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# Investigating teachers' perceptions of syntactic complexity in L2 academic writing

*Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder*

## Abstract

*This paper aims to investigate how L2 teachers perceive syntactic complexity in L2 writing, and to what extent teachers' judgements are related to current theoretical views. The main reason for conducting the study is that the majority of studies that have investigated the development of syntactic complexity in L2 have been grounded in hypothesis-testing research; few studies, however, have explored whether teachers' perspectives on syntactic complexity reflect the development of syntactic complexity as hypothesised in the SLA literature. Two groups of language teachers (eleven of L2-Dutch and sixteen of L2-Italian) were asked to evaluate individually the syntactic complexity of a sample of argumentative texts written by L2 university students of, respectively, Dutch and Italian. In the panel discussion that followed, teachers discussed their motivation behind their assigned scores and the feedback they had proposed. The results revealed that teachers tended to focus primarily on accuracy and comprehensibility. When their comments were concerned with syntactic complexity, both similarities and differences (related to target language and writing context) emerged between Dutch and Italian. Teachers' reflections appeared to be only partly aligned with existing theoretical views on syntactic complexity.*

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## Introduction

Syntactic complexity in L2 has been approached from many theoretical angles, addressing a range of L2 learners with different target and source languages, and different proficiency levels (Bulté and Housen 2014; Housen, Kuiken and Vedder 2012; Lambert and Kormos 2014; Lu 2011; Ortega 2003; Vyatkina 2012). In many of these studies, syntactic complexity has been studied as a dependent variable of various task and genre effects (e.g. planning time, number of elements required for task completion, monologic vs dialogic tasks) on oral and written performance (e.g. Ellis and Yuan 2004; Michel, Kuiken and Vedder 2007). Other studies have investigated developmental patterns of syntactic complexity throughout the acquisition process (cf. Polat and Kim 2014). An important concern of this type of research is how syntactic complexity develops over time, in relation to accuracy and fluency, and to lexical and morphological complexity (cf. Norris and Ortega 2009).

The majority of empirical studies that have so far investigated the growth of syntactic complexity in L2 have been grounded in hypothesis-testing, whereas few studies have employed a bottom-up approach by eliciting reflections on syntactic complexity by teachers. To complement the findings of previous research, the goal of the present study is to explore to what extent L2 teachers' perceptions of syntactic complexity reflect current theoretical views and may lead to new insights. As teachers' reflections on syntactic complexity in L2 academic writing may be impacted by particular syntactic features and preferences of the target language and the pedagogic context, the present paper compares teachers' perceptions of syntactic complexity in two different languages and writing contexts, a Germanic language (Dutch) and a Romance language (Italian), in two different settings (Amsterdam and Rome). Two groups of language teachers of L2-Dutch and L2-Italian were asked to assess the syntactic complexity of a sample of argumentative texts written by (future) L2 university students of the two languages, and to provide feedback to the writers. In the panel discussion that followed, they discussed the motivation behind their scores and elaborated on the proposed feedback given to the students.

The rationale behind the study is an attempt to contribute to bridging the gap between research and classroom practice. The study draws on the conviction that teachers and researchers may have a lot to learn from each other. Theory and research findings, on the one hand, may offer teachers

deeper ways of understanding L2 learning and their own classrooms, and may encourage them to explore alternative pedagogical approaches. Conversely, teachers' reflections on what works in the classroom, and what does not and why, may give researchers more insight into language learning 'in the wild', leading to new research questions (Block 2000; Erlam 2008; Mackay, Birello and Xerri 2017).

In the sections that follow, we first describe the background of the study by discussing the literature on teacher opinions on syntactic complexity. The paper then presents the main hypotheses from the SLA literature concerning the development of syntactic complexity in L2, followed by the design and methodology of the study. Subsequently, we compare the two groups of teachers with respect to their motivations for the assigned rating scores and suggestions for feedback to the students. In the concluding section, the outcomes of the study are summarised and related to the assumptions and findings in the SLA literature concerning the development of syntactic complexity in L2. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the study for classroom practice and teacher training are discussed.

