

Profiling EFL Learners' Writing Performance by Syntactic Complexity - a corpus-based study

Austina Shih & Tung-mei Ma
The Language Training & Testing Center (LTTC)

Abstract

A testing institution has participated in an international collaboration project led by a research university in Japan. The project aimed to build a corpus of young English learners of different mother tongues. Data were collected from English learners of ten to eighteen years of age and from eight countries and areas. The testing institution itself contributed around 740 writing samples of junior and senior high school students from southern Taiwan.

In addition to providing a profile of the Taiwanese data in terms of learners' background, and lexical information, the project further investigated syntactic complexity. An automatic system was employed to provide fourteen measures of syntactic complexity in five categories, including length of production, sentence complexity, subordination, coordination, and particular structures. Correlations among significant measures were also performed.

Certain sentence structures in learners' data were also examined across all the six junior and senior high school grades locally and internationally. This was to investigate to what extent and from which grade these structures could be used correctly in students' production, and how well these structures were used by the students in the same grades in different countries. The research results will hopefully benefit English teachers in their language instruction and curriculum planning.