

Chapter 5

Age-related Differences and Associated Factors in Foreign Language Writing. Implications for L2 Writing Theory and School Curricula

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Introduction

The first studies on second language (L2) writing were largely influenced by the body of knowledge and theory in the field of first language (L1) writing. The idea that findings from L1 writing could be applied to L2 writing was taken for granted, and it has taken some time to decide what findings from L1 writing could be extended to L2 writing and which concepts needed to be revised.

One issue that has received a great deal of attention in the studies of L2 learning and that is the focus of the present chapter is onset age. As will be discussed later, in L2 contexts it was found that the sooner learners were exposed to the target language, the better chances they had of succeeding in learning the language effectively. This chapter aims to shed some light on this issue in relation to writing in a foreign language (FL). There are several reasons for investigating the potential benefits of an early start in a FL and in FL writing in particular. From a language policy point of view, it is important to determine whether the long-term benefits of an early start, which have been found in naturalistic settings, also hold true in a FL context. From a writing theory perspective, the influence of writing in one language on writing in other languages is still being debated. From an L2 writing angle, further research is needed on the best measures to ascertain both L2 and FL learners' interlanguage (IL) in writing needs.

The BAF Project

The BAF (Barcelona Age Factor)¹ project at the University of Barcelona was started in 1995 with the main goal of analyzing the effects of lowering the age for starting to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an instructional context (see Muñoz, 2006a). All over the world, and in Europe in particular, it is becoming increasingly common to commence the learning of EFL earlier. While most European curricula used to introduce English between the ages of 11 and 12, nowadays English is started between the ages of 7 and 9, and it is becoming more popular to have kindergartens introducing English to 3 or 4 year old children.

From the very beginning, an important area of study in BAF has been the analysis of writing as a tool to gauge IL development across different age groups. This objective led us to a second, closely related aim, i.e. the search for the best instruments with which to measure written attainment by very low proficiency school-age learners (see Method section). Finally, age-related differences have also been investigated by examining the use of the L1 in writing, mainly lexical transfer, as we believe that the analysis of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in multilingual settings, like that of our studies, may offer important insights about the FL acquisition process. As Juzwik *et al.* (2006) state in their overview of research on writing, in comparison with other issues, minimal attention has been paid to studies on middle and high school students and to bi- or multilingualism within the population up to Grade 12. We think, therefore, that our studies may help to fill this gap.

This chapter is structured around three main areas of concern: the effects of an early start in FL contexts as measured on a written task; CLI in EFL writers; and the analytical measures used to assess FL learners' language in writing. An overview of the age factor, CLI and measures for the analysis of writing will be provided before presenting and discussing our own findings. The studies on writing from the BAF that will be reported in this chapter are summarized in Table 5.3.

Review of the Literature

Findings on the age factor in the acquisition of L2 are still controversial; most research in naturalistic settings confirms the picture presented by Krashen *et al.* (1979) and Long (1990) after examining the short- and long-term effects of an early start. The consensus view in the 1980s and 1990s was that older L2 learners are faster and achieve higher levels of proficiency in the short term, but that in the long run, Early

Starters (ES) will catch up with Late Starters (LS) (see Birdsong [2005] and Singleton & Ryan [2004] for an updated state of the art).

It was soon suggested (Long, 1990; Singleton & Lengye, 1995) that findings from L2 contexts could also be extended to FL settings. Some researchers (see Ellis [1994] among others) questioned this supposition, and more recently, other researchers have written along the same lines (see, for instance, Muñoz, 2006b, 2007). In naturalistic contexts, the picture synthesized by Krashen *et al.* (1979) and Long (1990) is consistent with studies such as that of Patkowski (1980) and the classic, frequently cited study by Johnson and Newport (1989).

Patkowski (1980) studied immigrants who had lived in the USA for at least five years and found that those who were exposed to the L2 before the age of 15 achieved a higher syntactic command than those who arrived later. Almost a decade later, Johnson and Newport (1989) correlated the age of arrival to the USA with proficiency in English, as measured by grammatical judgment tests, and concluded that age of arrival was the best predictor of L2 learners' proficiency.

The studies in FL settings from the 1960s and 1970s analyzing the results of introducing a FL in primary school showed that, as in naturalistic contexts, older learners were faster than younger learners, especially in grammar and cognitively demanding tasks, but, in contrast to the case in naturalistic contexts, children did not outperform older learners in the mid or long term (see, for instance, Bland & Keislar, 1966; Ekstrand, 1978; Stankowski-Gratton, 1980). After five or 10 years of instruction, when exposure was kept constant, it was the older learners who outperformed the younger learners in overall proficiency, in grammar tests and in reading and writing tasks. A large-scale project ($n = 1700$) by Burstall (1975) found that children who started studying French as a FL at the age of 11 learnt French more efficiently than younger children (starting at 8) when it came to morphosyntax and cognitively demanding tasks such as clozes, reading and writing tasks. Despite the fact that these studies were soon dismissed as inconclusive and have been severely criticized on methodological grounds – because during the last years of schooling some ES and LS were mixed in the same classrooms – one may wonder whether they should not be replicated in light of the fact that more recent findings with improved methodological designs have led to extremely similar results.

