DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 051 CS 205 771

AUTHOR	Vann, Roberta J.
TITLE	Oral and Written Language Relationships: The Question of Universals.
PUB DATE	Nov 79
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (69th, San Francisco, CA, November 22-24, 1979).
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Research; *Language Acquisition; *Language Skills; *Learning Theories; *Oral Language; Relationship; *Second Language Learning; Speech Skills; Writing Skills; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

This summary of the literature on the relationships between oral and written language points out that (1) there is a similarity between first language acquisition and second language learning, and (2) children acquiring English as their first language and English-speaking adults learning a foreign language exhibit similar syntactic maturity. Also discussed are the results and implications of a study of adult Arabic-speakers learning English that indicated that these nonnative speakers tended to differentiate English oral and written expressive styles in ways similar to native speakers. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED191051

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Roberta J. Vann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE RELATIONSHIPS:
THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSALS

Roberta J. Vann

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to inform teachers and researchers in English Education of what we have recently learned concerning oral and written language relationships, particularly among adult foreign language learners. First, the author discusses findings which support the similarity of first language acquisition and second language learning. Second, she reviews research on the concept of syntactic maturity among children acquiring English as their first language and English-speaking adults learning a foreign language. Third, she discusses a study she conducted using adult Arabic-speakers who were learning English in the United States. Results of the study indicate that this group of non-native speakers tended to differentiate English oran and written expressive styles in ways similar to native speakers. This suggests the possibility of certain universals in this relationship. Finally, the author discusses the implications of this for teachers.

As a teacher, I am well aware of the sense of frustration of teachers, who, unprepared in the area of teaching English as a second language or dialect, find themselves thrust into a situation of dealing with one or more of these "non-traditional" students in the language arts classroom. While I recognize our immediate needs for nuts-and-bolts answers to these problems, I see an even more important need--the need for basic research on questions concerning how human beings learn language. Without investigation into such questions as the psycholinguistic relationship between our oral and written language, much of our classroom methods must necessarily be based on trial-and-error. On the other hand, sound language learning

S22577

research enables us to refine our theory of language learning and language growth and thus to develop more effective teaching methods in this area.

So rather than deal with the nuts-and-bolts issues of classroom teaching, I want first to summarize the research concerning the relationship of first and second language learning and that relationship specifically in terms of how first and second language learners grow in syntactic maturity.

For some time it was believed that there was a fundamental difference between first and second language learning, and thus no need to develop a common theory. However, in recent years, several researchers have pointed out similarities in the two processes. For instance, we know that both first and second language learners make use of language transfer in the sense that they build on previously-acquired knowledge (Erwin-Tripp, 1974). We also see similar use of congitive processes such as over-generalization of rules. The toddler who says "he goed" for "he went" or the French speaker who concludes that if mice is the plural of mouse then blice is the plural of blouse, indicate through their errors that they are making certain constructive hypotheses about the way English works; in fact without such hypothesizing none of us would ever learn a language at all. We see a great deal of evidence of this over-generali[illegible] tion of the target lang[illegible] child and adult language learners. In English, for example, [illegible] the langu[illegible] stages regularizing t[illegible] form, t[illegible] rea[illegible] he go." These same [illegible] omit the BE) [illegible] structures such as [illegible] a[illegible] neglect or simp[illegible] prepositions, and pr[illegible] [illegible]ac[illegible] construction[illegible] example, coordinate structures are typically used in preference to complex ones, and active voice is preferred over passive. In non-classroom learning situations, one can observe the similarity of both the form and the function of sentences by those who are acquiring a first or second language. So although the extent to which first and second learning are related is still argued, that both involve a systematic and rule-governed development and that learners of either their first or second language tend to employ oversimplified grammatical structures is now widely accepted.

Common folk-wisdom also gives us insight into the similarity of first and second language acquisition. The way we talk to babies and the way we talk to foreigners is remarkably similar. That is, we use similar structures when we speak to either babies or foreigners, making our adjustments on the basis of the complexity of the responses we receive from the person addressed. Characteristic of both of these registers is the notion of simplicity--uninflected forms; verbs limited to infinitives, imperative or third person singular; and certain omissions: the verb BE, prepositions and articles (Ferguson, 1971).

Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to English. A few years ago when I was living in Poland, Polish friends used to remark that they enjoyed hearing me speak my uninflected version of their language with its conspicuous absence of certain consonant clusters. They said I sounded "charming like a little child." More interesting, they had an intuitive sense, just as we all do, of knowing how to speak in a special register which both the toddler and the adult foreigner would find relatively comprehensible. This implies that, at least in terms of folk grammars, speaker-listeners unconsciously acknowledge certain similarities between first and second language learning, regardless of the age of the speakers.

Thus we have support for certain similarities between first and second language acquisition not only from linguistic analysis of the sturctures these learners use while in the process of learning a language, but also from observation of how we respond to those learners, whether they are young children or adults. Although one could look at similarities in this relationship between first and second language acquisition in a number of areas including pronunciation and lexical choice, I want to focus here on the concept of syntactic maturity.

