verbs like *finish, travel, relax*, etc. in some texts, but on the whole, the lexical store across the texts studied consists predominantly of simple (Germanic) one-syllable high-frequency verbs. This observation seems directly relevant to the development of "some precision" in student writing. Not only is *precision* a specific competence aim for the final stage of lower secondary education; students will need more complex vocabulary in order to cope with a demand for higher-order thinking in general and discussions of more abstract and cognitively demanding topics when they transfer to upper secondary education. Our professional interest in quality English-language education is coupled with a more general concern for ways of preventing students from dropping out of secondary education, with quality teaching and assessment at the lower-secondary level as a potentially preventive measure.

Grammatical complexity

The most frequently used index in the analysis of grammatical complexity in a number of studies is the ratio of t-units to the number of dependent clauses connected with each t-unit. A t-unit can be defined as a "minimal terminal unit or independent clause with whatever dependent clauses, phrases, and words are [...] attached to or embedded within it" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 143). As figure 2 above demonstrates, two students in the class produce an average of 4,5 dependent clauses per t-unit. The least proficient writers in our data produce on average only very simple sentences.

Again, a quantitative measure of syntactical complexity is only a very crude indication of the extent to which students have moved beyond simple or compound sentence formation; once again, it is a closer look at what *kinds* of dependent clauses are used that will give us a richer view of these students' meaning-making potential. Only a few learners make use of *-ing* clauses, for example, but quite a few use adverbial clauses of reason (introduced by *because*) and even condition (*if...*), expressing circumstances around their needs for certain technological objects (or, as mentioned above, more *human* necessities like mums, dads, family and friends):

(2) The things I could not live without are, my telephone because I do always need to call my parents or friends if I need some important or if I need to say some important.
(L14: 1)

Grammatical complexity is relevant from the point of view of increased "precision" also in relation to the presence or absence of *relative clauses* in noun

phrases. In the material investigated here, as many as 9 students do not make use of relative clause post-modification at all in their texts. Of course, we cannot tell whether these students simply have decided not to specify their noun referents on this particular occasion, or whether relative clause post-modification is not yet part of their repertoire of constructions. As these young learners move on to upper secondary schools, however, more demands will be put on them; they will be required to handle increasingly more abstract topics and predications.

Complexity at the clause level is of course only one index of grammatical sophistication. It is clear from (2) above that this particular student is still working on consolidating her/his use of indefinite constructions, as in *need (to say) *some important*. This particular learner spells other indefinite expressions as two words: *some times* (L14: 3). The most immediate explanation for this instability, where **some thing* might have been another likely candidate in front of *important* (2), is that the student may be translating literally from Norwegian (one word *noe* [=English *something*] and two words *noen ganger* [=English *sometimes*]).

In our analysis so far, we have already made use of terms like *constructions* and *instability*. In a usage-based linguistic framework (Tomasello 2003), attempts are made to account for not just core or regular grammatical structure but also idioms, formulaic expressions like lexical chunks, mixed patterns, with invariable elements combined with slots for the insertion of various words or expressions (for instance, the *-er* construction, as in *the older you get, the wiser you become*), metaphorical extensions, etc. – all within one theoretical framework.

According to Tomasello (2003: 105), what characterises the linguistic competence of a mature speaker is that it is a “structured inventory of symbolic units,” organised in the mind as a “complex, multi-dimensional network” (2003: 106). He offers the following definition of *construction*: “prototypically a unit of language that comprises multiple linguistic elements used together for a relatively coherent communicative function” (2003: 100), an example being the use of passive construction for when a role other than the doer is topicalised. Tomasello argues that the linguistic competence of L1 speakers is developed as children “construct their abstract linguistic representations out of their item-based constructions using general cognitive, socio-cognitive, and learning skills – which act on the language they hear and produce” (2003: 161).

We are, of course, interested in the implications of this general theory of language for L2 or L3 learning and teaching. If learners are to construct constructions on the basis of patterns of used language, they need to be provided with a lot of relevant text in English, both receptively and productively, from which they can abstract patterns and constructions. We know that there can be no guarantee that learners pick up exactly what their teachers or learning materials set them up to learn. According to a complexity-theory approach to language learning and teaching (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008), language learners are themselves complex and dynamic systems developing as they keep interacting with the context in which they are a part, including their classroom peers. Their individual system of English³

³ We sometimes prefer the abbreviation “EAL,” representing “English as an Additional Language” instead of the more commonly used ESL/EFL. In the Norwegian setting, English is no longer considered a foreign language, nor is it unambiguously a *second* language. It is clear,

self-organises or goes through restructuring as the learners encounter and interact in English. In the terminology of complexity theory, emerging patterns are often referred to as “attractor states.” Some of these attractor states may be less than beneficial for the learners. This is the case if the patterns constructed along the way are not in fact the same as native speakers would use. The following examples are a case in point:

(3) So the mobile phone has been so more than just to calling with these days (L2: 8)⁴

(4) The inventors are all the time finding new things to the phones that [...] (L2: 12)

