

Syntactic Length,
Embeddedness and Structures:
a Study of the Syntactic
Complexity Demonstrated by
Chinese EFL learners

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- 1. Introduction
- **Syntactic complexity**

“The varied and sophisticated linguistic structures adopted in language production”

(Ortega, 2003: 492)

1. Introduction

- **Previous empirical studies pointed out the problems existing in Chinese tertiary EFL learners' English writings:**

- ☞ SVO structures (finite driven) dominate their English writings.

(Yang, 1994; Zhao, 2004; Xu, 2006)

- ☞ **R**educed structures are insufficiently used. (Xu, 2009)

- ☞ Lower embeddedness ratios of C/T and DC/C are achieved when compared with those of English native speakers

(Bao, 2009)

- 1. Introduction
- **Additional studies on the types of syntactic complexity are needed.**

(Bao, 2009)

- Close attention should be given to phrase level structures in future researches (Lu, 2011:57).

2. The Study

2.1 Purpose and Significance

- Take a further look at syntactic complexity demonstrated by Chinese tertiary EFL learners.
- Extend the investigation to the domains involving reduced structures, passives, finite and non finite types.

2. The Study

2.1 Purpose and Significance (con.)

- Approach syntactic complexity from three aspects simultaneously:
 1. syntactic length
 2. embeddedness
 3. syntactic types

■ 2. The study

■ 2.2 Research questions

- ---- What differences in terms of syntactic length, embeddedness and syntactic structure, if any, are revealed between Chinese EFL learners of high and low writing ability and of different language proficiency?
- ---- What specific differences relating syntactic complexity are found in Chinese EFL learners of all abilities and English native speakers?

2.3 Data sources

- Data of Chinese EFL learners
 - ----expository writings composed by Chinese EFL learners
 - ----Writings randomly selected out from Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (WECCL) (Wen, Wang & Liang, 2005)
 - ----240 writings across 4 school levels, 60 at each school level
 - ---Around 300 words for each writing
- Data of English native speakers
 - ----30 articles randomly chosen from the “Reading” section of the book “DELTA”s Key to the Next Generation TOFEL Test: Advanced Skill Practice for the IBT”(2005)
 - ----30 articles randomly chosen from journals in second language acquisition
 - ---The first 300 words in each prose were extracted for this study.

■ 2.4 Syntactic measurement

■ ----Syntactic length

■ W/T, W/C

■ ----Syntactic embeddedness

■ C/T, DC/C

#11. 幻灯片 11

■ ----Syntactic structures

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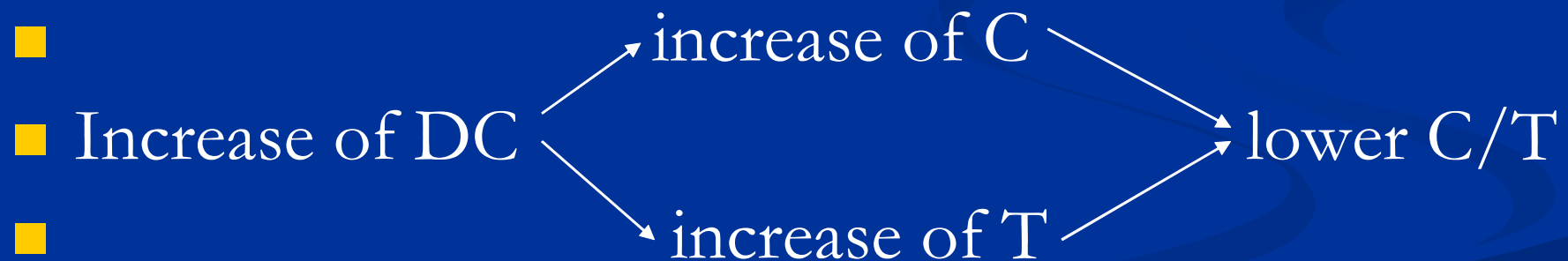
- T-unit:
- ----A construct consisting of a main clause plus any subordinating clauses, namely a T-unit as a “minimal terminable unit” (Hunt, 1965).
- C-unit
- ---any linguistic unit containing an overt subject and a finite verb. (Qing & Wen, 2007)
- For example:
- Connor likes dinosaurs that have sharp teeth because they are fearsome when they eat
- ----T units: 1
- ----Clauses: 4

#9. 幻灯片 9

- C/T, DC/C
- ----A text with a higher ratios will have more embedded text structures such as subordinate clauses. Conversely, texts with lower ratios would have more simple sentences, or series of sentences joined by coordinating conjunctions.