### Research on teachers' perceptions

As mentioned previously, the majority of hypothesis-testing studies that have investigated the growth of syntactic complexity in L2 have focused on the impact of different variables (e.g. proficiency level, task type) on syntactic complexity. Only a few studies have adopted a pedagogical perspective by eliciting the reflections of teachers on L2 performance. Still fewer studies have, to the best of our knowledge, directly or indirectly addressed perspectives on syntactic complexity of L2 performance by L2 teachers.

Weigle (2007), in a study on assessment of student writing, emphasises the importance for teachers to be adequately prepared to construct, administer and score effective and reliable classroom tests. Teachers' perceptions and beliefs on goals of L2 writing are implicitly addressed in the study, in so far that the author recommends teachers to formulate measurable learning objectives and outcomes for the teaching of writing and classroom assessment (e.g. what the student could focus on in the future and the student's strengths). The benefits of specifying goals and outcomes is, according to Weigle, that they can be used to make teaching decisions and to design rubrics for evaluating writing. Ait Eljoudi (2018), in a study on learner autonomy in English as a second language (ESL) learning, examines potential mismatches between learner and teacher expectations in the Algerian context. The study involved 336 third-year Bachelor's students and ten L2 teachers of English. Two different questionnaires were administered

to obtain information about teacher and learner beliefs related to learner autonomy. The results of the survey indicated that learner autonomy is not put into practice by teachers, even if it is considered highly desirable by both teachers and learners.

Two studies that inspired the study presented here are Révész and Gurzynski-Weiss (2016), and Kuiken and Vedder (2014). Révész and Gurzynski-Weiss (2016) focus on teachers' perspectives on L2 task difficulty, by means of think-aloud comments and eye-tracking. The aim of the research was to explore to what extent introspective L2 teachers' data reflected existing theoretical views on task difficulty, particularly Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2001, 2011), Skehan's Limited Capacity Model (1998) and Ellis' task framework (2003). Sixteen ESL teachers were asked to judge the linguistic ability required to carry out four pedagogic tasks (two decision-making and two information-gap tasks), and to consider how they would manipulate the tasks to suit the abilities of learners at lower and higher proficiency levels. While contemplating the tasks, the teachers thought aloud; at the same time their eye movements were being tracked. The majority of think-aloud comments revealed that teachers were primarily concerned with linguistic factors when assessing task difficulty. Cognitive demands were more frequently proposed as a way to increase task difficulty, whereas both linguistic and cognitive factors were suggested for decreasing task difficulty. The think-aloud data also revealed that the majority of factors to which teachers referred when gauging and manipulating task difficulty were included in the three theoretical frameworks of task difficulty developed by Robinson, Skehan and Ellis. This outcome, considered by the authors as 'reassuring' for task researchers, confirms that the three models do indeed incorporate a considerable number of variables that, according to the teachers' reflections in the study, may influence task difficulty.

In an earlier study, Kuiken and Vedder (2014) investigated raters' judgements of functional adequacy and linguistic complexity in L2 and L1, for Dutch and Italian, by means of a six-point Likert scale and general measures of linguistic complexity. The participants were thirty-nine learners of Italian and thirty-two of Dutch, who wrote two short argumentative essays; the raters were native speakers of the target language and language teachers (four for Dutch, three for Italian). The results showed that raters' judgements of functional adequacy largely corresponded to their judgements of linguistic complexity. During a panel discussion, raters were asked to verbalise the reasons why they had assigned a text to a particular rating level. The outcomes of the panel discussion showed that raters' judgements were influenced by the L2 proficiency level of the learners. At lower levels, raters

considered the use of good arguments and general comprehensibility of a text as very important, whereas at higher levels, raters tended to attach more importance to the use of more sophisticated words, and to accuracy (errors which may hinder comprehensibility, errors in verbal agreement and morphosyntax, wrong connectives and prepositions). More specifically, with respect to syntactic complexity, positive features to which raters often referred were well-formed and complex but smoothly constructed sentences, use of relative clauses, verbal agreement and appropriate use of grammatical connective devices; the occurrence of long and complex sentences affecting the readability of the text was viewed negatively. An interesting result that emerged from the study was that use of syntactic constructions considered to be too basic and a lack of variation in sentence structure were judged by the Italian raters as negative, in contrast to the Dutch raters.

