

A Summary of Simplicity Without Elegance: Features of Sentences in L1 and L2 Academic Texts

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In his overview of research into L2 academic writing, Silva (1993) points out, "There seems to be a clear need for more extensive treatment of textual concerns...It may also be necessary for L2 writing teachers to work to enhance their writers' grammatical and lexical resources" (p. 671) to allow students to build a syntactic and lexical repertoire with which to produce more sophisticated academic texts. One of the difficult issues in teaching academically bound ESL students to produce appropriate academic written text is that research has not established with certainty what specific syntactic and lexical features, when taken together, can create an impression of a seemingly simplistic or reasonably sophisticated text in written L2 discourse. This article...identifies the grammar and vocabulary constructions that may create an overall impression of textual simplicity in texts written by nonnative English speakers (NNSs) relative to those written by native speakers (NSs) and that that may therefore reflect negatively on the quality of L2 academic essay text....

Hinkel looks at studies that compare conversational and written registers... For NNS students in U.S. universities, exposure to and experience with L2 spoken and formal written registers may represent a key lexical consideration that can ultimately determine the types of syntactic and lexical features such as students employ in L2 essays. In a recent study, Shaw and Liu (1998) examined issues of textual simplicity and complexity in academic essays written by NNS university students. Shaw and Liu's study, based on pre- and posttest essays written by 164 speakers of 23 languages, found that the students' uses of informal linguistic features actually increased in frequency with greater exposure to the spoken register in English and despite intensive academic writing instruction. On the other hand, the researchers did not identify a similar increase in the use of

textual features of "academic style" (p. 246), which are considered to be lexically and syntactically complex (e.g. subordinate clauses), whereas the rates of occurrence of spoken and informal syntactic and lexical features (i.e., informal vocabulary items such as *a lot, because of* and *so*) increased significantly. The study concludes that in English for academic purposes programs in English-speaking countries, students are exposed to formal English writing but also have much contact with informal conversational discourse. The authors point out that L2 learners become adept at employing the features of the conversational register without developing register differentiation skills.

In the past two decades, corpus analyses of spoken and written text in English have made great strides in identifying the contextual meaning and functions of syntactic and lexical features that are prevalent in the conversational genre and that can make written academic text appear to be particularly simple. According to Biber et al. (1999), for example, compared with frequencies of lexical items in any other register (e.g. fiction or news), the conversational register shows a clear preference for simple nouns and noun phrases, and derived nouns are by far the least common in conversations...

Hinkel characterizes "simple syntactic and lexical features"... Constructions with *be* as a main verb can have copula or existential functions and usually mark a static informational style in written prose (Quirk et al., 1985). An example (from a text written by a Korean NS) is *In Korea, some families are very rich, and their children are lazy because they don't have to do anything*. Biber (1998) calls these "non-complex constructions" (p. 228) because they have reduced information content and are characteristic of spoken discourse...

Vague nouns (e.g. *guy, man, people, society, stuff, thing, woman, world*) represent one of the

most prominent features of conversational genre and lexically simple prose; for example, *When people grow up, they begin their way in the society, and they have to remember all the things their parents taught them* (from a text written by a Chinese NS). [This section goes on to classify the simplest public, private, expecting and tentative verbs like *argue, explain, promise, say, speak; know, learn, think, feel, hope; expect, like, try, want.*]

Hinkel describes the subjects and corpus... Of the 206 NSs whose essays were analyzed, 89% were first-year students enrolled in required first-year regular composition classes at private universities. The other 11% were similarly enrolled in first-year composition classes in a public university in the Midwest...All of the 877 NNSs were international students (NSs of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Arabic) who had achieved a relatively high level of L2 proficiency with TOEFL scores ranging from 545 to 603 (an average of 577)... The corpus consists of 322,750 words in 1,083 essays written by speakers of six L1 groups...

Hinkel describes the results of the analysis... (U)ses of *be*-copula as the main clause verb were significantly more common in NNS than NS texts. In fact, in the essays of Korean speakers the median frequency percentage rates of this feature were almost twice those in the prose of native English speakers, and in the texts written by speakers of Japanese and Indonesian, the median rates exceeded those of English speakers by over half the median rate. In many cases L2 writers relied on *be*-copula and the resulting stative descriptions to advance and support their claims practically to the exclusion of alternative means of essay development.

In Example 1, the NNS writer explains his position on whether parents should allow their children to form their own opinions by means of relatively static exposition:

1. Children's opinions are always a controversial topic. Children are important to their parents, and some believe that older children are mature enough to flourish their opinions without parents' interference. Some argue that children are incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, and therefore it is the responsibility for parents to construct their children's opinions. The two beliefs are contradictory to each other, and many parents are anxious about this dilemma. (Chinese NS)...

Predicative adjectives play an important role in descriptions provided in L2 texts. The essays of all five NNS groups contained significantly higher rates of predicative adjectives than those of native English speakers. Specifically, in the prose of all NNS writers, the mean frequency

rates of predicative adjectives were twice those in the NS essays or even higher. The range data further show that in some NNS texts, predicative adjectives represented at least 10% of the total number of words, and in essays of Korean speakers, more than 20% of all words. Example 2 illustrates the key role of these simple and stative descriptive features of NNS texts.

2. People think that a teacher and students must be serious and diligent in the classroom. I understand the idea, and I think that learning is significant to keep up. In a serious class, people are sleepy or unattentive. If people are unattentive in the class, learning is hard for students. In contrast, if people think that the lesson is enjoyable, most people have interest in the class and the subject. In general if people have interest in the class and the subject, the lesson that is enjoyable is better than a serious lesson. Also, teachers are usually more friendly in the classroom that is joyful for students than a serious classroom. If teachers are friendly, most students feel more comfortable to ask a question to the teacher. In most cases, if the lesson is serious, the teacher is serious, too. (Japanese NS)...

Vague nouns occurred in L2 texts significantly more often than in NS prose for all groups of NNS writers...

9. People always study hard to get a good grade. People try to get a better grade, as well as they can, and do all the things in class. In my opinion, I disagree with the opinion that said grades do encourage learning. Because I think that if people get a good grade, it shows they have learned a lot about this lesson and did all the things. This is an example about grades encourage learning. When people get a bad grade, it means that they haven't learned all about their lessons, so that they fail in the final exam and they must take their class again. Grades are important in learning because from their grades people can see whether they have learned about their lessons or not. (Indonesian NS)...

Public, private, and expecting/tentative verbs are very common and lexically simple...[The article also notes the lexical, ideational, and syntactic redundancies and the syntactic and lexical simplicity of the L2 text as in Example 13:]

13. People can learn in many different ways. Some people learn well when the subject is presented in a situation that is serious. I learn well in a class that is formal because I can think more deeply about the subject, and it helps me to remember the material easier. Then I won't forget it easier and think about it for a long time. My sister told that when she learns something, there are visual aids beside the information, she can understand the subject better. I feel that I can understand the subject better in one way, and my sister can see it better in another. This is because different people learn in different ways. (Indonesian NS)...