

# The longitudinal development of clausal and noun-phrasal complexity in German intermediate learners of English

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Recent research into the syntactic complexity of learner English has increasingly taken into account measures of noun-phrasal complexity, both for academic learners (Parkinson & Musgrave 2014) and for pre-academic learners (Bulté & Housen 2018, Kreyer & Schaub 2018). The impetus for much of this interest can be tracked to Biber, Gray & Ponpoon (2011), who call for a more diversified understanding of syntactic complexity in the study of learner language, i.e. one which takes into account phrasal complexity features (in addition to clausal measures). The underlying assumption is that beginning learners produce complexity at the clausal level, influenced by a conversational writing style, whereas advanced learners increasingly rely on phrasal complexity, aiming at an academic writing style. It can thus be hypothesized that the development from clausal to phrasal complexity already sets in during the intermediate stage of the language learning process.

The present study is a longitudinal, corpus-based analysis of syntactic complexity in the written exams of German EFL learners (age: 13-18). Syntactic complexity is operationalized as the number and range of dependent structures (dependent clauses, NP modifiers) per independent structure (main clause, NP). The study seeks to answer the following research question: How do clausal and phrasal complexity measures develop in the written language of German intermediate EFL learners over four years?

The data is drawn from the Marburg corpus of Intermediate Learner English (MILE) (Kreyer 2015), a longitudinal corpus of written exam texts produced by a cohort of German secondary school pupils over a 4-year period. The study is based on a multi-layer annotated subsample of ten pupils with German as their L1.

Preliminary results corroborate previous findings that group measures of syntactic complexity generally tend to increase over time, while learner-individual trajectories vary considerably (cf. Bulté & Housen 2018).

## References

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