In Spain, the studies conducted by García-Mayo and García-Lecumberri (2003) and the studies from the BAF project collected in Muñoz (2006a) found that less than 1000 hours of instruction in FL contexts may not provide enough opportunities for ES to catch up with

LS except in a few oral tasks. In this research, ES and LS who had received the same total number of hours of instruction were compared on leaving high school after seven to ten years of learning EFL. It was the LS who significantly outperformed the ES in most domains, especially in cognitively demanding tasks such as that of writing (Torras *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the researchers concluded that, in the long run, later is better.

One specific aspect on which some of our studies on writing have focused is the use of the L1, our second concern in this chapter. The decision to analyze lexical transfer in writing was taken because of its frequency and communicative relevance in multilingual learners in BAF. Besides, studies dealing with CLI mainly analyze oral production; CLI in writing has often been neglected because, given the lack of spontaneity with which learners confront a written task as compared to an oral one, it is assumed that instances of CLI are scarce. We hope to be able to show that writing can also offer an interesting area for CLI research. It is worth noting the change from the 1960s, when the L1 was seen as the cause of errors (interference), and the 1970s, when almost all errors were considered as developmental and there was no role left for the L1 in SLA, to the 1980s, when it became possible to disentangle the notion of transfer from behaviorism (see Odlin [2003] for a recent review). More recently, the study of multilingual speakers has identified another process, that of interlanguage transfer (ILT) or the influence of languages other than the first between one another (see Cenoz *et al.* [2001] for studies on CLI in third language acquisition). The findings reported below may help us to understand writing done by multilingual learners.

The relationship between age and writing necessarily led us to our third area of concern: the measures used to assess writing and its development as proficiency in the L2 increases. In BAF, we attempted to create an instrument of analysis that could gauge the production by young, low-proficiency learners and could discriminate between groups at different ages and proficiency levels.

Larsen-Freeman (1978: 439) defines the index of development as 'an independent yardstick by which we can expediently and reliably gauge proficiency in a second language'. The underlying assumption is that these indices develop in tandem, i.e. as learners become more proficient, they write more fluently, more accurately and produce more grammatically and lexically complex texts (Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*, 1998). However, as Skehan and Foster (1999) claim, attentional resources are limited and attending to one aspect of performance may mean that other dimensions are neglected (see Schoonen *et al.*, this volume). They propose that for language development to proceed optimally, a balance needs to be

established between the performance dimensions of fluency, accuracy and complexity, because, they hypothesize, when faced with a cognitively demanding production task, L2 learners will attend to conveying meaning first and to accuracy and linguistic complexity of their output last. This perspective suggests not only that there is individual variability at any given point in time, but also that one aspect of development may progress at the expense of another. Foster and Skehan (1996) maintain that complexity in L2 learners' use of language indicates a greater willingness to experiment and to take risks, whereas accuracy reflects a focus on form to achieve freedom from errors. They argue that complexity and accuracy are two competing goals for L2 learners.

Contrary to Skehan and Foster's Limited Attentional Capacity Model, Robinson (2001) proposes that L2 learners can access multiple and noncompetitive attentional pools. Tasks that make increasing conceptual/communicative demands engage cognitive resources that progressively exploit learning mechanisms leading to greater analysis, modification and restructuring of IL with consequent performance effects. Robinson's proposal is consistent with the hypothesis on cognition found in Long (1996) and Schmidt (2001). The Cognition Hypothesis, integrating information-processing and interactionist explanations of L2 task effects, predicts that increasing the cognitive demands of the tasks in the developmental dimension will push learners toward greater accuracy and complexity in L2 production. Some of the studies in our project (see Table 5.3 for details) examined the assumption questioned by Wolfe-Quintero *et al.* (1998) that the four areas will develop in parallel.

Method

Participants

The participants in BAF (see Table 5.1) were learners of English from different state schools in Barcelona (Spain). They were all Catalan-Spanish bilinguals. The ES began learning English at the age of 8 in Grade 3 and the LS began learning English at the age of 11 in Grade 6. In order to carefully control the amount of exposure received, most of the short- and mid-term BAF studies focused exclusively on students whose entire exposure was limited to the school instruction. At Time 3 of data collection, with learners from Grades 11 and 12, only 20% had received their exposure solely in the school setting; 40% had attended out-of-school classes and another 40% had repeated one of their last years of high school. This explains why some of our long-term studies include

Table 5.1 Participants

Grade	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
ES (AO = 8)	8									
			T1		T2				T3	
			200		416				726	
			10.9		12.9				16.9	
			1		3				5	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
LS (AO = 11)				11						
					T1		T2			T3
					200		416			726
					12.9		14.9			17.9
					2		4			6
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Note: AO: age of onset; AT: age at testing; Gr: BAF groups; C h: curricular hours of instruction at time of data collection; Y: number of years of instruction of EFL.

learners with out-of-school exposure, but unless explicitly indicated otherwise, instructed exposure was kept constant.

