



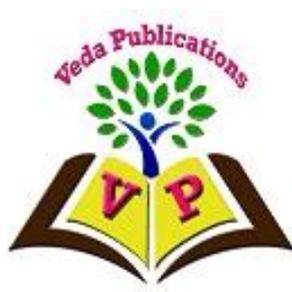
## MORE NOT ALWAYS BETTER: REFLECTIONS ON NUANCES IN MARKING GROWTH IN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Dr. Deepesh Chandrasekharan

(SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, India.)

Email: [deepeshc@ssn.edu.in](mailto:deepeshc@ssn.edu.in)

### ABSTRACT



Growth in language proficiency is usually marked, including in the CEFR, by a growth shown in the ability to use certain sentence constructions and vocabulary (phrases and words). These are usually indicated as broad growth trends, but the greater or less use of these features would depend on the task at hand. Some of these should be considered markers of growth only when the language user uses the language structure less for certain kinds of tasks.

The argument made in this paper is that more of all is not necessarily better and that the nature of the language task would determine whether the use of a certain sentence construction is a sign of growth or not. By considering the use of three sample language features – relative clauses, dummy subjects (*it* and *there*) – and passive voice constructions, it is argued that depending on the task type, proficient users use these features differently. Greater use of the features mentioned is seen in tasks which involve observation and description of phenomena, whereas the use of these features is reduced by proficient users in tasks involving introspection and personal reflection. The reasons may vary from task to task, and it may be argued that this is due to the context-embedded/context-reduced dichotomy or due to the difference between 'describing the external world' in the former type of task vs 'describing one's own feelings' in the latter reflective task. Whatever the reason, the fact that language use depends on the task type has implication for institutions involved in assessment and in delineating markers of proficiency growth, because a blanket criterion under 'features that show growth' will fail to capture the realities of actual language use.

**Keywords:** *Growth, Language, Proficiency, Genres.*

*Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

Copyright © 2017 VEDA Publications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

**INTRODUCTION**

Evaluators of language development the world over follow frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as tools to help assess growth in language abilities. The CEFR provides broad guidelines in the specific skills and areas of language, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as in grammar and use of vocabulary to help put language use into the grades ranging from A1 (Basic user) to C2 (Proficient user). Worldwide tests such as TOEFL, IELTS etc., commonly use this as reference for evaluation.

Users of the CEFR follow the reference levels in typical ways. For example, "Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices" is the description for level C1 and this is interpreted to mean that the user is able to use sentence structures (such as the passive voice) effectively.

It is generally seen that the broad statements made as reference levels in CEFR are interpreted to mean that the greater use of certain language features that appear along the developmental scale of a second language user is seen as a sign of growth.

**BACKGROUND/CONTEXT**

The argument made in this paper is that the tendency to evaluate the greater use of a language feature (such as passive voice), the use of which is seen as a sign of higher language proficiency, is deeply problematic.

The paper focuses on the use of language features in writing. When a language user shows greater incidence of certain language features such as the use of relative pronouns in writing, she/he is not necessarily displaying better felicity in the language. The task in which such features are used

should be a factor that determines whether greater or less use of that feature is a sign of language competence.

**THE STUDY**

The study was conducted by me as a teacher-researcher in a secondary school in Chennai at the class VIII level. Multilingual students with reasonable fluency in English were part of the study and these students were made to write on several topics in different genres across a period of four months. The 14 tasks included those where they had to describe, reflect, narrate, compare, express preferences and justify them, express opinions, explain phenomena etc.

Ten of these tasks were zeroed in on, as samples of significant writing, with at least a few lines written as writing sample. The student writing samples were not evaluated generically using the 'content, fluency, accuracy' template used by CBSE, the school Board to which the students' school is affiliated. Instead, these tasks were divided into two categories and the incidences of the occurrence of certain language features were enumerated in order to assess language growth. Instinctively, greater occurrence of a certain language feature was deemed to be a sign of growth. The two broad categories the tasks were divided into based on the genre of writing involved or its task-type were those based on description of external phenomena and those belonging to what can be called tasks of personal reflection. Six tasks were thus categorized as descriptive tasks and the remaining four as personal reflection tasks, as shown in the table below. The table also briefly describes what students were asked to do for each task.

