

You've got to crack a few eggs to make an omelette. Linguistic complexity and instruction in SLA: what's in it for language teaching?

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Abstract

This commentary takes a teaching practice and teacher education perspective on complexity in Instructed Second Language Acquisition. It takes the stance that it is essential to understand if and how linguistic complexity relates to learning challenges, what the implications are for language pedagogy, and how this challenges the role of the teacher. Research shows that differences in task complexity may lead to differences in linguistic complexity in language learners' speech or writing. Different tasks (e.g. descriptive vs narrative) and different modes (oral vs written) may lead to different types and levels of complexity in language use. On the one hand, this is a challenge for language assessment, as complexity in language performance has been shown to be affected by task characteristics. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for language teaching: using a diversity of tasks, modes and text types may evoke and stretch lexically and syntactically complex language use. It is argued that it is essential for teachers to understand that it is at least as important to aim for development in complexity as it is to aim for development in accuracy. That is, that 'errors' in language learning are part of the deal: complex tasks lead to complex language use, including lexical and syntactical errors, but they are a prerequisite for language development.

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This thematic issue addresses complexity in Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) from different theoretical and empirical perspectives. The five contributions stress the relevance of distinguishing developmental trajectories of syntactic complexity, differential effects of task, genre and modality on complexity, variation in complexity across languages, measurement and assessment practices of complexity in L2 instruction, and teachers' perceptions of complexity.

In this commentary, I take a teaching practice and teacher education perspective on the role of linguistic complexity. I take the stance that it is essential to understand if and how linguistic complexity relates to learning challenges, what the implications are for language pedagogy, and how this challenges the role of the teacher. Research shows that differences in task complexity may lead to differences in linguistic complexity in language learners' speech or writing. Different tasks (e.g. descriptive vs narrative) and different modes (oral vs written) may lead to different types and levels of complexity in language use. On the one hand, this is a challenge for language assessment, as complexity in language performance has been shown to be affected by task characteristics. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for language teaching: using a diversity of tasks, modes and text types may evoke and stretch lexically and syntactically complex language use. Following Pallotti (2009), becoming more proficient in L2 is not just a matter of using more complex language, but of 'fine-tuning' the degree of syntactic and lexical complexity to task type and communicative situation. I argue that it is essential for teachers to understand that complexity development is at least as important to aim for as accuracy development. That is, that 'errors' in language learning are part of the deal: complex tasks lead to complex language use, including lexical and syntactical errors, but they are a prerequisite for language development. In other words: avoid avoidance, don't keep it simple. *Take a walk on the wild side.*

In the five contributions to this special issue on linguistic complexity and instruction in SLA, several issues are addressed with respect to implications for language teaching. Michel and colleagues studied complex language use in online written texts in L2 English. They found that task-related factors affect the complexity of learners' written language use, particularly at the lower proficiency levels. Descriptive tasks evoke other types of language use than argumentative tasks, and formulaic expressions in the task prompt may have a positive effect on the use of such (complex) expressions in task performance. This may be problematic for assessment purposes in

SLA research, as language complexity in task instruction affects language complexity in task performance. On the other hand, this is a constructive affordance for teaching purposes: linguistically complex input may serve as a scaffold or model, promoting linguistically more complex output, which can stretch learners' language use and may lead to subsequent development. The authors suggest that their findings call for language courses that provide learners with writing assignments that target a wide variety of task types. Therefore, for optimal language development to occur, a variety of task types is beneficial at all stages of development.

Bulté and Housen compared complexity of L2 English language use in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and non-CLIL secondary school students. Although CLIL students were exposed to greater, richer and more diverse language input over a period of nineteen months, this did not result in higher levels of linguistic complexity. Apart from methodological considerations, these researchers suggest that out-of-school exposure to complex language for both groups may have outweighed the potential additional effect of in-school exposure to complex language for the CLIL students. From a teacher educator perspective, in order for in-school exposure to complex language to make a difference, learners should have the opportunity and be stimulated not only to *understand* complex language, but also to *use* complex language, both oral and written. If learners are not encouraged to use complex language, to be creative and take risks, and if they do not receive stimulating feedback on the complexity of their language use, they run the risk of avoidance; that is, they keep their oral and written output as simple as necessary to convey only the message, and as simple as possible as to avoid accuracy errors.

In Rouse-Malpat, Steinkrauss and Verspoor's contribution, complexity in written assignments was compared between implicitly and explicitly instructed learners of L2 French (L1 Dutch secondary school pupils). Whereas both groups had similar scores on lexical complexity measures, the implicit group outperformed the explicit group on the syntactic complexity measures. The authors conclude that it makes little sense for teachers to focus on more complex syntactic structures in order for them to be detected and used, instead of giving learners the opportunity to be creative with such structures themselves. These outcomes, too, imply that L2 pedagogy should provide opportunities and challenges for learners to process and produce complex language, instead of avoiding it.