This finding shows that typological differences between a Germanic language (Dutch) and a Romance language (Italian), in word order, sentence structure and construction of the verb phrase, may influence teachers' perceptions and preferences for syntactic complexity. Word order in Dutch, for example, is usually difficult for L2 learners of Dutch because of the varying position of the verb in main and subordinate clauses, respectively in second position versus final position ('Ik ben thuis', I am at home, vs 'Ik bel je, als ik thuis ben', I'll call you when I am at home). Noun phrase agreement in Italian, on the other hand, is particularly challenging for learners of Italian, as both number and gender have to be taken into account ('Sei ricercatori italiani', Six Italian researchers vs 'Queste ragazze sono tornate presto', These girls have come back early). Dutch and Italian also differ with respect to sentence complexity. L2-Dutch learners often struggle with infinitive clauses with 'om ... te' (in order to ...), while the gerund – frequently used in Italian ('pur avendo i soldi', even having the money) but much less in Dutch – is difficult for L2 learners of Italian. With respect to the verb phrase, in Dutch the combination of a modal verb (the equivalent of 'should', 'could', 'would', etc.) and a main verb is perceived as problematic compared to, for example, English, as shown by a structure such as 'Would you be so kind ...', which requires two verbs in English, but three verbs in Dutch ('Zou je zo vriendelijk willen zijn ...'). In Italian, at verb phrase level, appropriate use of the subjunctive in subordinate clauses is often tricky for L2 learners, and in certain cases also for native speakers; for example, in 'Penso che Paolo è felice', I think Paolo is happy, vs 'Penso che Paolo sia felice'. Differently from 'Paolo è felice', where the indicative form 'è' is employed, the construction with the subjunctive form 'sia' denotes the speaker's uncertainty about Paolo's actually being happy.

Finally, in line with the outcomes of Kuiken and Vedder (2014), teachers' perspectives on syntax may also be influenced by differences between the Dutch and Italian writing context and the educational background of the participants. Whereas Dutch language teachers generally have a communicative studies-oriented background, Italian teachers more often come from a classical-literary tradition, which may result in different syntactic (and stylistic) preferences.

### Development of syntactic complexity

The SLA literature has shown that syntactic complexity is strongly related to the overall level of L2 proficiency (Ortega 2003). As has been argued in various studies (Bardovi-Harlig 1992; Norris and Ortega 2009; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim 1998), syntactic complexity is thought to develop in three stages, in relation to the global increase of L2 proficiency. First, sentences or clauses are produced as independent, unco-ordinated utterances (e.g. 'I have a son. He is twelve years old'; stage 0). These utterances are then linked by co-ordination (e.g. 'I have a son *and* he is twelve years old'; stage 1), subsequently by subordination (e.g. 'I have a son *who* is twelve years old'; stage 2), and finally by complexification of the noun phrase (e.g. 'My *twelve-year-old* son'; stage 3). In this final stage, the pre-modifying phrase 'twelve-year-old' is embedded into the main clause (Norris and Ortega 2009). Syntactic complexity in L2 is thus thought to expand from co-ordination to subordination and to phrasal elaboration, as learners gain proficiency (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim 1998). At beginner and low-intermediate proficiency levels (stage 1), syntactic growth may show an increase of co-ordination (Bardovi-Harlig 1992; Vyatkina 2012). Upper-intermediate levels are thought to display an increase in subordinate structures (stage 2). More advanced proficiency levels may be characterised by subclausal complexification at the phrasal level (stage 3), which is supposed to be characteristic of academic discourse and written prose (Biber and Gray 2011; Biber, Gray and Poonpon 2011; Lambert and Kormos 2014; Norris and Ortega 2009).