As Table 5.1 shows, ES started learning English when they were 8, in Grade 3. At Time 1, after 200 hours of instruction, they were 10.9 years old, in Grade 5, and had already received three years of instruction. At Time 2, now aged 12.9 years in Grade 7, they had had two more years of school and 416 hours of English instruction. At Time 3, the 16.9-year-old learners in Grade 11 had received four more years of EFL instruction. In contrast, the LS started three years later than their younger peers, in Grade 6, when they were already 11. At Time 1, the older group had only received instruction for two years – not three like the ES. At Time 1, the older group was 12.9 years old on average and they were in Grade 7. At Time 2, LS had been learning English for two more years, as had the ES group. They were now in Grade 9 and they were 14.9 years old. At Time 3, LS were in Grade 12 and about to leave high school and enter university or get a job.

It is important to notice that for LS the last period of instruction was concentrated into three years instead of four, as was the case for their younger peers. This can be seen in Table 5.1, which also shows the differences in intensity and how the instruction was distributed to account for exactly the same amount of instruction when the two groups of learners were compared. The difference in age between ES and LS at Times 1 and 2 was two years, but there was a difference of only one year at Time 3. ES received instruction over a total of nine years, while the LS received the same amount of instruction in only seven. At Time 3, the ES were 16.9 years old and in Grade 11 while the LS were one year older, 17.9, and were in Grade 12. It is important to remember that in the BAF design, the total amount of instruction was carefully kept constant. ES and LS were compared in the short run, after just 200 hours of instruction; in the mid run, after 416 hours of instruction and in the long run, after 716 hours of instruction.

Instruments and procedure

The data came from a written composition, which was administered to participants in their own classroom by a BAF researcher. Both teachers and researchers made it clear to the students that the task would not be assessed as an exam and instructions were also given in the learners' L1s (Catalan and Spanish) to avoid misunderstandings. They were not allowed to use dictionaries or grammar books and could not ask the teacher or researcher for help.

All the participants were given the same amount of time (15 minutes) to write on the topic 'Introduce yourself: Me, my past life and my future' (see Appendix for examples) – although younger learners did not use more than 10 minutes. In this way, both time and topic constraints were controlled for in order to make results comparable (Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*, 1998).

Instruments for data analysis

The review of existing measures that had been used in previous studies showed that there was a need to adapt and even create new measures that could gauge our learners' IL in a reliable way. We realized that the fact that our learners were much younger and less proficient than the subjects of most previous studies required a careful decision-making process and thorough piloting before proposing a reliable instrument. The review of previous work by other researchers in Celaya *et al.* (2001b) focused on Long (1991), one of the first reports on measures to gauge written competence with examples and good descriptions of the measures, Polio (1997) on measures of linguistic accuracy and, finally, Wolfe-Quintero *et al.* (1998) where more than 100 measures to analyze written competence in a L2 are reviewed. The first instrument proposed in Celaya *et al.* (2001b) included 17 measures used for the short-term studies with the youngest and least proficient learners. When the three groups of learners were compared, the initial set of measures was expanded to 40 measures (see Navés *et al.*, 2003), as reflected in Table 5.2.

Results and Discussion

The main features of the studies on writing from the BAF project are summarized in Table 5.3.

Results from studies on writing from the BAF project focusing on the age effects

The short- and mid-term effects of age of onset were analyzed and discussed in Pérez-Vidal *et al.* (2000) and in Celaya *et al.* (2001a), while the long-term effects of an early start are the main focus of Navés *et al.* 2003, Navés (2006) and Torras *et al.* (2006). Overall, these studies found that as far as writing was concerned, in the short run, i.e. after 200 hours of instruction, it was the older learners who wrote significantly better compositions than their younger peers. The mid-term comparisons, after 416 hours of instruction, showed that it was still the LS who did significantly better in the writing task. In the long run, at Time 3, after 726

Table 5.2 Analytical measures in the four writing components

Accuracy	Fluency	Syntactic complexity	Lexical complexity
1. Error-free sentences	4. Total number of words	12. Number of subordinate clauses	28. Noun tokens
2. Error-free sentences in %	5. Total number of words in English	13. Number of coordinated clauses	29. Noun types
3. Number of rejected units	6. Total number of nodes	14. Number of combined clauses	30. Adjective tokens
	7. Total number of clauses	15. Coordination Index	31. Adjective types
	8. Total number of sentences	16. Number of nonfinite nodes	32. Adverb tokens
	9. Words per clause	17. Ratio of nonfinite nodes per clause	33. Adverb types
	10. Mean sentence length (words per sentence)	18. Ratio of nonfinite nodes per sentence	34. Lexical verb tokens
	11. Mean clause length (words per clause)	19. Ratio of clauses per sentence	35. Lexical verb types
		20. Ratio of subordinate clauses per clause	36. Primary verb types
		21. Ratio of coordinated clauses per clause	37. Open class words
		22. Ratio of combined clauses per clause	38. Lexical density
		23. Ratio of subordinate clauses per sentence	39. Total number of words in L1 (borrowings)

Table 5.2 (Continued)

Accuracy	Fluency	Syntactic complexity	Lexical complexity
		24. Ratio of coordinated clauses per sentence	40. Total number of lexical inventions
		25. Ratio of combined clauses per sentence	
		26. Ratio of nodes per sentence	
		27. Auxiliary modal verbs	

Source: Adapted from Navés *et al.* (2003).

hours of instruction over a period of either seven (LS) or nine years (ES), it was the older learners who still significantly outperformed their younger peers. These findings are consistent with the results of research on writing competence with a similar population of Basque-Spanish bilingual children conducted at the University of the Basque Country (see Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2003).

