INTRODUCTION

• Attempts to evaluate and strengthen a language program need to take stock of students’ current levels and measure their development as they proceed through the language sequence. The research done by Georgetown University German faculty has explored the development of students writing in response to the curricular developments and noted the influence of genre on production (Byrnes et. al., 2010).

• Complexity, accuracy, and fluency are often used as indicators for L2 proficiency, but L2 complexity has not been clearly defined (Bults & Mouwen, 2012).

• Norris and Ortega (2009) note the need for an “organic approach” to investigating complexity, accuracy and fluency that would show the multidimensional factors that it involves.

• In a study exploring linguistic development of a group and focusing on selected individuals Vyatkina (2012) contributed to the methods for tracking the development of complexity in L2 writing.

• Ruf and Steinhagen (2016) found that students made gains in fluency, complexity (overall, coordination, subordination and fronting), but not in accuracy as measured by verb placement.

METHODS

Participants

• This study is part of a larger cross-sectional study (conducted fall 2014 through fall 2016) of 374 second- and fourth-semester students who completed writing and speaking tasks at the beginning and end of the semester, as well as initial, demographic, motivational orientations, and final surveys.

• 33 of these students completed these tasks in both second and in fourth semester. This presentation focuses on 12 of these longitudinal students:

  ✓ 6 participants with the least increase in Mean Length of Sentence (MLS) from beginning of second semester to the end of fourth semester.

  ✓ 6 participants with the greatest increase in Mean Length of Sentence (MLS) from beginning of second semester to the end of fourth semester.

• All 12 participants were of similar age (18-21), started German in their teenage years; 11 had native language of English, 1 native language Chinese; 4 females, 12 males

Materials for the present study

Informal first-person written narratives taken at the beginning and at the end of second and fourth semester simulations.

Each writing sample was coded for the following:

• Fluency:
  • Mean length of sentence and mean length of clause; Score reported is average of the two

• Complexity:
  • Mean number of clauses per sentence

• Fronting:
  • Number of main clauses starting with something other than the subject

• Accuracy:
  • Verb second placement in main clauses
  • Verb agreement in present tense
  • Modal verb agreement, plus word order of modal verb and infinitive verb

• Lexical development:
  • Lexical diversity: Type-Token Ratio (TTR)
  • Lexical density: Ratio of number of content words to total number of tokens

• No differences found between groups and results are not reported here

Procedures

• Written in the computer lab

• Given 12 (second semester) or 14 (fourth semester) minutes to write; no dictionary or grammar help allowed

• Prompts varied slightly between second and fourth semesters

RESULTS

Research Question #1:

Fluency

• Group averages show that the group with the greatest overall gains in fluency consistently improved from the beginning of second semester to the end of fourth semester.

• The group with the least overall gains in fluency improved from the second semester to the end of fourth semester, but then regressed in fourth semester.

Complexity and Fronting

• Complexity: The two groups behaved very similarly: increased complexity primarily seen between second and fourth semester. The group with the greatest overall fluency gains continued to improve in fourth semester, whereas the group with the least overall fluency gains regressed in fourth semester.

• Fronting: The group with the least overall fluency gains performed well in the beginning but regressed in second-year and shows no overall improvement. The group with the greatest overall fluency gains shows consistent improvement across the four time periods.

Accuracy in Verb Use

• We explored accuracy in verb use in three different ways:

  ✓ Placement of verb in frontal clauses: Leave aside the beginning 2002 sample (where both groups showed little overall fronting)

  ✓ Greatest fluency group: consistent improvement

  ✓ Least fluency: initial improvement, then regression

Main verb agreement: The group with the least overall gains in fluency improved slightly here.

• Greatest group does not make any gains.

• Note: The prompt used in fourth semester invited the use of third person. Accuracy in third-person agreement tended to be lower than accuracy in first-person agreement.

Advantages and infinite verb word order: Two groups behave similarly, especially in second year.

• Greatest overall fluency gains had lower accuracy with modal verbs at the beginning and thus has more overall improvement.

• By the end of second semester the two groups both decrease in accuracy (though modal verb use consistently goes up in the same manner for both groups).

• Modal verb agreement and infinitive verb word order: Two groups behave similarly, especially in second year.

• Greatest overall fluency gains had lower accuracy with modal verbs at the beginning and thus has more overall improvement.

• By the end of second semester the two groups both decrease in accuracy (though modal verb use consistently goes up in the same manner for both groups).

CONCLUSION

• Students with the greatest overall gains in fluency also improved consistently across the two semesters in their sentence complexity and accuracy in main verb placement in frontal clauses. However, these same students did not show improved in verb agreement accuracy.

• In contrast, students with the least overall gains in fluency improved initially, but tended to regress during fourth semester. This pattern of fourth-semester regression was not for sentence complexity and accuracy in main verb placement as well. Accuracy in verb agreement did not improve for this group either.

• The significant positive correlation between development in fluency and complexity lends further support to the simultaneous development (or lack thereof) of fluency and complexity.

• Motivation and attitude towards learning German may help explain the lack of overall fluency gains and fourth-semester regression in other aspects of L2-writing displayed by some students.

REFERENCES


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For further information: brooks@umn.edu, cahr0001@umn.edu, jasen93@umn.edu