



The effects of task complexity on the complexity of the second language written production

Umi Kalsom Masrom, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia

Nik Aloesnita Nik Mohd Alwi, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Malaysia

Nor Shidrah Mat Daud, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of manipulating task complexity on the complexity of learner language production during asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) writing tasks. This study draws the construct of cognitive complexity indicated in Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson 2001a, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007a, 2007b) which predicts that complex tasks made along resource-directing dimension will lead to greater complexity of language production while complex tasks made along resource-dispersing dimension will result in less complex language production. However, research on the effects of manipulating task complexity along both resource-directing and resource-dispersing dimensions is so far inconclusive.

By means of an experimental design, 88 undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) students in a public Malaysian university were asked to perform different tasks manipulated along resource-directing (+/- causal reasoning demand) and resource-dispersing (+/- task structure) dimensions. The complexity of the writing was analyzed syntactically and lexically. For syntactic complexity, the general and dependent clauses measures were used whereas Lexical Frequency Profile (Laufer & Nation, 1995) and Guiraud's Index (Guiraud, 1960) were used to measure lexical complexity. This study employs Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to measure the effects of task complexity and the complexity of language production. Results showed that the manipulation of task complexity has a significant effect on certain measures of syntactic and lexical complexity of the language production.

Keywords: task complexity, complexity of language production, resource-directing, resource-dispersing, task-based instruction