The analysis of short- and mid-term effects of an early start showed that age of onset had a clear influence on the scores obtained in the written compositions (see Celaya *et al.*, 2001a; Pérez-Vidal *et al.*, 2000). At Time 1, after 200 hours of instruction, the LS, who were 12.9 years of age, showed better results than the ES (who were 10.9) in the four areas of fluency, accuracy, lexical and syntactic complexity. At Time 2, after 416 hours of instruction, some of the measures in both lexical and syntactic complexity yielded significant differences in favor of the LS aged 14.9, but the ES, aged 12.9, were able to catch up in accuracy and fluency. These results were consistent with those found in naturalistic settings, in which older learners are reported to be faster in the initial stages of learning. It was hypothesized that differences in cognitive maturity might account for these results. To probe further into this finding, writing by learners at the same biological age (12.9 years) but different starting ages (ES at 8 and LS at 11) was analyzed. The two groups of learners, aged 12.9 when tested, had received 200 and 416 hours of instruction, respectively. Results in Pérez-Vidal *et al.* (2000) and Celaya *et al.* (2001a)

Table 5.3 Summary of BAF studies on writing

BAF studies on writing reviewed	Topic			OA		Term			Age at testing						Grade at testing						Type			
	A	T	W	B	O	S	M	L	10	12	14	16	17	18+	5	7	9	11	12	U	C	L	B	
																								10
Pérez-Vidal et al. (2000)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Celaya et al. (2001a)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Navés et al. (2003)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓								
Navés (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓								
Celaya and Torras (2001)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓					✓	✓									
Navés et al. (2005)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Celaya (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Muñoz and Celaya (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					✓	✓									
Celaya et al. (2001b)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Torras and Celaya (2001a)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								

Table 5.3 (Continued)

BAF studies on writing reviewed	Topic			OA		Term			Age at testing						Grade at testing						Type			
	A	T	W	B	O	S	M	L	10	12	14	16	17	18+	5	7	9	11	12	U	C	L	B	
																								10
Torras and Celaya (2001b)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Torras et al. (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								
Navés (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓								

Note: BAF main onset ages: 8 and 11.

O: other onset age; A: study on age factor effects; T: study on cross-linguistic influence and transfer in particular; W: study on writing measures; S: short-term study; M: mid-term study; L: long-term study; C: cross-sectional study; L: longitudinal study; B: both cross-sectional and longitudinal study; U: university students.

showed that LS with 200 hours still outperformed ES with 416 hours in some variables, specifically in the domain of syntactic complexity, while ES performed significantly better on those measures related to lexical complexity and in the area of fluency. It was concluded that in the initial stages of language acquisition, a higher number of hours of instruction, together with earlier age of onset, may result in an increase in lexical complexity and in fluency, but not in either grammatical complexity or accuracy. A more intense pattern of exposure for the LS (200 hours of instruction over a period of two years in contrast with the five years for ES) might be a key factor in explaining the results. In other words, 11-year-old starters manage to maximize the learning concentrated in two academic years, while eight-year-old starters do not seem to have benefited from having started earlier in spite of having received twice as much formal exposure as their older peers.

The long-term effects of an early start in writing were analyzed with learners from Grades 11 and 12 in Navés *et al.* (2003), Navés (2006) and Torras *et al.* (2006). The main objective was to determine whether ES (AoO = 8) would have caught up with LS (AoO = 11) in the long run within the school system, i.e. when the oldest group was about to leave high school while the younger peers with the same amount of instruction were one grade behind them. ES had been studying EFL for nine years while LS had been studying EFL for seven years. ES and LS were measured after the same number of hours of instruction, 726 hours of school instruction in the case of Navés *et al.* (2003) and Torras *et al.* (2006) and either 726 or 850 hours of instruction in Navés (2006) (See Table 5.1).

The results revealed that after 726 hours of instruction, when Grade 12 learners were compared with Grade 11 learners, LS' writing was still significantly better than that of ES. The writing components of fluency, accuracy, and lexical and syntactic complexity were examined by means of analytical measurements. LS' accuracy in writing, as measured by the *percentage of error-free sentences*, was significantly higher than that of younger learners. The older learners also significantly outperformed the younger learners in *mean sentence length*, as measured by the *total number of words per sentence*, and in *lexical complexity* (see Table 5.2). As for syntactic complexity, LS' grammatical complexity was significantly higher as measured by *subordination*, *coordination index* and other ratios involving *finite subordination*, all of which, as will be discussed later, are regarded as highly sophisticated indices. ES only managed to outperform LS in less sophisticated indices of grammatical complexity involving *nonfinite nodes (nonfinite subordination)* measures. In other words, in the long run, within the school system, at Time 3, after 726 hours of EFL

instruction, LS' writing is still significantly better than that of ES. ES have only managed to catch up with LS on fluency as measured by *essay length* and most *production unit measures*.

