



UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT AND PROFICIENCY IN WRITING – BOOK REVIEW

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Abstract:

The original and thought-provoking book “Understanding Development and Proficiency in Writing” was written by Philip Durrant, Mark Brenchley, and Lee McCallum and published in 2021 by Cambridge University Press. It comprises seven major chapters, four of which focus on key areas of language proficiency: syntax, vocabulary, formulaic language, and cohesion. The book focuses on the continual debate of evaluating and interpreting development in L1 and L2 writing and offers evidence-based and objective perspectives to explore development. It reviews almost 250 quantitative corpus linguistics (QCL) based studies spanning over 70 years, thanks to its empirical approach. The historical and theoretical overview of QCL research on written language suggests a powerful guide map to understand what is already known (and not known) about written language development. It inspires us about what to do next to evaluate and assess first and second-language writing from a more robust perspective.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; second language writing, assessment of writing development

1. Summary

Beginning with the definition of the key concepts, the first chapter, “Introduction” (pp. 1-13), sketches the broad parameters of the book and explains its aim in two dimensions: pedagogical and methodological. The pedagogical aim of the book is to understand development in written language in more explicit and descriptive terms rather than seeing it as a mere count of errors or judgment of how accurate it is based on teacher intuition. The authors describe development in a first and second language in terms of time and quality, which are taken as two developmental lenses allowing the reader to grow a fuller understanding of how proficiency can change. Development is described

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as using an appropriate set of linguistic features in order to contrive communicative complexity. With regard to time, learners are expected to demonstrate proficiency in using some language features at specific time frames like a semester, year, etc. Quality refers to the interpretation of evaluators based on linguistic features of the learners' language. The other aim of the book is to make methodological contributions to the existing literature on writing. To develop a more evidence-based and applied procedure that many can implement, the book adopts an empirical approach. It offers QCL as a specific lens to interpret the research on writing development. With the novelties in QCL, it has been possible to make safer generalizations based on a large body of texts. However, the authors caution the reader about the shortcomings of QCL approaches. Due to the rapid increase in tools and analysis in QCL, the researchers need to be aware of the robustness of these assumptions. Thus, the authors elaborate the methodological aim of the book as to provide researchers with a guideline for conducting future research in QCL, clarifying the theoretical basis for research and claims QCL has made so far.

The second chapter, "Theoretical and Methodological Foundations" (pp. 14-55) elucidates the basic premise upon which writing development rests, presenting a theoretical and methodological overview of QCL. This chapter consists of five subsections, laying the basics for the review in the following parts of the book. After a brief introduction, Subsection 2 focuses on the specifications of key constructs such as "writing", "writing proficiency", and "writing development". Though these concepts are controversial in the literature, the authors still attempt to construe the key terminology mainly based on "proficiency" in broad terms to refer to both L1 and L2. To deal with the substantive difficulty of variability in the literature, they incorporated "genre" as another defining dimension to explore writing development in a more granular and communicatively nuanced way. "Time" and "quality" are also examined as other major key variables of writing development as part of communicative competence. The chapter contains a review of how "time" and "quality" are operationalized in L1 and L2 studies, and a general framework is outlined that reflects the pragmatic viewpoint adopted by the authors.

The following part, Section 2.3, unpacks the four linguistic assumptions QCL depends on to analyze writing development. The authors question the extent to which linguistic features can be coherently and substantively described to analyze writing development through QCL. Section 2.4 expands on the basics of QCL and discusses its strengths and limitations as a specific quantitative research methodology. The authors warn researchers of the challenges in defining and measuring the essential variables to establish validity to explore development. They also suggest not undermining the context-specific features to strike a balance to provide sufficient contextualization. The last section, 2.5, elaborates a specific approach to QCL: multidimensional analysis (MDA), which uses principal components analysis to evaluate co-occurrence relationships between the various language features studied. MDA provides an interpretive context that offers some plausible interpretations based on QCL functioning as a whole.

The following four chapters are a confluence of the applied QCL and linguistics. Chapter 3, “Development in Syntax” (pp. 56-114), is an impressive in-depth coverage of studies that exploit syntactic features as categories to explore writing development through the critical axes of time and quality. The chapter discusses why syntactic development is the most popular focus for studies on writing development and offers three plausible explanations. What follows is a persuasive discussion of what syntactical proficiency is and how it is regarded in the literature based on two components: the representational component and the usage component. The first is explored as a fuzzy component due to fundamental disagreements at more or less every level in syntactic literature. The latter is captured in terms of four separate constructs: complexity, accuracy, fluency, and appropriacy to unpack syntactic proficiency. It is emphasized that there is no established system for categorizing syntactic measures used in the literature, but still, the authors attempt to provide the reader with a broad, low-level taxonomy that might be of practical and theoretical interest. The review is restricted to the most prevalent generic indices, based on Hunt’s (1965) clause-to-sentence factors, with five measures which offer a fine-grained framework to study development. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a review categorized according to five labels. It presents a detailed and well-organized account of L1 and L2 studies, focusing on five specific syntactic categories (sentence length, T-unit coordination, T-unit length, clause density, clause length) to explore writing development. The studies returned striking empirical evidence at each level of these categories concerning both time and quality. For example, T-unit length and adjective phrases are specific L1 and L2 development markers for both time and quality. The authors criticize these studies as they mostly lacked conceptual clarity regarding what is being measured and why. Instead, they suggest some fruitful further research options to unpack development through a more systematically and theoretically grounded approach, since syntax plays a substantive role in writing development.

