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THE VALUES OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Syntactic complexity (SC) is one of the most studied aspects of second/foreign language writing. SC affects the quality and effectiveness of written communication as it reflects the writer's ability to effectively structure sentences and paragraphs to convey complex ideas and arguments. This theoretical paper presents a succinct review of existing literature on the value of SC in academic writing. It highlights the intricate relationship between SC and academic writing proficiency. The study concludes with pedagogical implications aimed at boosting the learning and application of SC in academic writing. The paper seeks to enrich the literature on the role and value of SC in academic writing for both educators and learners.

Keywords: *Academic proficiency, academic writing, Syntactic complexity (SC), value,*

I. Introduction.

English has emerged as a global language, with approximately 1.75 billion speakers worldwide, accounting for a quarter of the global population (Yang, 2006). Notably, a significant portion of these English users are non-native speakers. In countries like Vietnam, where English serves as a dominant second language in various domains such as academia, business, media, and technology (Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2009), the influence of English is steadily growing.

Among the four skills of language, writing is where Vietnamese test takers score the lowest, according to data from IELTS Council research conducted in 2017. Because learners must demonstrate their proficiency in utilizing linguistic elements like lexical and SC Therefore, believe that writing is the most challenging skill to learn when learning a language. Learners learning to write in English as an (EFL) face particular challenges. Therefore, understanding EFL learners' practices and beliefs about the utilization of SC in academic writing is a necessity not only for teachers but also for learners themselves.

According to Bulté and Housen's (2012) taxonomy model of L2 complexity, linguistic complexity can be studied at the syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological levels of granularity. Of these four levels, the one that has drawn the most research interest and has been the main subject of many L2 writing studies is SC. SC is the level of complexity at the clausal, sentential, and phrasal levels. As a result, research on L2 writing currently makes use of a range of SC measures. Some of these measurements have a lot of overlap with other measurements, are very confusing, or are just not useful enough because they are stated in the written language yet have the attributes of the spoken language (Lu 2011; Norris & Ortega 2009). Even in a first language (L1) environment, writing is widely regarded as the most difficult skill to master, and academic writing in an L2 adds yet another level of complexity (Biber & Gray 2016)

It becomes troublesome when such measurements are utilized to evaluate SC in academic writing because of the academic prose's tight lexical packing and strong nominalization. Academic writing's SC traits are distinct from those of spoken language and other writing genres (Biber & Gray 2016).

This theoretical paper presents the value of SC in academic writing and sheds light on its implications for both writers and readers. By examining the relationship between SC and various dimensions of academic writing, such as clarity, precision, coherence, and rhetorical effectiveness, we can gain a deeper understanding of its role in shaping the quality and impact of written discourse.

2. Literature review

2.1. Academic writing

2.1.1 Definition of Academic Writing

Academic writing is a means of conveying ideas, knowledge, and research to the broader academic community. It comprises two main categories: learner academic writing, utilized for assessment in universities and as preparatory exercises for tertiary education (Jönsson, 2006), and expert academic writing, designed for publication in academic journals or books. Irrespective of the writer's level of expertise, academic writing demands conformity to high standards, which often proves challenging for learners. This mode of writing stands out from other forms of writing due to its characteristic traits such as logical organization, evidence-based arguments, critical analysis, impartiality, precision, and objectivity (Samuels, 2019).

According to Jordan (1999), academic writing is "writing which produces knowledge, contributes to its formation, and can be reproduced, disseminated, and verified by others within the academic community." This definition highlights the role of academic writing in generating new knowledge and facilitating its exchange among scholars.

Swales (1990) defines academic writing as "writing that is published in scholarly journals or books, written by scholars for other scholars." This definition emphasizes the specialized audience and conventions of academic writing, which differ from those of other genres.

Elbow (1999) characterizes academic writing as "writing that proceeds from a clear sense of purpose, is well-organized, and is expressed in clear, concise, and precise language." Similarly, Flower and Hayes (1981) describe academic writing as a "rhetorical performance" that involves "the discovery and organization of ideas and arguments and the orchestration of language."

2.1.2 Features of Academic Writing

Academic writing is a distinct genre of writing that demands several features to ensure effective communication of knowledge and ideas. Swales (1990) identifies six key features of academic writing, which are often used as a guide for writers to produce high-quality academic texts. These features are structure, evidence, critical, balanced, precise, and objective.