In a number of studies, it has been emphasised that the three stages may partially overlap, and that at higher proficiency levels syntactic complexity may decrease (Housen, Kuiken and Vedder 2012; Ortega 2003; Pallotti 2009; Polio and Yoon 2018). Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998) suggest that complexity measures may exhibit 'omega-shaped' patterns, with an increase in complexity, followed by a decline at the higher proficiency levels. As argued by Ortega (2003) and Norris and Ortega (2009), 'more complex' does not necessarily mean 'better,' since a higher or lower

complexity rate may also be determined by personal and stylistic choices, rather than being an index of higher L2 proficiency. Increased subordination may thus reflect development at the lower-intermediate level, whereas decreased subordination may do so at upper-intermediate and advanced levels.

None of these studies on the development of syntactic complexity in L2 that have been discussed, however, have adopted a pedagogical perspective by addressing the question as to what extent the outcomes of the SLA literature are shared by teachers and reflected in classroom practice. The study at hand aims to fill this gap by investigating the degree to which findings concerning the hypothesised development of syntactic complexity in the three stages align with the perceptions of L2 university teachers of Dutch and Italian.

## Design and methodology

In order to shed light on the above-mentioned goal of the study, the following research questions were formulated.

RQ1: How do L2 teachers judge syntactic complexity in L2 writing, and what motivates their judgements?

RQ2: Which feedback do teachers give to students when evaluating syntactic complexity?

RQ3: To what extent are teachers' judgements of syntactic complexity in the two target languages shared?

RQ4: To what extent are teachers' judgements related to the hypothesised development of syntactic complexity in the SLA literature?

## Participants

Two groups consisting of eleven language teachers of L2-Dutch and sixteen of L2-Italian were asked to evaluate the syntactic complexity of a sample of argumentative texts in L2-Dutch and L2-Italian (six texts written by university students, for each of the two languages). As L2 proficiency might have an impact on teachers' reflections on syntactic complexity (Kuiken and Vedder 2014), proficiency levels varied from A2 to B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). The data for Dutch were collected in Amsterdam (the Netherlands); collection of teachers' data for Italian took place in Rome (Italy). All

teachers were native speakers of the target language and language teachers at, respectively, a university in Amsterdam and in Rome. The age of the teachers ranged from 35–61 for Dutch, and 25–50 for Italian. Nearly all the teachers were female (Dutch:  $n = 11$ ; Italian:  $n = 13$ ). Teaching experience for the Dutch teachers varied from 10–31 years of language teaching, for the Italian teachers from 3–21 years. In contrast to the L2 teachers of Dutch, who were not actively engaged in research, eight out of the sixteen teachers of Italian were involved in SLA research.

## Materials

Rating of syntactic complexity by the two groups of language teachers of Dutch and Italian was based on six short argumentative texts of approximately 150 words written by L2-Dutch and L2-Italian students. The texts were extracted from a previously collected corpus of data of thirty-two young adult learners of L2-Dutch and thirty-nine of L2-Italian (cf. Kuiken and Vedder 2014; Kuiken, Vedder and Gilabert 2010). The L2-Dutch students were preparing for enrolment at university, whereas the L2-Italian learners were already registered as Bachelor's students. The students of L2-Italian all had Dutch as their mother tongue; the L2-Dutch learners came from different language backgrounds. All the texts had been written during class. The time available for each task was thirty-five minutes, which turned out to be sufficient to complete the task. Use of a dictionary was not allowed. In the task, learners were required to make a decision about which of three non-governmental organisations to choose as a candidate for receiving a grant. In order to increase the comparability of the selected texts with respect to topic, content and lexis, it was decided – for both Dutch and Italian – to concentrate on texts elicited by one of the three writing prompts, 'Back to Nature' (an NGO aiming to protect the natural environment). See Appendix 1 for examples of a text for both L2-Dutch and L2-Italian, together with their translations into English.