- ----delicate balance

- Increase of DC → increase of C, hence lower DC/C



- #9. 幻灯片 9

- Syntactic structures
- 1) independent clauses
- Simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, compound and complex sentences
- 2) dependent clauses
- Adverbial, object, predicative, subject, relative, appositive clauses
- 3) reduced structures
- Adverbial, adjectival, nominal verb clauses
- (Wolfe-Quintero et al, 1998)
- 4) passives
- Finite passives, non-finite passives

3. Major findings

3.1 Results of length measurement

- *Differences demonstrated by Chinese EFL learners of different ability
- 1) A linear relationship between the two length measurement indices, W/T and W/C, and the advances of school levels is demonstrated. Level 4 has significantly higher W/T and W/C ratios.
- 2) Better learners conceptualized either by TEM-4 scores or holistic rating achieved significantly higher W/T and W/C ratios.
- *Differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers
- 1) W/T and W/C ratios in writings by Chinese EFL writings are significantly lower than those in native speakers' proeses

■ 3.2 Results of embeddness measurement

- *Differences demonstrated by Chinese EFL learners of different ability
- 1) C/T and DC/C are reported to be on the rise across Level 1 to Level 3, 4, with a slight insignificant decline at Level 2. Again Level 4 produced the largest ratios.
- 2) better writers → significantly higher C/T and DC/ C ratios;
- Better learners → significantly higher C/T, but insignificantly higher DC/C ratios

- *Differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers
- Chinese learners of all ability have significantly lower DC/C and C/T ratios than the native speakers.
- *Discussion:
- Chinese EFL learners:
 - 1) higher frequencies of the total number of dependent clauses, including adverbial clauses, object clauses and predicative clauses, resulting in **larger DC and T frequencies.**
 - 2) favoring simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences, **adding to the frequency of C units.**
- ----Improper manipulating syntactic structures leads to lower embeddedness ratios.

■ **3.3 Results of syntactic structures adopted** 专题会场 徐晓燕 夏伟蓉 summary Microsoft Word 文档.doc

- 1) SVO structures: significantly higher frequencies in Chinese EFL learners' writings
- (simple sentences, adverbial, object, predicative clauses)
- 2) SVO relative clauses: significantly lower frequencies in Chinese EFL learners' writings
- 3) Passives: significantly lower frequencies in Chinese EFL learners' writings
- 3) Adverbial phrases: significantly lower frequencies in Chinese EFL learners' writings; But learners with better TEM-4 scores have significantly more of such forms than native speakers
- 4) Adjectival phrases: significantly lower frequencies in Chinese EFL learners' writings;

■ **Discussions:**

- 1) SVO forms: the major repertoire to draw on by Chinese EFL learners to lengthen their production units and increase embeddedness ratios
- 2) Relative clause: mutual interaction of L1 and L2;
- 3) Adverbial phrases: facilitation of the use of adverbial clauses
- 4) Adjectival phrases: involving ability to reduce sentences to modifier phrases
- 5) Passives: seldom used by Chinese EFL learners accustomed to Chinese syntax to convey passive sense by means of active forms.

■ 4. Implications of the study

- 1) Tertiary English instruction needs to concentrate on expanding students' syntactic repertoire by teaching them the uses of advanced syntactic features.

- 2) Effort devoted at college level English teaching should shift away from the teaching and practice of subordinate clauses, “an ability which seems to be easily learned, and moreover, not necessarily a good sign of language maturity (Monroe, 1975: 1031).

- clauses → in spoken English while “

- a group of words centering on a noun

-

- in writing



Thank you very much!
Thank you very much!



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