(5) And soon will new and more amazing things come to the phones [...] (L2: 13)

This student’s overuse of the preposition *to* is such an attractor state in his/her learning trajectory. The student does use *for* in constructions like *for me* and *for the whole world*. It is tempting to see the use of *to* here as a transfer from Norwegian *til*, since the two often match quite well; Norwegian is not, however, this student’s L1. Still, it may be the case that L2 (here: Norwegian) patterns are extended to L3 (here: English). Again, on a complexity view of language development, systems are sensitive to initial conditions. Changes may occur, learning paths will take new directions given enough impact from outside the system, but unless such impact occurs, systems will remain stable. This is why it is so interesting to study variability and instabilities in students’ texts. We get to see a system on the verge of changing. A case in point is the following sample from our Year 9 class:

(6) [...] newer times (which is the only time I been on this planet) there is been advanced technology [...] (L4: 1)

This student’s system is unstable with respect to the construction of perfective aspect. The irregular verb form *been* is probably perceived as salient and becomes the main element in the first part. At the same time, the idea that the pattern requires an auxiliary has also registered. What appears, however, is a pattern with another auxiliary. This student clearly needs affordances that can push the current unstable system towards a shift that will ultimately stabilise as one construction, preferably complying with the appropriate *HAVE^{AUX} + VERB-ed* pattern.

Emerging precision in students’ writing in English – where do we go from here?

It is the responsibility of teachers to manage the dynamics of learning for all those human “complex systems” in their classroom to the best of their ability. Their main challenge as teachers of English is to supply affordances in the classroom that are conducive to pattern formation in the learner. Classroom interaction and texts in English should ideally be useful tools from which to generalise and analogise. Language teachers need to intervene and facilitate their students’ struggle to make

however, that for young learners to function well in Norwegian society and on the international scene, well-developed English literacy skills will stand them in good stead.

⁴ Our underlining in all student sentences (3)–(6).

meaning in EAL. They must do this in an informed way, in alignment with both linguistic and learning theory.

When the basic skill of *writing* is in focus, and in our case – writing in EAL, we cannot ignore the challenges of *text* creation by concentrating too hard on lexis and grammar at the level of sentences and below, looking for mistakes and infelicities in a reactive way. More importantly, since EAL literacy is a gate-keeping competence even in Norway, problems of access for some and reduced opportunities to participate meaningfully in English also force teachers to target their students' general discourse competence, their genre awareness, and their ability to construct text in a *dialogic* perspective. Writers have to be reminded to keep their readers' best interest at heart. The problem of infelicitous and uncommunicative *reference* in texts is relevant in this respect. A number of students use pronouns and determiners that refer incorrectly, especially in terms of number, as in "Most things have electric stuff into *it" (L6: 9).

The topic of text coherence and cohesion will be one of the strands in our further work with literacy in English. More research is called for into the nature and formulation of *tasks* for the multilingual classroom. Studies have demonstrated (Hvistendahl 2009, Svendsen 2009) that many learners with minority-language backgrounds struggle with Norwegian and especially with figurative or non-literal language in various forms. This may also be the reason why a task that is formulated as a rhetorical question and meant to prompt the writing of two paragraphs of straightforward argumentative text is interpreted literally as a question and *answered*, as if it were a prototypical adjacency-pair interchange. Not only will it be of central concern for us to investigate tasks critically as a genre; it may also be worthwhile duplicating for the written medium a *task repetition* design with a view to establishing to what extent and in what way texts change when the students are past the challenge of *conceptualisation* (i.e. simply deciding what to write) (Levelt 1989). Will students attend more freely to other dimensions of text production, such as cohesion, stylistic variation, rhetorical organisation, and other dialogic qualities?

All students are likely to benefit from developing their general *language awareness*. In the multilingual classroom there should be ample affordances for awareness-raising processes. The very fact that there may be students there with L1 competence in languages other than Norwegian or English, that are typologically very different from these two languages, should be shared and exploited for all its language-awareness development potential (Flognfeldt 2010).

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Rozwój sprawności pisania w języku angielskim w gimnazjum

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia opis badań rozwoju języka na poziomie gimnazjalnym w Norwegii, w oparciu o teorię kompleksowości (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008).

Jednym z celów kształcenia według programu narodowego w Norwegii na tym poziomie jest umiejętność pisania z 'pewną precyzją, płynnością i koherencją'. Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badań w przypadku tekstów napisanych przez 22 uczniów w wieku 14-15 lat. Analiza ilościowa, oparta na badaniu kompleksowości słownictwa i gramatyki, wskazuje na znaczną różnorodność w badanej klasie. Badania jakościowe pokazują zastanawiającą niestabilność leksykalną i gramatyczną.

Badanie diagnostyczne prowadzi do refleksji pedagogicznych na temat efektywności i proaktywności technik rozwijających sprawność pisania. Aby ułatwić przyswajanie użytecznych struktur języka angielskiego nauczyciele będą potrzebować zestawu technik dynamicznie powiązanych z życiem ucznia, aby zmotywować go do większej precyzji w pisaniu.