## Rating procedure and rating scale

In order to collect the data, a rating session of two hours was organised for each group, one in Amsterdam for the teachers of L2-Dutch and one in Rome for L2-Italian. The organisation of the two sessions and the procedure that was followed were identical. After having explained the session's purpose, we presented the rating scale for the assessment of syntactic complexity, a six-point Likert scale, derived from the CEFR (see Appendix 2 for the rating scale for syntactic complexity). The descriptors of the rating scale refer to both complexity and control of syntactic structures (or lack

thereof). Level 1, for instance, refers to the presence of 'simple isolated phrases and sentences', 'limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns', and 'errors that may lead to misunderstandings'. At level 6, it is expected that the outcome should be 'a clear, highly accurate and smoothly flowing complex text', containing 'a wide range of connectors', and showing 'good control of even the most complex language forms'. We instructed the teachers to explicitly focus on syntax, rather than on vocabulary, accuracy or spelling. In order to familiarise them with the scale descriptors and rating procedure, an example of a writing sample was discussed.

All six texts were first evaluated individually. Raters were asked to indicate for each text (1) which score they would assign for syntactic complexity based on the six-point rating scale; (2) for which reasons they had decided to assign a particular score; and (3) which feedback they would give to the writer in order to improve the text. The individual rating sessions were followed by a panel discussion, in which we asked teachers to describe their motivation behind the assigned scores for the six texts and the type of feedback they proposed to give to the students. The two panel discussions (respectively in Dutch and Italian) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data analysis

We first calculated inter-rater reliability for Dutch and Italian by means of intra-class correlations among teachers, per language group, on the basis of the scores on the Likert scale. We then collected the various comments made by the teachers, from the individual rating forms containing teachers' motivations for the assigned scores and their proposed feedback to the students, as well as the transcripts of the two panel discussions. From an analysis of all the teachers' comments, five different macro-categories that emerged from the data were identified: accuracy, comprehensibility, lexicon, syntactic complexity, text organisation and coherence. Comments referring to syntactic complexity were then subdivided as they pertained to sentence complexity, verb phrase, word order and noun phrase.

### Results

The first research question investigates how syntactic complexity in L2 writing is rated by teachers, and what motivates their judgements. Appendix 3 and 4 provide an overview of the scores of syntactic complexity assigned by the teachers of L2-Dutch ( $n = 11$ ) and L2-Italian ( $n = 16$ ) on the six-point Likert scale (see Appendix 2). Intra-class correlation coefficients

for L2-Dutch and L2-Italian were calculated, in order to establish inter-rater reliability:  $r = 0.947$  for L2-Dutch;  $r = 0.986$  for L2-Italian. Although the scores for the different texts that had been assigned varied depending on the proficiency level of the writers, these scores indicate that raters highly agree in their judgements of syntactic complexity.

Table 1 gives an overview of the linguistic domains that were most often addressed both by the teachers of Dutch and Italian (presented in descending order), together with examples of the type of comments (translated into English) for justifying the assigned scores. Although the teachers had been instructed to explicitly zoom in on syntax when rating the texts of the students, they mainly focused on accuracy and comprehensibility in both Dutch and Italian. As shown in Table 1, syntactic complexity came in third for Italian and fourth for Dutch, whereas with respect to lexicon, it was the other way round: third place for Dutch and fourth place for Italian. Text organisation and coherence appeared to be less important.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of an analysis of all cases in which teachers did refer to syntactic complexity for justifying their judgements (rather than to other linguistic features and domains), we found both similarities and differences between the teachers of Dutch and Italian (see Table 2). What the two groups had in common was that they both commented on sentence complexity (especially on the use of simple versus complex sentences)

**Table 1:** Linguistic domains underlying raters' judgements (in descending order) in L2-Dutch and L2-Italian and examples of comments (translated into English).