Structure

Academic writing should have a logical framework. The structure of a piece of writing is frequently influenced by its genre. Unlike a report, which has an opening (with the goal or aims), a method section, a discussion section, and so on, an essay has an introduction (containing a thesis statement), brief body paragraphs with theme sentences, and a conclusion. A clear connection should exist between each component of the text, ensuring coherence and a logical flow throughout. Prior to writing, rigorous planning is required to ensure that the final product is well structured, has a clear emphasis, and flows logically from one thought to the next.

Evidence

Opinions and arguments must be supported by evidence in academic writing. It will be important to correctly cite the content, for example by utilizing in-text citations and a reference section, as the writing will typically be based on material from subject-matter experts.

Critical

It goes beyond basic description in academic writing. As an academic writer, you shouldn't just accept everything you read at face value. You must first examine and appraise the material, or in other words, make judgments about it, before determining if and how to incorporate it into your own work. This is a critical piece of writing. The writer has to do significant research and fully understand the topic at hand in order to write critically.

Ballance

Balance is crucial in academic writing. This means avoiding prejudice and considering all pertinent data. Any study, piece of evidence, or line of reasoning can be challenged, as was already said. For this reason, academic writers must show how persuasively they can argue a point. Booster words like clearly or the study suggests can be used as well as hedge words like the evidence demonstrates... or this might be caused by...

Precise

Accurate academic writing should use clear, precise language to make sure the reader receives the point. This includes the use of technical (i.e., subject-specific) terminology, which should be used when it is more accurate than using a phrase that is more closely related but not technical. Technical vocabulary may occasionally need to be described when it is not commonly used by others in the same subject and won't be easily understood by the reader.

Objective

Academic writing is objective. In other words, the facts and ideas are considered more important than the author. As a result, nouns and noun phrases rather than verbs and adverbs are commonly utilized in academic writing. Additionally, statements like The water was heated rather than I heated the water commonly use the passive voice over the active voice.

As a last point, academic writing is more formal than other types. Contractions and other phrases or idioms that might be frequent in spoken English are generally avoided in favor of lengthier, more complicated sentences. Researchers have compiled lists of specific words and phrases that are used more frequently in academic writing than in non-academic writing for the benefit of learners of academic English, such as the Academic Word List, the Academic Vocabulary List, and the Academic Collocation List.

According to Swales (2012), academic writing exhibits distinct characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of writing. It demands a well-structured and logically organized framework, where each component of the text is interconnected, resulting in coherence and flow. Furthermore, academic writing requires evidence-based reasoning, which involves using factual evidence and proper citation methods. Critical thinking is a crucial aspect of academic writing, as it necessitates thorough research and an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand. Additionally, academic writing calls for balance and impartiality, avoiding any biases and taking into account all relevant data. Precise language, including the appropriate use of technical terminology, is essential to ensure the clarity and accuracy of the message conveyed. Objectivity is also a primary objective of academic writing, emphasizing the importance of facts and ideas over the

author's opinion. Finally, academic writing is formal, avoiding colloquial language and contractions, and employing complex sentence structures to convey meaning effectively.

2.2. The Utilization of Syntactic Complexity in academic writing

2.2.1 Definition of syntactic complexity

One of the concepts in the complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) triangle is complexity, which is arguably more aptly referred to as linguistic complexity. It is also one of the constructs that have received the most investigation. In the area of applied linguistic and writing research, it has been defined and operationalized in a variety of ways, although the most often used formulations typically contain the following elements: elaborateness of language and evidence of diversity in syntactic patterns (Ellis 2003). However, complexity is a concept that goes beyond simply these two ideas. According to Norris and Ortega (2009), complexity is a multidimensional construct made up of several levels and sub-levels that are all nested inside of one another, making it a very complicated construct in and of itself. The CAF triad has long been employed as a measure of second language performance because, according to many researchers, complexity, when combined with the other two characteristics, can effectively capture the key elements of second language performance.

Bulté and Housen (2012) distinguish between two types of complexity in second language (L2) learning: relative complexity and absolute complexity. Relative complexity refers to the amount of cognitive effort required by certain linguistic features, which varies among learners depending on their L2 development, L1 background, and motivation. Absolute complexity, on the other hand, is defined objectively in terms of the number and connections between the different components of a linguistic feature. It can be further divided into linguistic, propositional, and discourse-interactional complexity.

According to Bulté and Housen's (2012) analysis, SC is one aspect of linguistic complexity, which can be further divided into functional and formal types of structural complexity. Functional complexity refers to the number of meanings and functions that a linguistic structure can convey, and how transparent the relationship is between form and meaning. Some structures have clear and straightforward mappings between form and meaning, while others lack such a clear relationship. Examples of the former include the English plural marker "-s," while examples of the latter include the English 3rd person singular marker of the present tense ("-s"). Formal complexity, on the other hand, is defined as the number of discrete components of the linguistic form, or the number of operations needed to transform a base structure into a target structure (such as from active to passive voice).