Intuitively we realize that some structures are probably more difficult than others both for the child acquiring English or for the person learning English as a foreign language. Let us take relative clause constructions as an example. In the early stages of language development it is virtually impossible for the child to use such a construction and similarly it is typically one of the last structures mastered by the foreign learner. When a two year, four month old child was asked to repeat certain adult sentences containing relative clauses, he reduced these to his own level of syntactic maturity. Thus the adult's "The man who I saw yesterday got wet" was imitated by the child as "I saw the man and he got wet." Similarly, the adult's "The man [illegible] I saw yesterday runs fast" was repeated by the child as a coordinate structure: "I saw the man and he run fast." As children grow, their syntax grows, moving from the one-word sentence at about the age of one year to the multi-propositional sentence at some point when we have learned the target language, never a point of stasis, but rather a continuing process of maturation (Shuy, 1979).

Kellogg Hunt (19[illegible]) investigated this phenomenon of syntactic matu in the writing samples of school children in grades 4, 8 and 12 as well in the writing of skilled adults. As a measure of syntactic maturity, Hunt introduced the "T-unit," consisting of one main clause plus any subordinate clause on non-clausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it. Thus, in the examples used earlier, the sentence: "The man who I saw yesterday runs fast" consists of a single eight-word T-unit, while the child's imitation: "I saw the man and he run fast" contains 2 four-word T-units.

Hunt found that as students grew older, they tended to write longer T-units. Skilled writers in his investigation carried the tendency even further by producing lengthier clauses. Thus older subjects tended to combine sentences, reducing to words and phrases what younger subjects would write as whole sentences. The result was that older subjects packed a greater number of propositions into fewer words.

Two years after Hunt's study, O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967) investigated the syntactic resources of children in speech and writing, again utilizing the T-unit. Like Hunt, O'Donnell found that at every grade level, [illegible] length of the T-unit increased. However, T-units were longer [illegible] than in written expression in grade 3, while longer [illegible] writ[illegible]es and 7. The data suggest that as children progress in sch[illegible]y learn to control their writing more carefully than their speech, a finding which has support in previous studies of child language development, including Lull (1929) and Harrell (1957).

A second important study dealing with oral and written language relationships was conducted by Walter Loban. In 1953 he began to collect data for a longitudinal study of the language development of a group of kindergarten children that he followed through 12th grade. Loban's so-called "communication unit" closely resembled Hunt's T-unit. Both researchers also accounted for linguistic tangles, false starts and redundancies termed "garbles" by some researchers and called "mazes" by Loban.

Like Hunt and O'Donnell, Loban agreed that subordination was probably an important clue to syntactic development. Loban also pointed out that proficient speakers and writers use a variety of phrasal structures and other strategies to compress ideas and to replace dependent clauses with phrases.

In summary, studies examining the oral and written relationship of native-speaker discourse have resulted in the following findings:

1) Spoken texts are approximately six times longer than their written counterparts produced in the same length of time. Spoken texts also tend to have relatively more noun clauses, while written discourse contains more adverb and adjective clauses.

2) The relative number of words produced in both oral and written discourse in a given time tends to increase with the age and proficiency of the school age subject. This is also true of the number of clauses, communication units or T-units, and the mean number of words per unit.

3) Somewhere between grades 3 and 5 a marked change seems to occur in which written proficiency overtakes oral proficiency in most subjects.

4) More proficient subjects tend to use expressions of tentativeness (conditional, hypothetical, and suppositional) more often than the less proficient.

5) While similar structures are used by all writers, more mature writers use those produced by sentence-combining transformations more frequently. This includes reducing to words and phrases what younger writers would write as sentences.

6) The best indicators of syntactic maturity in native-speaking school children are average length of T-units, clause length, and number of clauses per T-unit.

In recent years, the concept of syntactic maturity has been applied to second language learning. Thornhill's 1969 dissertation was one of the earliest studies to center around the hypothesis that second language learning recapitulates first language acquisition and to use the T-unit of segmentation. Using four adult Spanish speakers studying English, Thornhill made eight weekly taped conversations. He found that in terms of the structural patterns of main clauses, mean T-unit length and incidences of sentence-combining transformations, there were many parallels with first language acquisition.

In 1975 Monroe also conducted a study using the T-unit to analyze second language learning development. This time the target language was French rather than English and the subjects ranged from American students in beginning French to French native speakers. Monroe found that in the first stage subjects used coordination, in the next stage subordination, and in the advanced stage clausal reduction--use of phrases and words where less mature writers might use whole sentences or clauses. So for example, we might go from: "The boy is five and the boy has red hair" at the beginning level, to "The boy who has red hair is five" at the intermediate level, to "The red-headed boy is five" at the advanced level. Monroe pointed out that this technique of subordinating seems to be learned very early in second language development. This implies a speeding up of the developmental process we see in first language learners. A study similar to Monroe's conducted by Cooper in 1976 using American subjects studying German, confirmed Monroe's findings.