L2-Dutch	L2-Italian
1. Accuracy 'It starts already in the first sentence: word order is not correct and the verb form is wrong.'	1. Accuracy 'The text contains many basic errors including the lack of agreement between genitive and noun.'
2. Comprehensibility 'I have been led by the comprehensibility criterion.'	2. Comprehensibility 'Systematic errors, but thanks to the context it is possible to understand the meaning.'
3. Lexicon 'Sometimes it is not clear what is meant, but that has to do more with vocabulary than with the grammatical structure.'	3. Syntactic complexity 'There is some variation in syntactic structures, generally used however as unanalysed, fixed formulas.'
4. Syntactic complexity 'I counted two subordinate clauses of which one is a relative clause.'	4. Lexicon 'I do not look at syntax, if there is still so much work to do on lexicon.'
5. Text organisation and coherence 'The student is struggling with pronominal reference.'	5. Text organisation and coherence 'The text is well structured and fairly coherent.'

**Table 2:** Linguistic features underlying raters' judgements of syntactic complexity (in descending order) in L2-Dutch and L2-Italian and examples of comments (translated into English).

L2-Dutch	L2-Italian
1. Sentence complexity – simple vs complex sentences – relative clauses – infinitive clauses ( <i>om ... te</i> )  'I wrote down: use of more complex sentences, but sometimes they do not run that smoothly.'	1. Sentence complexity – simple vs complex sentences – co-ordinate vs subordinate clauses – conjunctions and relative pronouns – gerund  'There are some subordinate clauses, but every time they are introduced by "perché" [because].'
2. Verb phrase – agreement (subject-verb) – conjugation – irregular verbs – should, could, would + main verb  'It is always this same pattern of "should" plus another verb that continuously goes wrong.'	2. Verb phrase – agreement (subject-verb) – conjugation – verbal tenses and modes (subjunctive)  'Hardly any variation, only the present and past present, incorrect participles and one – incorrect – subjunctive.'
3. Word order – main vs subordinate clauses – inversion  'Word order in main clause and subordinate clause is sometimes wrong.'	3. Noun phrase – agreement (gender, number) – phrasal complexity (length of NP)  'Many problems with respect to agreement of gender and number in the NP.'

and structure of the verb phrase (in particular agreement and conjugation). However, they also differed; whereas teachers of Dutch paid much attention to word order, teachers of Italian often concentrated on the construction of the noun phrase. This different focus may be explained by typological differences between Dutch and Italian: correct word order, as already mentioned, is notoriously difficult for L2 learners of Dutch because of the varying position of the verb in main and subordinate clauses (in, respectively, second versus final position), whereas noun phrase agreement in number and gender is usually particularly challenging for learners of Italian.

The second and third research questions investigate the type of feedback teachers give to students for improving the text, and possible differences between teachers' judgements of syntactic complexity in the two target languages. Table 3 shows the main linguistic domains and features that the teachers address in their suggestions for feedback, including some examples. Not surprisingly, their feedback concentrates on the same syntactic areas that have been discussed above: sentence complexity and verb phrase in both Dutch and Italian, word order in Dutch, and noun phrases

**Table 3:** Types of feedback (in descending order) in L2-Dutch and L2-Italian and examples of comments (translated into English).