Vasylets, Gilabert and Manchón found that L2 learners of English (L1 Spanish/Catalan university students) achieved syntactic and lexical propositional complexity differently in oral and written mode. As writing allows for self-paced planning, formulating and monitoring, it provides

favourable conditions to create more complex texts. In oral tasks, on the other hand, learners produced longer ideas with a greater number of words. With respect to L2 pedagogy, they conclude that particularly written tasks possess a language-learning potential, as they facilitate the use of more complex language, may push the boundaries of interlanguage, and could favour restructuring of the underlying L2 system.

In their study on teachers' perceptions of syntactic complexity, Kuiken and Vedder found that language teachers, when asked to assess syntactic complexity in academic writing in L2 Italian (L1 Dutch) and in L2 Dutch (various L1s), tended to focus mainly on accuracy and comprehensibility rather than on syntactic complexity as such. With respect to L2 pedagogy, they stress the importance that teachers are stimulated to reflect on their own assessment practice, and that they collaborate in order to develop a common understanding of useful criteria for syntactic complexity. Following Pallotti (2017), they stress the importance that teacher training encourages teachers to take a positive and rewarding attitude towards errors, focusing on what goes right instead of on what goes wrong. Actually, isn't stimulating a learner to get out of his or her comfort zone a key factor for any progress in any type of learning?

Teachers' practices on complexity

What can language teaching practitioners take home from the outcomes of the studies discussed here? First of all, language teachers and teacher trainers should be encouraged to provide a diversity of tasks that stimulate complex language use. If this implies that learners make more accuracy errors, so what? It shows that an alternative focus is needed in L2 instruction, assessment and the type of feedback provided to the learners. Researchers, as well as task and test developers, need to provide support for developing complexity measures that are feasible for learners to understand and appreciate, and feasible for teachers to apply in teaching and testing.

In Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is the most widely used framework for describing and assessing language proficiency levels. The CEFR most strongly relates to communicative adequacy, which can be evaluated by means of the predefined descriptor scales for Spoken and Written Language Use (see Kuiken, Vedder and Gilabert, 2010). Let us consider how complexity is represented in the CEFR descriptors. With respect to spoken and written language use, scales are represented for Range, Accuracy and Coherence (as well as Fluency, Interaction and Phonology for spoken language use, and Description and Argument

for written language use; see Council of Europe 2018). As such, complexity is only represented implicitly, in the 'Range' scale (B2 level: 'using some complex sentence forms'). Interestingly, what comprises 'complex forms' is not specified, which makes it difficult for teachers to apply when creating tasks, providing feedback or assessing task performance.

In the section on 'General and communicative language competences' of the 2018 *CEFR Companion Volume*, the descriptors for 'general linguistic range' and 'vocabulary range' have been elaborated. Here, attention is paid to the emergence of new forms (i.e. more complex language use) instead of their mastery (i.e. accurate language use) as evidence for language learning progress. It states that, 'attempting to use more complex language, taking risks and moving beyond one's comfort zone is an essential part of the learning process. When learners are tackling more complex tasks, their control of the language naturally suffers, and this is a healthy process' (Council of Europe 2018:131).

It is here that further elaboration and specification of the complexity construct is needed for both teachers and learners. Complexity measures such as those developed in SLA research may provide reliable indications for the complexity level of language use, but they may not be sufficiently applicable to common teaching practice. Indices for sentence length, lexical diversity, co-ordinate versus subordinate clauses may all be relevant measures in complexity research in SLA, but they may be challenging for teachers to employ, even more so for oral language use. Furthermore, development of complex language use is more than just the sum of several general and specific complexity measures, as it also relates to task type, task setting, task purpose, audience, , communicative adequacy, etc. (see Pallotti 2009).

Particularly in writing tasks, teachers tend to focus on accuracy, as this is relatively easy to assess, explain and grade. However, the studies that are reported in this special issue have clearly indicated how written tasks in particular can stimulate the development of more complex language use, as learners have time to reflect and can be encouraged to improvise and be creative. But if learners know that in the end they will mainly be graded on the number of grammatical errors they make, they will avoid complexity, choose the easy way out and keep things as simple as possible.

Most importantly, teachers and students alike need to understand that complexity and accuracy are not so much two sides of the same coin, but 'communicating vessels': more attention to one may lead to less attention to the other. In other words, why bother about accuracy if we want to stimulate learners to use more complex language? And why expect complex language if we stress the importance of accurate language use?