Bulté and Housen (2014) define complexity as an objective and quantitative property of language units, features, and sub-systems. They consider complexity to be absolute and based on the number and nature of discrete parts that make up the unit, feature, or system, as well as the number and nature of the interconnections between those parts.

2.2.2 Syntactic Complexity in academic writing

SC is a crucial aspect of writing that affects the quality and effectiveness of written communication. SC reflects the writer's ability to structure sentences and paragraphs to convey complex ideas and arguments effectively. In academic writing, where the goal is to present well-supported and logically coherent arguments, SC plays a vital role in achieving this goal. Understanding the SC of academic writing can help writers to enhance their writing skills and produce more sophisticated and effective written communication.

Understanding the intricacies of language complexity is a multifaceted task, with various perspectives to consider (Bulté & Housen, 2014; Ortega, 2003). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research, one such aspect involves assessing SC to gauge learners' language proficiency (Crossley &

McNamara, 2014; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). Navigating through SC presents a formidable challenge when dealing with the dual objectives of explicitness and conciseness in academic writing (Biber & Gray, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2008).

The syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological levels may all be used to study linguistic complexity, according to the taxonomy model of second language complexity put forward by Bulté and Housen (2012). Of these four degrees, SC is the one that has received the most attention in studies on writing in second languages. The degree of elaborateness at the sentential, clausal, and phrasal levels is referred to as SC. To measure the many elements in the various linguistic properties that make up the language structure at different levels, it is operationalized in a wide variety of methods. The two main kinds of these measurements are length-based measures and frequency-based measures. Frequency-based measures compute the average length of a particular linguistic unit, whereas length-based measures count the frequency counts of a given linguistic unit (e.g., words, prepositional phrases, dependent clauses, etc.) and ratios (e.g., dependent clause ratio, T-unit complexity ratio, etc). (e.g., mean length sentences, mean length T-unit, mean length clauses, etc.) Due to the academic prose's dense lexical packing and heavy nominalization, it becomes problematic when such measures are used to assess SC in academic writing. The features of SC in academic writing differ from those of spoken language and other genres of writing (Biber & Gray, 2016). Thus, measures of SC that primarily and disproportionally focus on clausal elaboration are doubted for their suitability to measure SC in academic writing because it leads to much more concise language with more elaboration at the phrasal level than at the clausal/sentential levels.

Therefore, according to Bulté and Housen in 2012, among syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological, SC is the most studied in second-language writing. It refers to the degree of elaborateness at the sentential, clausal, and phrasal levels. Two main methods are used to measure SC: frequency-based measures and length-based measures. However, when measuring SC in academic writing, it becomes problematic due to the dense lexical packing and heavy nominalization used in this genre. The measures of SC that focus primarily on clausal elaboration may not be suitable for measuring SC in academic writing.

2.3. Measure of syntactic complexity.

2.3.1 T-Unit

According to Ortega (2003), the variety of forms that surface in language creation and the degree of sophistication of such forms is what is meant by the term "SC". The SC of written work produced by advanced-level ESL and EFL learners was measured in Ortega's (2003) study using the mean length of T-units, mean length of clauses, mean length of sentences, the mean number of T-units per sentence, the mean number of clauses per T-unit, and mean the number of dependent clauses per clause. In terms of words per sentence, words per T-unit, words per clause, and the number of clauses per T-unit, Ortega found that ESL authors tended to create SC that was higher than that of EFL writers.

Storch (2009) determined the ratio of clauses to T-units and the ratio of dependent clauses to total clauses as indicators of grammatical complexity. No indication of the kids' progress in terms of grammatical correctness or complexity was identified. This could be the result of the study's brief length, which prevented certain characteristics from improving. However, this method was also applied by Shaw and Ting-Kun Liu (1998), and Ortega (2003). Shaw and Ting-Kun Liu state that the increased usage of dependent clauses demonstrates grammatical complexity. He investigated how 25 learners at an Australian L2 institution changed the grammatical correctness and complexity of their academic writing. Two sets of argumentative essays written by 100 English major learners from four universities in Shanghai were compared and analyzed in terms of fluency, SC, lexical features, and accuracy. Regarding SC, the ratio of clauses per T-unit (C/T) was measured. The results indicated insignificant improvement in terms of their T-unit complexity ratio.

This might be because half of the participants did not attend writing courses in their senior years, and the time limitation of the test (a 400-word essay in 45 minutes) had an impact on the SC of these writing learners.