When learners with an extra exposure of 125 hours were also included in the long-term analyses, the same results were found. Navés (2006) analyzed the writing of two large groups of learners ($n = 406$) after the same number of hours of instruction: 726 and 850, respectively. For the analytical analysis of the writing, 85 measures were used. Navés (2006) classified the measures in each of the four domains as highly sophisticated and less sophisticated measures in light of research on L1 and L2 acquisition and studies in L2 writing, and suggested considering *mean production units* as belonging to a construct other than fluency that has to do with syntactic complexity but behaves somewhat differently. She found that LS, after receiving either 726 or 850 hours of instruction, significantly outperformed ES in all domains except fluency when examined by highly sophisticated indices.

Cummins (1980) has argued that older learners show higher mastery of L2 syntax, morphology and other literacy-related skills, such as vocabulary and reading comprehension, due to their greater cognitive maturity. We concluded that the limited amount of input and input quality that characterize FL contexts might explain the different results from those found in naturalistic settings. DeKeyser (2000) has argued that very young learners benefit the most from implicit learning, something which requires massive contact with the language and which FL learning contexts do not provide, while older learners benefit the most from explicit language learning. Therefore, in a FL context, with very limited contact with the target language, older learners will have a greater opportunity to succeed.

Finally, as claimed in Navés *et al.* (2003), the intensity of the instruction learners received and the way instruction was distributed in the two groups might also account for the differences found. The amount of instruction received by ES is spread out much more over the three collection times than that of the LS. Research examining intensity suggests that more intensive courses are more effective (Collins, 1999; Serrano & Muñoz, 2007). Navés (2006) proposed that in an instructional FL setting, the expected long-term benefits of an early introduction should be checked at the end of high school, just before learners enter university, because of the nature of the context. In overall EFL proficiency, in grammar-oriented tests and in cognitively demanding tasks such as writing, it is the older learners, the LS, who show a clear

and statistically significant advantage in the long run, i.e. when they have finished their high school education.

Cross-linguistic influence

The analysis of CLI in relation to age in BAF has focused mainly on lexical transfer from the L1. Two moderating variables we have dealt with are language dominance in our bilingual learners and the effect of L2 proficiency (see Table 5.3 for a summary). Our main findings can be summarized as follows: age seems to have an effect on the types of lexical transfer analyzed and there is a clear effect of L2 proficiency. However, language dominance has no effect.

Lexical transfer errors were classified in Celaya and Torras (2001) adapting James's classification (1998), into *misspellings* (e.g. *braun*), *borrowings* (e.g. The school is *bonica* [*bonica* = nice, from Catalan]), *coinages* (e.g. I am good *deportis* [from Spanish *deportista* = sports person]) and, finally, *calques* (e.g. The best of my life I *passed* it there [from Spanish *pasé* = lived]). The participants were three groups of learners of different ages (10 years old, 12 years old, and 18+), who had received the same number of hours of instruction (200 hours). Results showed differences both in the number and the types of lexical transfer due to age. Children seem to draw more on the L1 but this difference appears only when the type of transfer is more direct (as in *borrowings*); adults and preadolescents were found to draw on the L1 more than children in *coinages*, that is, in that process which combines L1 and L2 knowledge. We concluded that age seems to be strongly related to CLI and that this may be due to the fact that, because of differences in cognitive maturity, the same amount of instruction may be more effective in older learners, making them more proficient than younger learners. If this is the case, we can claim that learners with different levels of proficiency fall back on the L1 in different ways.

Two of the types of lexical transfer mentioned above were the focus of Naves *et al.* (2005). The participants belonged to the six BAF groups of learners with ages ranging from 10.9 to 17.9 (from school grades 5–12). The first question analyzed whether CLI (as measured through the use of borrowings and lexical inventions) changed in relation to age and amount of instruction in the FL. The second question aimed to analyze how the amount of instruction influenced the transfer of content and function words in young low-proficiency learners from Grades 5 and 7. The third research question focused on the impact of language dominance and hours of instruction and age on the use of borrowings

and lexical inventions, respectively. In contrast to Cenoz (2003), but in agreement with previous research studies on transfer as a compensatory strategy (e.g. Celaya, 1992; Möhle, 1989; Poulisse, 1990; Ringbom, 1987), it was found that young learners in lower grades used these strategies more extensively. Statistical differences were only found at the end of the age span and only for borrowings, not for lexical inventions.

The answer to the second research question showed that the youngest groups transferred a similar percentage of content and function words, thus corroborating the results in Miralpeix and Celaya (2003), but not those found in Poulisse and Bongaerts (1994). Finally, our results on the effect of language dominance indicated that Catalan-dominant learners and balanced-bilinguals used fewer borrowings and lexical inventions than Spanish-dominant learners (independently of age and amount of instruction), but the differences between the groups as regards language dominance did not reach statistical significance.