This perspective is not self-evident for language teachers. In a longitudinal study on the effects of explicit versus implicit form-focused instruction, Piggott, van der Ploeg, Tribushinina, van den Bergh and de Graaff (submitted; see also Piggott 2019) found that teachers' holistic scores of learners' oral and written tasks correlated more strongly with accuracy measures than with fluency or complexity measures. They claim that teachers' holistic assessment mainly corresponds to accuracy measures because teachers are most used to implicitly or explicitly applying accuracy indicators. This remained the case also when teachers were explicitly encouraged to focus on a combination of diversity and sophistication of vocabulary, diversity and sophistication of grammar and functional adequacy. That is, whereas the rubric they used contained holistic descriptions of lexical and structural complexity as well as adequacy, teachers' ratings most clearly related to differences in accuracy measures between students. This corresponds to Kuiken and Vedder's study in this special issue, as well as Duijm, Schoonen and Hulstijn's (2018) observation that foreign language teachers tend to be more focused on accuracy in their ratings. Crossley and McNamara (2014) also found that whereas L2 learners' writing became more complex according to specific complexity measures, it did not always correlate strongly with human judgements. In Piggott *et al.*'s study, apparently, the holistic rating procedure could not confirm outcomes related to differences in complexity and fluency that had been found on the specific complexity and fluency measures. Interestingly, this was the case in both written and oral tasks. In both the oral and written task modalities, the implicit group showed more signs of complexification, produced longer texts and used more chunks than the explicit group; however, this was not reflected in the teacher ratings.

Based on a large-scale survey, Graus and Coppen (2016) found that L2 student teachers in the Netherlands held strong beliefs about the importance of accuracy and explicit grammar instruction in foreign language teaching, despite a communicative and complexity-oriented focus in language teacher education. It shows that it is difficult to have a substantial impact on teacher beliefs, as well as learner beliefs, with respect to accuracy and complexity. Larsen-Freeman (2015) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) also explain that focusing on grammatical accuracy relates to the common educational preference to transfer and test knowledge about language. The most straightforward way to evaluate language production is by focusing on accuracy errors in task completion. Housen, Kuiken and Vedder (2012) have shown that accuracy is one of the most transparent constructs of language performance and far more easily operationalised than complexity or fluency. Teachers in Piggott's study (2019) found that

telling adolescent pupils they had a low grade because of the number of grammatical or lexical errors is easier for them to accept than explaining that their lexical diversity is low or their level of subordination is limited.

As a language classroom researcher and teacher trainer I often hear teachers suggesting to their pupils, 'if you keep it simple, you will make fewer errors'. And as (grammatical) errors are usually punished in grading, learners tend to go for the easy way out and avoid complexity in order to improve grammatical accuracy. SLA researchers can only convince learners and teachers that a focus switch from accuracy to complexity is beneficial if useful and useable forms of alternative assessment are available. What if teachers understand that accuracy is not the main goal of foreign language proficiency but just the icing on the cake (Piggott, Tribushinina and de Graaff, in press)? That assessing and correcting errors in the beginning stages of language development may be a waste of scarce time and energy that can better be spent on promoting complexity and adequacy? I propose that researchers support the development of valid complexity measures that are easily accessible for teachers, so that they can apply these for feedback and assessment purposes. Likewise, I suggest that teacher training focuses on the development of tasks, tests and feedback types that stimulate and appreciate creativity and improvisation in adequate language use.

A simple take-home message on a complex issue

In sum, teachers and teacher trainers are in need of a clearer understanding of what types of tasks, tests and feedback most effectively promote more complex language use and language development. If they can apply assessment tools that relate complexity to different proficiency levels, they will better be able to include complexity development in proficiency evaluation.

How can SLA complexity researchers, language teachers and teacher educators move ahead? For researchers, it is essential to have practitioners involved in their empirical research: this provides opportunities for longitudinal studies in ecologically valid contexts, and for multiple and replicated data collection (DeKeyser and Prieto Botana 2019). An additional benefit is that such collaboration helps teachers to systematically evaluate and therefore better understand the language development of their students as well as their own teaching practice. Moreover, it helps them to become involved in task and test development that responds to their own teaching needs and their pupils' (implicit) learning needs.

However, Lightbown (2000) and Spada (2019) call for caution in the direct application of classroom-based research findings to L2 pedagogy.

Classroom-based complexity research shows that language learners need to crack a few eggs to make an omelette. But it is the researchers' and teachers' shared responsibility and down to their expertise to create and try out the recipes that will best turn some cracked eggs into a tasty omelette.

About the author

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