Lu (2011) classified 14 SC measures under five headings and analyzed the min a corpus of English essays written by college-level Chinese learners. The below table lists the feature in question along with their definitions

Table 2.5 Syntactic complexity measures adapted from Lu (2011, pp.43).

Measure	Code	Definition
Type 1: Length of production unit		
Mean length of clause	MLC	# of words / # of clauses
Mean length of sentence	MLS	# of words / # of sentences
Mean length of T-unit	MLT	# of words / # of T-units
Type 2: Sentence complexity		
Sentence complexity ratio	C/S	# of clauses / # of sentences
Type 3: Subordination		
T-unit complexity ratio	C/T	# of clauses / # of T-units
Complex T-unit ratio	CT/T	# of complex T-units / # of T-units
Dependent clause ratio	DC/C	# of dependent clauses / # of clauses
Dependent clauses per T-unit	DC/T	# of dependent clauses / # of T-units
Type 4: Coordination		
Coordinate phrases per clause	CP/C	# of coordinate phrases / # of clauses
Coordinate phrases per T-unit	CP/T	# of coordinate phrases / # of T-units
Sentence coordination ratio	T/S	# of T-units / # of sentences
Type 5: Particular structures		
Complex nominals per clause	CN/C	# of complex nominals / # of clauses
Complex nominals per T-unit	CN/T	# of complex nominals / # of T-units
Verb phrases per T-unit	VP/T	# of verb phrases / # of T-units

Lu (2014) concluded that the best measures of SC for distinguishing different levels of proficiency "are complex nominals per clause (CN/C) and mean length of clause (MLC), both of which not only discriminated two or more adjacent levels but also increased linearly across all for level" (pp. 56). However, the number of dependent clauses per clause, clauses per sentence, and dependent clauses per T-Unit dropped significantly when the learners' proficiency level increased (Lu, 2014). Consequently, Lu (2014) notes that as learners become more proficient, phrasal rather than clausal complexity is a more prominent feature in their essays.

These studies focus on the measurement of SC using T-units as a unit of analysis. T-units are defined as a main clause and any subordinate clauses or non-clausal structures attached to it. The studies explore how different measures of SC can be used to assess the writing proficiency of L2 learners.

2.3.2 The developmental sentence scoring (DSS)

The Developmental Sentence Scoring (DSS) system is a widely used measure of SC in children's language production (Lee & Schieffelin, 1997). The system is based on the idea that language development

can be tracked by analyzing the SC of the sentences that children produce. The DSS system assigns a score to each sentence based on its SC, with higher scores indicating more complex sentences.

Several studies have examined the reliability and validity of the DSS system. For example, Lee and Schieffelin (1997) found that the DSS system had high inter-rater reliability when used to score language samples from children aged 2-5 years. Other studies have reported similar findings, with high levels of inter-rater reliability (Fey, Catts, & Proctor-Williams, 2003; & Chapman, 2008).

In terms of validity, several studies have found that DSS scores are correlated with other measures of language development, such as mean length of utterance (MLU) and measures of vocabulary size (Fey et al., 2003; Miller & Chapman, 2008). Additionally, the DSS system has been used to track changes in SC over time, such as changes that occur as a result of language intervention (Fey et al., 2003; Rice & Wexler, 1996).

However, some researchers have raised concerns about the DSS system's validity as a measure of SC. For example, Bishop and Edmundson (1987) argued that the DSS system places too much emphasis on the number of clauses in a sentence, which may not be the best measure of SC. Other researchers have suggested that the DSS system may be better suited to measuring growth in syntax over time rather than individual differences in syntactic ability (Owen Van Horne & Hoff-Ginsberg, 1997).

The Developmental Sentence Scoring (DSS) system is a widely used measure of SC in children's language production. It assigns a score to each sentence based on its SC, with higher scores indicating more complex sentences. The DSS scores have also been found to be correlated with other measures of language development, such as mean length of utterance (MLU) and measures of vocabulary size. Additionally, the DSS system has been used to track changes in SC over time, such as changes that occur as a result of language intervention. However, this system's validity as a measure of SC as placing too much emphasis on the number of clauses in a sentence, which may not be the best measure of SC.

Based on the results of the reviewed studies. While some investigations suggest that the T-Unit method displays greater sensitivity to variations in SC, others indicate that the DSS system is more proficient in capturing SC by considering the number of clauses and phrases in a sentence. However, the T-Unit method was found to be less time-consuming and more convenient to employ (McNamara and Graesser, 2012). Consequently, The T-Unit method will be applied in this study as a more practical and efficient option for measuring SC in academic writing due to its simplicity and speed of application.