L1 influence and proficiency effects on writing were the focus of Celaya (2006). The written production of 16 learners was followed longitudinally and collected at ages 10, 12 and 17 (from fifth grade in primary school to first noncompulsory year in high school), which means, according to the design of data collection in BAF, 200, 416 and 726 hours of instruction respectively. Results show that nonstandard words due to L1 influence show a remarkable decline at the second measuring time, when learners are 12 (Grade 7). The second finding was that L1 influence, proficiency and age interrelate in different ways depending on the type of nonstandard word, that is, depending on whether the influence of the L1 is more direct as in *borrowings* or whether the L1 and the L2 are activated simultaneously as in *lexical inventions*. Maturation factors and language awareness may have something to do with the explanation for these results, as pointed out in Torras and Celaya (2001b) and Celaya and Torras (2001).

The analysis of adult learners ($n = 69$) after the same number of hours of instruction as above yields similar findings (see Muñoz & Celaya, 2007). Results show three different patterns of L1 and L2 influence depending on the type of lexical transfer and a predominance of L1 influence over other L2 in lower levels (200 hours), which gradually disappears in favor of a more varied use of other languages at higher levels (416 and 726 hours).

Finally, the qualitative analysis of *rejected units* (Pérez-Vidal *et al.*, 2000), a very relevant measure in the case of beginner young learners in a FL learning context, revealed interesting uses of the L1. In our studies, rejected units are incomprehensible units, telegraphic speech or whole

units in the L1, as in *myself waterpol; the favourite very very vevery the swim; the bodi larn erg lang fotball me*. With the same number of hours of instruction (416 hours), LS who were 14 at the time of data collection did not produce any rejected units, whereas ES who were 12 still produced this type of unit. This finding led us to conclude that learners need to have reached a certain age in order to be able to realize that the target language operates as a code that is different from the L1.

These studies have shown that the analysis of CLI offers interesting insights to understand the development of writing in a FL. CLI was found to be affected by age and proficiency but not by language dominance in our bilingual learners. However, it is true that the two first languages of our learners are typologically close, which may explain this finding. Further research is in progress with immigrant learners with L1s distant from Spanish and Catalan in our school context.

Measuring learners' writing in an EFL context

A wide variety of analytical measures have been used in the BAF project. Commonly used measures were first included, but it soon became evident that there was a need to develop and use other measures suitable for the production of very young EFL writers. For example, the Coordination Index, a widely used measure of syntactic complexity, could not be used in the first studies on the short- and mid-term effects of an early start because those very young, low proficiency, inexperienced writers used almost no subordination.

English language teaching methodology, second language acquisition (SLA) and L2 writing use accuracy, fluency, lexical and syntactic complexity as useful constructs. Measurement of these language components, however, is still far from clear. Confirmatory factor analyses, correlations and principal component analyses are among the statistical procedures employed in testing, and in our studies on writing, several of these statistical analyses have been used.

The third issue to be considered when reflecting on the instruments used is whether those components develop in parallel or not, that is to say, whether becoming a better writer involves being more accurate, fluent, and also more lexically and syntactically complex. If the four components do not develop in line with one another, it might be appropriate to further explore whether, as suggested by Skehan and Foster (1999), accuracy is achieved at the expense of both lexical and syntactic complexity or if, as suggested by the work of Robinson (2001), a highly demanding task will trigger both accuracy and lexical and

syntactic complexity at the expense of fluency. Several of our studies have partially addressed these last issues.

Navés (2007) conducted an exploratory factor analysis with older school-age students from Grades 11 and 12 who had received exactly the same number of hours of instruction (either 726 or 850 hours) and found that most of the variance could be best described using five, not just four components, as in the first principal component analysis in Celaya *et al.* (2001b). Four of the components were easy to label because in one component all the measures dealing with *error-free production units* could be found. In a second component, well-established measures of syntactic complexity involving finite subordination were found. *Essay length* constituted another of the components, while classical lexical variety measures such as McClure's (1991) *lexical variety* constituted another. Interestingly enough, however, *mean production units* such as *words per clause*, *words per sentence* and *words per t-unit* represented a fifth factor for which the literature has not yet suggested a name. While the two latter measures, *mean sentence length* and *t-unit length*, were also partially loaded on the factor with measures of syntactic complexity, *mean clause length* was only found in this new component. It was suggested that *mean sentence length* and *mean t-unit length* had to do more with syntactic complexity than with fluency, as Ortega (2003) had also suggested in contrast to Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*'s (1998) initial proposal. However, it remains to be seen whether these mean production unit measurements were not of a rather different nature, i.e. did not measure a dimension different from grammatical complexity, in light of those preliminary studies.

In view of the results presented in the first part of this chapter, it could be concluded that our studies found that older learners significantly outperformed the younger learners in all the four domains studied. However, if *mean sentence length* and *clause length* were to be regarded as measures of syntactic complexity, as suggested by Ortega (2003), then the LS would still be significantly outperforming ES in the domains of accuracy, lexical and syntactic complexity, but ES would have caught up with LS in fluency.