**Table 1. Summary of selected tasks as descriptive or personal reflection tasks**

Task Number		Task description
Personal reflection	Descriptive	
	1	Describe an Indian and a Pakistani
2		Writing about one's name and good/bad experience
4		Literacy as personal history
	5	Bio-sketch of Kalpana Chawla



7		Naming and prejudice: Writing about their choice of engineer
	8	Ethical advertising
9		Topdog & Underdog: Personal reflection on power
	11	Gender and language
	12	Language and advertising
	14	Summative feedback

Writing was optional for each of the tasks given in class and since attendance was not compulsory, all students did not produce responses for all tasks. Writing samples of a few students were focused on, because they had responded to at least three of the 14 tasks given in class, and their writing was significant both in terms of size (number of words) and the nature of response (appropriate response to the task at hand). The students are SAY,<sup>1</sup> HIM, HAR, UTA, SUM, DAN, NIS, ANJ, MAY, AAD, VID and DIA for the descriptive tasks and SAY, DIA, HIM, DAN, HAR, UTA, NIS, ANJ, MAY and VAR for the personal reflection tasks. The study therefore has as its sample only nine students, namely, SAY, DIA, HIM, DAN, HAR, UTA, NIS, ANJ, and MAY, since their responses are shortlisted in both categories in question – descriptive and personal reflection tasks.

Since most responses of the class VIII students were not elaborate and very detailed, and were at most 10-12 lines long, they were evaluated based on the incidence of certain language features – the complexity of sentences (simple-compound-complex), the use of relative clauses, the use of dummy subjects, repetition of words/phrases, and the use of passive voice. The higher occurrence or use of these language features is generally considered to reflect better language proficiency, and therefore across the tasks, which are numbered chronologically, growth can be captured through the measurement of the greater occurrence or use of the increasing complexity of each of these features.

#### i) Complexity of sentences

Some researchers have pointed out that moving from simple sentences to compound and complex sentences in writing can be recognized as improvement when one considers the developmental pattern of writing in English as a second language. Initial writing is often seen to involve just simple sentences. The use of compound and complex sentences in writing succeeds this stage in writing chronology, and therefore this is a natural conclusion to draw. Formal academic writing includes a dense use of complex (and compound) sentences and a rarer use of simple ones (Bard, n.d.).

Seven of the nine students showed a reduction in the proportionate number of simple sentences in their responses across the personal reflection tasks. This was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the use of complex sentences in their responses across the same tasks.

**Table 2. Use of sentence complexity across personal reflection tasks**

Task No.	SAY			DIA			HIM			DAN			HAR			UTA			NIS			ANJ			MAY		
	S <sup>2</sup>	Cd	Cx	S	Cd	Cx																					
2	16	1	4	1	2	7	9	2	2	7	8	2	11	2	6	1	4	5	7	2	7	3	-	8	6	2	6
4	14	5	10				8	2	3	6	3	9	2	2	10	5	-	9	7	3	2	13	3	1	10	3	9
9	10	4	9	11	-	7	11	1	5	2	2	9	3	3	5	5	1	8	7	1	11	2	1	9	3	1	9

Most of the students' responses for the descriptive tasks too showed the same kind of growth – reduced use of simple sentences and increased use of complex sentences.

<sup>1</sup> I have used three letters of each student's name to protect their privacy on the one hand and to respect them as individuals with an identity and not reduce them to numbers and codes on the other. Only in cases where the three letters are identical for two students, a fourth letter was added for both.