The chapter on vocabulary development, “Development in Vocabulary” (pp.117-146), opens with a discussion of why vocabulary is a popular construct in QCL and presents some potential limitations regarding the operationalization of vocabulary in many studies. In the theoretical considerations section, some basic terminology is identified, such as “vocabulary proficiency” concerning the measures of “breadth” and “depth”, “receptive” and “productive vocabulary knowledge”. Also discussed are the two specific aims of vocabulary studies: testing and development. The studies in the review section are organized around three classification measures offered by Read (2000) to quantify writing development: “lexical variation”, “lexical sophistication”, and “lexical density”. “Lexical sophistication” is analyzed under four headings: “word frequency”, “register”, “word length”, and “semantic measures”. Most of the studies focus on lexical diversity and word frequency. Lexical diversity is positively correlated with time in L1 studies but with quality in L2 studies. Lexical density is too diverse and vague to conclude anything about development. Methodologically, the authors expanded on less studied measures such as semantic measures and depth and presented good research topics concerning the influences of educational context, first language, and text genre on the features of vocabulary use.

Chapter 5, “Development in Formulaic Language” (pp. 147-182), offers insight into approaches to defining and identifying formulaic language. It reviews studies across time and quality constructs, particularly in L2 contexts (as there are no studies in L1 settings on formulaic expressions except for Durrant and Brenchley’s (in press) study on children’s academic collocation use). The chapter starts with the basics of formulaic language and expands on why formulaic language is essential for language development. The Theoretical Framework section explores how formulaic language knowledge is conceived in the literature, for example, as part of vocabulary depth, social phenomena, or discourse markers of meaning creation. The following section provides detailed information about how formulaic language is operationalized, particularly about frequency-based approaches, which dominate the majority of the studies in the review. The frequency-based approaches are investigated under two main headings. The first is based on how often a particular combination of words appears, and is discussed in relation to “n-grams”, “lexical bundles”, and “p-frames”. The second approach is focused on the strength of association between the components of the combinations, particularly in relation to “collocations”. The detailed review in the following section shows that studies of formulaic language have been recently expanding in different ways in which phraseological sophistication can be understood. Specifically, in L2 studies, formulaic language showed clear patterns of development in terms of the quality variable and the greater strength of association with collocating words. “Development in Cohesion” (pp. 183-200) is the last chapter where development in writing is investigated from the perspective of QCL. After a brief introduction to cohesion as a textual construct and coherence as a mental construct, two key models of cohesion are discussed: the model of cohesion set out by Halliday and Hassan (1976) and the Coh-Metrix tool for automated text analysis (Graesser & McNamara, 2011). The review sketches the general layout for L1 and L2 writing concerning cohesion under these two classifications. However, the sparsity of studies explored under cohesion created a problem to conclude the contextual specificity of cohesion as a linguistic feature. Coh-Metrix oriented data were relatively narrow because a specific research group produced it. Still, the authors found some evidence that greater use of lexical cohesion, explored under Halliday and Hasan’s model, is associated with higher ratings for quality for L1. Cohesion is therefore described as an area that needs further studies in the future for more consistent conclusions.

The last chapter, “Conclusions” (pp. 201-212), presents a systematic and detailed summary of all findings in all four research areas. L1 writing shows clear developmental patterns, along with the construct of time, in terms of syntax and vocabulary. On the other hand, L2 writing shows consistent patterns, along with the quality variable, in terms of syntax, vocabulary, and formulaic language. The authors offer some plausible explanations regarding the differences between L1 and L2 and suggestions for further research

2. Evaluation

The book is an essential contribution to Corpus Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, and Theoretical Linguistics, as it presents a bird's eye view of the convoluted topic of writing development for both researchers and practitioners. It provides the reader with a broad picture of the interdisciplinary topic of writing development. It then zooms in on each particular developmental unit by breaking down the construct in a systematic and organized way, which is one of the most remarkable features of the book. It walks the reader down the path to understanding the complex elements in all chapters step by step, so that readers always know where they are heading. In that sense, it's a great reference book for students as it explains every construct from scratch.

Given the complexity and interdisciplinary nature of writing development, the book includes cognitive, psycholinguistic, historical, and educational perspectives on the topic. All the chapters are woven across these different perspectives. The chapter on syntax is a unique and comprehensive compilation of studies on fuzzy syntactic constructs. Durrant's pioneering expertise on formulaic expressions, specifically on collocations, offers a tangible empirical approach to dealing with formulaic language in writing development. The book fulfills its two aims, as it provides empirical insights into the extent to which meaningful development patterns occur across time and quality and how the two constructs yield similar results across first and second-language development. It also suggests several directions to further study writing development across the four major areas of syntax, vocabulary, formulaic language, and cohesion. The cohesion and vocabulary chapters in particular present huge gaps to explore development in both L1 and L2. The book itself is a fine example of how to conduct a quantitative study methodologically and theoretically, for it presents a consistent empirical and generalizable roadmap to the readers. Some small challenges may bother the reader about the interpretations and layout of some charts and tables. They require further attention from the reader in order to understand the statistical details discussed. An additional limitation may be the language of the book. It is a fine example of elaborated academic writing, and readers might evaluate the language as sophisticated. However, the long list of citations at the end of each sentence may give the reader a hard time refining the message in the long and complex sentences. Although the book is a review study, the long citations may still pose an unavoidable challenge to the reader. The book is a worthwhile read and an invaluable resource for all interested in writing development and corpus linguistics.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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