The development of writing shows that after 200 hours of instruction, complexity and accuracy develop closely to each other and that they both develop less than fluency in both ES and LS. After 416 hours (T2), fluency is still more highly developed than the other two areas, especially complexity, which is the lowest of the three (see Torras & Celaya, 2001a). Similarly, in the longitudinal study presented in Torras and Celaya (2001b), both intragroup and intergroup longitudinal analyses revealed

that not all the areas of writing proficiency develop in parallel and that an earlier start does not seem to show clear advantages in the development of EFL written production.

The results of the analysis of the Mann-Whitney tests performed in Navés *et al.* (2003) arrange development in the four areas of writing (accuracy, fluency, lexical and syntactic complexity) into two patterns. The variables representing these four areas cluster together in the above-mentioned patterns, which are presented in Figures 5.1 and 5.2. Figure 5.1 shows almost no IL development in complexity as measured

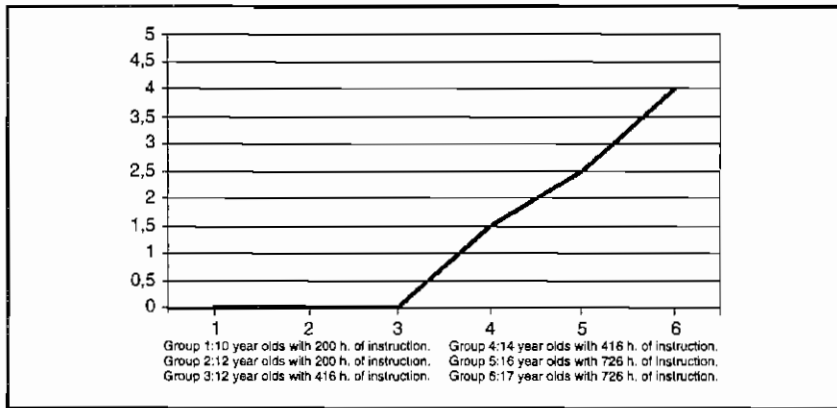


Figure 5.1 IL development in syntactic and lexical complexity

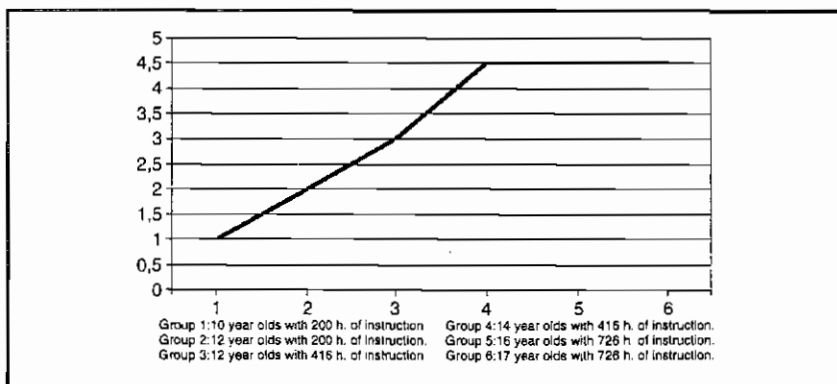


Figure 5.2 IL development in accuracy and fluency (and less sophisticated lexical metrics)

by syntactic complexity measures involving *subordination* and sophisticated measures of lexical complexity such as *adverbs* (tokens and types) and *lexical verbs* (types) in the first three groups of younger learners (aged under 14 with up to 416 hours of instruction). The pattern also shows a steady rise in syntactic complexity involving *subordination* and in *adverbs* (tokens and types) and *lexical verbs* (types) in learners in groups 4–6 (learners over 12 years of age with at least 416 hours of instruction). In short, no syntactic or lexical complexity is found in groups 1–3 (learners under 14 with up to 416 hours of instruction), while syntactic and lexical complexity steadily increases in groups 4–6 (learners over 14 with either 416 or 726 hours of instruction).

Figure 5.2 shows a steady development in accuracy (*error-free sentences*), fluency (*essay length*) and less sophisticated lexical metrics involving *nouns* and *adjectives* in the first four groups of younger learners (those under 16 years of age after 200 and 416 hours of instruction). This development suddenly stops in the two older groups (over 16 with 726 hours of instruction). In short, accuracy and fluency increase steadily in groups 1–4 but stop improving in groups 5 and 6.

Interestingly enough, the behavior of learners in group 3, the 12-year-old learners with 416 hours of instruction, shows that they seem to cope with the demands not only of accuracy and fluency, but also of syntactic and lexical complexity. Group 3 learners' writing pattern shows that the four language domains (accuracy, fluency, syntactic and lexical complexity) are developing in tandem.