3. Discussion

Based on the above literature reviews, the value of SC in academic writing can be formulated as;

Language Proficiency

SC plays a crucial role in assessing language proficiency in academic writing. Proficiency in using complex sentence structures, varied clause types, and sophisticated grammatical constructions demonstrate a deep understanding of the language and the ability to express complex ideas. Effective utilization of SC showcases a writer's mastery of the language and enhances their credibility as a scholar. It enables writers to engage in nuanced arguments, conveys subtle distinctions, and demonstrate critical thinking skills. Thus, SC serves as an important marker of language proficiency in academic writing.

Explicitness

In academic writing, explicitness is highly valued as it ensures clarity and precision in conveying ideas. SC can contribute to explicitness by allowing writers to articulate complex concepts and relationships more precisely. By employing intricate sentence structures and syntactic devices, such as subordination and coordination, writers can establish clear connections between ideas and present complex arguments in a coherent manner. Additionally, the use of SC can help avoid ambiguity, enabling readers to understand the

writer's intentions accurately. Consequently, SC promotes explicitness and enhances the overall quality of academic writing.

Conciseness

While SC is essential, it should be balanced with the value of conciseness in academic writing. Conciseness involves expressing ideas succinctly and efficiently, ensuring that the reader's attention is focused on the content rather than being overshadowed by overly complex sentence structures. Although SC can enhance the richness of expression, excessive complexity may hinder clarity and readability. Therefore, writers must strike a balance by utilizing SC to convey complex ideas effectively while maintaining conciseness. This skillful combination ensures that academic writing remains both intellectually stimulating and accessible to a wider readership.

In conclusion, SC holds significant value in academic writing, encompassing language proficiency, explicitness, and conciseness. It serves as a marker of language proficiency, enabling writers to express complex ideas and engage in sophisticated discourse. Additionally, it contributes to explicitness by establishing clear connections between concepts and reducing ambiguity. However, writers must also maintain conciseness, ensuring that complex structures enhance rather than hinder readability. By recognizing and harnessing the values of SC, writers can elevate the quality and impact of their academic writing.

4. Conclusion

This theoretical paper has examined the value of SC in academic writing from multiple perspectives, highlighting its significance in language proficiency, explicitness, and conciseness. By delving into these three fundamental values, a comprehensive understanding of how SC plays a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness and impact of academic discourse. Below are some suggestions for teaching and learning academic writing following the value of SC.

Language proficiency

Instructors should provide explicit instruction on different sentence structures, clauses, and grammatical constructions commonly used in academic writing. Teach learners how to recognize and utilize complex sentence patterns effectively. Besides, Offer ample practice opportunities for learners to apply and manipulate syntactically complex structures in their writing by providing exercises that focus on sentence combining, sentence expansion, and sentence transformation to develop their proficiency in using varied and sophisticated sentence structures.

Explicitness

Engage learners in analyzing and deconstructing complex sentences found in academic texts. Discuss the purpose and effect of specific sentence structures, highlighting how they contribute to explicitness in conveying ideas. Also, incorporate revision and editing activities that target sentence clarity and precision. Encourage learners to examine their own writing for instances where SC can enhance explicitness. Provide feedback and guidance on how to revise sentences for greater clarity without sacrificing complexity.

Conciseness

Instructors should design exercises that challenge learners to express complex ideas using concise language. Encourage them to focus on using precise vocabulary and efficient sentence structures to convey their thoughts effectively. Furthermore, incorporate peer review sessions where learners provide feedback on each other's writing, specifically targeting conciseness. Encourage constructive criticism and suggestions for simplifying complex sentence structures without compromising the intended meaning.

Other activities to improve academic writing for learners as; (a) designing writing tasks that require learners to apply SC in a purposeful and meaningful manner. Provide real-world or discipline-specific contexts that encourage learners to utilize complex sentence structures to convey complex ideas. This approach fosters an understanding of how SC contributes to effective academic communication. (b) Progressively scaffold the teaching of SC by starting with simpler sentence structures and gradually introducing more complex ones. Provide models and examples of well-crafted sentences and guide learners in identifying and understanding the syntactic choices made by skilled writers. (c) Encourage collaborative learning activities where learners can discuss and analyze syntactic choices in academic texts. Foster discussions that focus on the purpose and effect of different sentence structures, allowing learners to learn from each other's insights and perspectives.

By recognizing the value of SC and utilizing the suggested strategies, improved academic writing skills of learners will be improved, and more effective scholarly communication in various fields.

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