In the most general sense, findings point toward a process of syntactic development among second language learners similar to that among first language learners, but with an apparent acceleration of the process. That is, beginning second language learners do tend to use coordinate constructions, followed by subordination at the next stage, and afterwards clausal reduction, but development is relatively rapid and the trend characterized more by peaks and valleys than by the clear linear trend reported with first language learners.

Thus far I have discussed the relationship of adult second language learning to child language acquisition, but said almost about comparative discourse; that is, the relationship of a speaker's oral to his/her written language. A study I conducted deals specifically with this topic by examining paired oral and written discourse of a group of 28 adult native speakers of Arabic studying English in the United States. Methodology in the study was based largely on previous research using native speakers. Subjects in my study watched a short film containing no narration. After seeing the film, half of the group (randomly chosen) responded to the film in an oral interview, while the other half discussed the film in a written composition. Data were analyzed using the T-unit for segmentation. Five indices of language proficiency were used to analyze oral and written discourse: 1) mean length of T-units, 2) percentage of dependent clauses to T-units, 3) percentage of mazes (false starts, gibberish, and non-meaningful redundancies) to total discourse, 4) mean length of error-free T-units, and 5) percentage of error-free T-units to total T-units.

Although the T-unit has limitations, especially in the oral data of non-native speakers where the frequency of mazes sometimes makes analysis difficult, certain aspects of the analysis from this study can be compared with findings from similar studies using children acquiring their mother tongue.

1) Oral compositions were almost twice as long as written ones, although oral segments represented only one-fourth the time allotment of written ones (5 minutes of oral taping versus 20 minutes of writing). These results are similar to those of other studies which have compared oral and written discourse of native speakers.

2) Mazes were plentiful in speech and rare in writing. This is similar to Logan's finding with native-speaking school children.

3) Both mean length of T-units and mean length of error-free T-units were longer in written than in oral discourse. O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967:81)) report that in their study with native-speaking children, mean length was greater in oral than in written expression until grade 3 after which the trend reversed. Loban (1976) reported a similar phenomenon around grade 4. Thus the subjects in the present study appear to have more in common with the more advanced elementary school pupils.

4) The ratio of adverbial and adjectival clauses to T-units was higher in written than in oral language, expecially in the case of adjectival constructions, the percentage of which more than doubled in written expression.

These findings suggest that the adult foreign language learners in this study, similarly to native speakers (after about grade three or four) in previous studies, tend to use a more elaborative and more strictly controlled written than oral style. It is elaborative in the sense that T-units are longer with a larger percentage of adverb and adjective clauses, and more strictly controlled in that fewer words are produced in a given time allotment with mazes representing a very small proportion of these words. Still open to speculation, however, is the question of how much this is a function of language training, in the case of the subjects in this study training in English in a Western country which presumably exposed students to a more elaborative and finely controlled written style as opposed to a more free oral style characterized by shorter syntactic units.

Although the small number of subjects in this study and the problems inherent in comparing studies with differing methodologies limit the conclusions we can draw, this study does offer additional support for the similarity of first language acquisition and second language learning. This comparability seems to exist even when the first and second language learners are separated by age, language and educational experience, and cultural background. Although still speculative, this study also opens up the research question of how universal this phenomenon might be.

What does this imply for the classroom teacher of language arts or English as a foreign language? Perhaps that our students are closer to one another in their language development than we previously assumed, whether 3 or 30, whether American or Arabian, whether from a traditionally oral or written culture. Perhaps age is a less potent factor in learning development than we previously have assumed. This might mean that "stages" rather than "ages" would be the key word in ideal curriculum planning. Certainly, this should be taken as a sign for optimism for language learners of all ages and their teachers.

REFERENCES

Ausubel, D. 1964. Adults versus children in second language learning: psychological considerations. Modern Language Journal 48: 420-424.

Cooper, T. 1976. Measuring written syntactic patterns of second language learners of German. Journal of Educational Research 69: 176-183.

Erwin-Tripp, S. 1974. Is second language learning like the first? TESOL Quarterly 9: 111-129.

Hunt, K. 1965. Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels. Research Report No. 3, Champaign-Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Larsen-Freeman, D. and V. Strom. 1977. The construction of a second language acquisition index of development. Language Learning 27: 123-124.

Loban, W. 1976. Language Development: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve. Research Report No. 18. Champaign-Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Monroe, J. 1975. Measuring and enhancing syntactic fluency in French. The French Review 48: 1023-1031.

O'Donnell, R.; W. Griffin and R. C. Norris. 1967. Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis. Research Report No. 8. Champaign-Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Scott, M. and R. Tucker. 1974. Error analysis and English language strategies of Arabic students. Language Learning 24: 69-97.

Shuy, R. 1979. Language policy in medicine: some emerging issues. Paper presented at the 30th Annual Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.

Slobin, Dan I., and C. Welsh. 1973. Elicited imitation as a research tool in developmental psycholinguistics. In Ferguson, C. and Slobin, D. (Eds) Studies of Child Language Development. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Thornhill, D. 1970. A quantitative analysis of the development of syntactical fluency of four young adult Spanish speakers learning English. Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University.

Vann, R. A study of the relationship of the oral and written English of adult Arabic speakers (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1978).