It could be concluded from an examination of the first four groups of learners (aged under 14 with up to 416 hours of instruction) that accuracy and fluency develop in tandem. There seems to be no lexical or syntactic complexity development in the first stages of writing. However, an examination of the two older groups of learners (groups 5 and 6 aged over 16 with 726 hours of instruction) reveals that syntactic and lexical complexity is achieved at the expense of accuracy and fluency.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

When taken as a whole, the studies reported in the last section lead to the following two main conclusions: first, in a FL school context, in the long run, i.e. after more than 700 hours of instruction over a period of seven or nine years, it is the older learners, not the ES, who still significantly outperform the younger learners in most writing domains; second, the trade-offs of accuracy and syntactic complexity predicted by the Limited Attentional Capacity Model were found for the older and

more proficient learners in groups 5 and 6 (aged 16 and 17 who had received 726 hours of instruction). Their writing complexity is still steadily improving while accuracy and fluency have already stopped. Learners in groups 5 and 6 seem to increase their syntactic and lexical complexity at the expense of accuracy and fluency. Interestingly enough, the behavior of learners in group 3, however, corroborates the Cognition Hypothesis, because the 12-year-old learners with 416 hours of instruction in group 4 seem to cope with the demands not only of accuracy and fluency, but also of syntactic and lexical complexity. Group 3 learners' writing pattern shows that the four language domains (accuracy, fluency, syntactic and lexical complexity) are developing in tandem for these 12-year-olds with 416 hours of instruction.

The development of the various aspects of writing shown by the younger groups of learners with fewer hours of instruction (groups 1–3 aged under 14 with up to 416 hours of instruction) can be explained by both hypotheses. For the Limited Attentional Capacity Model, it would be clear evidence that accuracy and fluency are achieved at the expense of complexity. For the Cognition Hypothesis, however, it would show that for complexity to develop, learners need to be sufficiently proficient.

We fully agree with Muñoz (2006b, 2007) that there are fundamental differences between L2 and FL learning with respect to the amount and quality of the input learners receive. These differences have a significant influence on the effects that the starting age has on the rate and outcome of the learning process. In other words, the assumption that learning age will have the same effect on students of a FL, when they are exposed to limited speakers of the target language in only one setting (the classroom) and only for very limited amounts of time, is not confirmed by empirical research. Empirical studies in L2 contexts have shown that individuals who begin to learn a L2 very early in life are slower at first but generally attain higher levels of proficiency than those who start at a later stage. Our results show that, similar to L2 contexts, in a FL context older learners are faster at first, and, as regards the focus of the present chapter, i.e. writing, they do better than their younger peers. However, contrary to what was found in L2 contexts and predicted by Krashen *et al.* (1979) and Long (1990), in the long run (after 7 or 9 years) in a formal FL context, after the same amount of instruction it is still the LS who outperform their peers in writing. The long-term advantage of an early start found in L2 contexts does not appear in FL settings in schools for cognitively demanding tasks such as writing. Differences between

empirical research conducted in naturalistic and in FL contexts can be explained by two factors:

- (1) The same length of time, 10 years, for example, entails an intensity and quality of exposure to the target language that is radically different in foreign versus second language learning contexts. As predicted by researchers such as DeKeyser (2000, 2001) and DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005), with the limited exposure to the language provided in the EFL context, the possible benefits of an early start are not confirmed.
- (2) The findings in the BAF studies on age-related factors and writing can be interpreted in light of the differences between implicit and explicit learning which is characteristic of children and young adults, and the superior cognitive maturity of the older learners (DeKeyser, 2000, 2001).

The second general finding of our studies shows an effect of age on the use of the L1 in writing, as younger learners resort to the L1 in more direct ways than older learners.

Finally, our studies have confirmed that the areas of accuracy, fluency, lexical and syntactic complexity do not develop in parallel. The development of the older and more proficient learners' writing (groups 5 and 6 aged over 16 with 726 hours of instruction) matches the prediction of the Limited Attentional Capacity Model, as syntactic and lexical complexity seem to be achieved at the expense of accuracy and fluency. However, the writing pattern observed in group 3 at 12 years of age with 416 hours of instruction seems to corroborate the Cognition Hypothesis, as both accuracy and complexity are achieved. The preliminary factor analyses conducted showed that instead of the traditional four writing components, we might need to consider a new construct that will account for mean production unit measures. The measurement of learners' language in writing by means of analytical measures calls for further methodological studies, not only in order to allow comparison between more proficient and less proficient, older and younger learners and between L2 and FL learners, but also because what some measures gauge is still unclear.

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Appendix

Sample from learners' compositions

My life is like a narrow road. I've passed my whole life learning. I can imagine that everybody has lived like me, but I feel like an animal in a jail. It's quite pathetic but it's true. Although I've had my 'glory' moments, such as the day my brother was born. He was born the fourth of December of 1996, and this has been an spectacular experience for me. However I've always been a happy girl and now I'm becoming a happy woman. After finishing HS I want to become a Social Assistant, which is not the dream I've had ever since as I've always expected to become a nurse like my mother. The situation, and especially my marks made me change and I've decided that becoming a Social Assistant is what I really want. I can't say more about my future because I'm not as Rappel, so these are my earlier projects.

(ID: 699; ES aged 17 from Grade 11 with 726 hours of instruction)

When I was a child, I was a friendly girl who was always playing. I liked animals and I used to play with dogs and cats. Now, I haven't got time to dedicate it to animals. I have to study a good career and can't be an independent woman. Although I haven't got a lot of time in my free time, I play basketball, I go out with my friends and I ride bike because I like to fun.

On the other hand, I also like to stay with my family we do trips with our friends and we do camping in summer. We like the beach and sea very much and on holidays go to the coast.

(ID: 671; ES aged 17 from Grade 11 with 726 hours of instruction)