<sup>2</sup> S stands for simple sentences, Cd for compound sentences and Cx for complex ones among this writing

**Table 3. Use of sentence complexity across descriptive tasks**

Task No.	SAY			DIA			HIM			DAN			HAR			UTA			NIS			ANJ			MAY		
	S	Cd	Cx																								
1	9	2	1	3	3	3	10	0	0	3	3	2	11	2	6	-	-	-	8	2	1	2	0	4	10	0	2
5	6	1	1	3	3	0	-	-	-	5	1	0	6	1	7	4	0	2	-	-	-	3	1	1	-	-	-
8	-	-	-	3	3	0	2	0	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	4	5	-	-	-
9	-	-	-	4	0	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	5	2	3	-	-	-	5	1	4	-	-	-	2	5	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	2	2	6	-	-	-	1	2	4	4	4	4	1	1	6	1	3	2	4	2	4	-	-	-	5	1	9
14	16	1	7	-	-	-	13	1	12	17	4	7	14	5	12	4	2	10	23	8	7	-	-	-			

**ii) Use of relative clauses**

The use of relative clauses is a sign of higher language capabilities, as it is an indication of the student's ability to refer to a noun in descriptive terms within a sentence using an anaphoric expression. This ability is naturally seen in descriptive tasks, and is corroborated by the analysis of written responses, where over half of the number of students showed an increased use of relative clauses in these tasks. However, most of the students showed no increase in their use of relative clauses in their responses to personal reflection tasks.

**Table 4. Use of relative clauses across personal reflection tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
2	3	5	1	-	-	2	5	-	1
4	2	-	1	5	4	1	2	1	2
7	3	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	2	2	2	1	1	1	-	-	2

**Table 5. Use of relative clauses across descriptive tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
1	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	5	-	4	1	1	1	-	-	3
14	6	-	11	2	4	1	-	-	1

This is not an accidental occurrence. The students in question are reasonably fluent in the language and their writing can be deemed to be representative of the writing of a typical second language user of English. This definitely means that the average second language user of English uses fewer relative clauses in tasks that involve reflecting on one's own experiences, but uses more of them in descriptive tasks. Does this also mean that most language users use less of certain features in tasks that involve personal reflection than they do in descriptive tasks? This generalization can only be made if similar use can be noticed with other language features.

**iii) Use of dummy subjects**

Ample research has suggested that the use of semantically empty forms like dummy subjects like *it* and *there* require higher language abilities than the use of 'actual' subjects. Learning to use dummy subjects is a common problem in ESL learning, especially for first-language users of pro-drop languages (such as most Indian languages) (Hinkel, 2012).



The ability to use a 'dummy subject' correctly in writing can thus be taken as a sign of growth. Most of the students, whose responses have been analyzed for the descriptive tasks, show an increased ability to use dummy subjects in their responses. One can conclude that a descriptive task lends itself to greater use of a dummy subject. The same cannot be said for other tasks like personal reflection ones, because the latter type involves a sort of introspection—a looking within. If one looks at what Jim Cummins says about context-embedded and context-reduced tasks, these tasks are highly context-embedded ones. A description task, in contrast, is much more context-reduced, and is more a 'looking outside' and therefore the average student can use dummy subjects more effectively in descriptive tasks. For example, to write a bio-sketch of a well-known personality, or to describe an Indian or Pakistani doesn't involve introspection but observation of external phenomena. In contrast, one needs to reflect on one's own name, one's own personal history and equations within the family in the personal reflection tasks. One tends not to use a dummy subject in these tasks.

This different occurrence of dummy subject use between the two types of tasks stands testimony to the hypothesis made earlier that the greater use of certain language features depends on the task-type. In the personal reflection tasks, less than half of the students in focus showed an increased use of dummy subjects. Two students showed a decrease in such use, and four others either showed not much change or used no dummy subjects throughout their responses.

