Sentence complexity differs between writing and speaking in child second language learners

What this research was about and why it is important

Previous studies on second language (L2) production have found that L2 learners tend to produce more complex sentences as their proficiency increases. However, most studies have focused on writing, almost exclusively testing advanced adult second language learners. The present study addresses this gap by comparing sentence complexity in written and spoken production by child L2 learners with beginning-level proficiency. Our study is motivated by different cognitive processes underlying writing and speaking activities. Whereas writing is a recursive process which allows writers ample time to plan, monitor, and revise their product with relatively little time pressure, speaking is a linear process that is highly constrained by time. We hypothesized that the distinct cognitive processes associated with writing and speaking would lead to different language production patterns in L2 learners. For example, the cyclic nature of writing may free up cognitive resources, allowing L2 learners to produce longer and more complex language structures than they would during speaking. A linear process of speaking, on the other hand, may make it hard for L2 learners to produce more articulated and complex sentences. Consistent with this prediction, this study demonstrated that sentence complexity in written production predicted learner proficiency more reliably than sentence complexity in spoken production.

What the researchers did

- The researchers collected written and spoken data from 76 Korean-speaking child beginner learners of English.
- Each participant was administered a written and a spoken task. During the written task, participants were asked to provide a written introduction of their favorite teacher. In the spoken task, two participants engaged in a dyadic conversation to describe a person of their choice. The written and spoken data collected from these tasks comprised a total of 769 sentences and 401 sentences, respectively.
- The written and spoken data were analyzed in terms of sentence length, the use of subordination (for example, *because*) and coordination (for example, *and*), and the number of verb phrases per shortest grammatically allowable sentence.
- Participants' English proficiency was assessed through an independent test which had 10 items for listening comprehension and 10 items for reading comprehension.

What the researchers found

- Compared to those in the spoken data, the sentences in the written data involved longer sentences, more subordination including 'because' and 'when,' more verb phrases per shortest grammatically allowable sentence, but less coordination signaled by 'and.'
- Sentence complexity predicted learners' English proficiency more reliably in written than spoken production.
- The current findings indicate that the different processes underlying writing and speaking influence the way that beginning-level child L2 learners produce sentences.

Things to consider

- Child L2 learners managed their attentional/processing resources and their control over linguistic forms more effectively in writing than speaking.
- During the spoken task, the learners frequently used 'and' as a processing strategy, which allowed them to produce longer syntactic units with less cognitive effort.
- In classrooms, implementing writing activities before speaking activities may help learners use more diverse and complex forms while speaking.
- Using a variety of other complexity measures in future research will provide a better understanding of the significant effects of written versus spoken modalities on sentence complexity.