**Table 6. Use of dummy subjects across personal reflection tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1
4	3	-	-	4	-	-	-	1	1
7	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	3	4	-	2	1	2	1	1	8

**Table 7. Use of dummy subjects across descriptive tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	4	-	4	1	-	1	2	-	3
14	-	-	11	2	1	1	7	-	1

This tendency attests to the idea that the task determines whether individuals use certain language features for a task or not.

#### iv) Use of passive voice

ELT researchers (Pienemann et.al, 2005) have argued that the ability to use the passive voice reflects improved language abilities and that using it is more complicated than using active voice constructions in sentences.

Again, as seen in some of the features of language mentioned above, there can be difference in the use of this language feature. The passive voice involves a certain distancing from the subject and this objective stance is possible while writing a descriptive task. In contrast, in a personal reflection task, the use of active voice may be considered more suitable and appropriate. Language users who use more passive voice constructions in descriptive tasks and fewer of them in personal reflection tasks can be assessed as better users of this language feature.

This is attested by the way selected students use passive voice in the different types of tasks. Several students showed inconsistency in their use of this feature. In the descriptive tasks, four students clearly showed an



overall increase in their use of the passive voice across responses. Three students showed fewer instances of passive voice use over the period.

**Table 8. Use of passive voice across descriptive tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
1	1	3	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
5	3	2	-	1	-	1	-	1	-
8	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
14	2	-	2	1	3	-	4	-	5

The opposite trend can be seen in the personal reflection task type. Most of the students showed a general reduction in their use of the passive voice over the four-month period. The others used no passive voice in any of the personal reflection tasks. In the last two tasks under consideration, no passive voice was used.

**Table 9. Use of passive voice across personal reflection tasks**

Task No.	SAY	DIA	HIM	DAN	HAR	UTA	NIS	ANJ	MAY
2	6	3	-	4	-	1	1	-	-
4	9	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-
7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The table below summarizes the findings when all the criteria mentioned above are applied to the selected students' responses across tasks:

**Table 10. Summary of growth along language features**

Language feature	Increased/decreased use across descriptive tasks	Increased/decreased use across personal reflection tasks
<b>Complexity of sentences</b>	Almost all students showed increased use of complex sentences and reduced use of simple sentences	Almost all students showed increased use of complex sentences and reduced use of simple sentences
<b>Relative clauses</b>	Half the students showed an increased use in their responses	Most students showed no increased use in responses
<b>Dummy subjects</b>	Most students showed an increased ability to use them	Most students showed no increased use in responses
<b>Passive voice</b>	Most students who showed trends showed an increase in use	Most students showed consistent reduction in use

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

Except for the feature of sentence complexity which consistently showed an increase across tasks irrespective of the nature of tasks, the other features clearly showed that students show an increase or a corresponding decrease in the use of language features depending on whether the task is a descriptive task or a personal reflection one.

This has implications for assessment of language proficiency. Blanket statements that simply declare that increased use of the passive voice, relative clauses or the dummy subject indicate growth in language proficiency need to be replaced by more nuanced statements that take into consideration the fact that capable users of the language change the use of these features depending on the nature of the task.



Teachers and other evaluators of language use need to factor this in while assessing individuals' use of language in writing in the language classroom.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bard, P. (nd). Simple Sentences & Their Complexities [Lecture notes]. Retrieved from [http://www2.gsu.edu/eslhp/grammar/lecture\\_9/simple.html](http://www2.gsu.edu/eslhp/grammar/lecture_9/simple.html)
  2. Council of Europe (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
  3. Cummins, J. (2001). Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*. 71 (4). 649-676.
  4. Hinkel, E. (2012). Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar. Lawrence Erlbaum:Mahwah, NJ.
  5. Pienemann, M., Di Biase, B., & Kawaguchi, S. (2005). Extending processability theory. In M. Pienemann(Ed.),*Cross-linguistic aspects of Processability Theory*.Amsterdam:John Benjamins.199-256.
-