L2-Dutch	L2-Italian
1. Focus on systematic errors 'Little control of basic constructions.' 2. Sentence structure: back to basics – short, simple sentences – one main clause + one subordinate clause 'Keep it simple, short sentences. Main clause plus subordinate clause is OK. Not: subordinate clause within subordinate clause.'	1. Focus on systematic errors 'Many basic errors. Please check!' 2. Sentence structure: variation – subordination and co-ordination – topicalisation 'There are a number of subordinate clauses, but only relative clauses. Too little variation.'
3. Verb phrase – agreement (subject-verb) – conjugation – modal verb + infinitive 'Where English uses one word (should, would, could), two words are used in Dutch (should = <i>zou moeten</i> , would = <i>zou willen</i> , could = <i>zou kunnen</i> ). "Should" alone is usually not enough in Dutch.'	3. Verb phrase – agreement (subject-verb) – conjugation – variation in tenses and mode (subjunctive) 'Correct use of relative pronouns and both subjunctive in subordinate clauses, OK!'
4. Word order – main vs subordinate clauses – inversion 'Pay attention to word order in main clause with inversion.'	4. Noun phrase – agreement (gender, number) – articles, pronouns, prepositions 'Pay more attention to agreement in gender and number within the NP!'

in Italian. However, all teachers stress the need to focus primarily on systematic and frequently recurring errors in the L2 texts, rather than on less frequent, incidental mistakes.

With respect to sentence complexity, teachers of Dutch emphasise the importance of good knowledge of basic sentence structures, as well as the employment of short, simple sentences. As far as more complex sentences are concerned, students are advised to use main clauses combined with no more than one subordinate clause. Teachers of Italian, conversely, appreciate variation in sentence structure and advise their learners to alternate between co-ordinate and subordinate sentences, and also to use topicalised structures.

With respect to the verb phrase, next to verbal agreement and conjugation Dutch teachers insist on the employment of constructions comprising a modal verb plus an infinitive, while Italian teachers emphasise the need for varied and correct use of tense and mode, and their feedback often addresses different grammatical features within the noun phrase (e.g. agreement of gender and number; correct use of articles, pronouns and

prepositions). Teachers of Dutch, on the other hand, warn their students against violations of word order rules in Dutch.

The fourth research question addresses the extent to which the hypothesised development of syntactic complexity in L2 (in three stages moving from co-ordination via subordination to phrasal complexity) is mirrored in teachers' judgements and reflections on syntactic complexity. As Table 1 demonstrates, in both Dutch and Italian their attention is mainly devoted to accuracy and comprehensibility, and to a lesser degree to syntactic complexity, lexicon, text organisation and coherence. Table 2 shows that when teachers do reflect on syntactic complexity, they mainly concentrate on subordinate clauses (relative and infinitive clauses), rather than on co-ordinate clauses. Very little attention is paid to phrasal complexity; in spite of a few cases in which the teachers of Italian focused on the complexity of the noun phrase, there were no such cases for Dutch. Teachers' reflections on syntactic complexity thus appear to be only partly related to the findings in the SLA literature.

Finally, it is interesting to note that among the teachers of Italian (of whom – as mentioned earlier – eight out of sixteen were involved in research), interesting differences were observed between the reflections of 'typical' language teachers and teachers who were in some way familiar with findings from SLA research. These differences concern both the type of reflections and feedback, and the use of more 'sophisticated' grammatical terminology, as demonstrated by the examples in Table 4.

Example (1) shows that in spite of a number of lexical errors and preposition errors, the rater focuses on the presence of complex syntactic structures. In example (2), the rater particularly appreciates the use of various types of subordinate clauses and the presence of a complex noun phrase comprising three embedded clauses. Focusing on the occurrence of a topicalised structure and the employment of different embedded clauses, example (3) also demonstrates that teachers who are (in)directly familiar

**Table 4:** Examples of comments (translated into English) by teachers of L2-Italian involved in SLA research.

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(1) 'There are a number of lexical errors and preposition errors, but I didn't look at them, because the choice of a wrong preposition usually doesn't cause misunderstanding. Syntactic structures are there, and they are also quite complex!'

(2) 'The text contains various types of subordinate clauses, such as adverbial, relative, temporal and concessive clauses. There is also an elaborate complex noun phrase, comprising three embedded clauses. These are fairly complex syntactic structures.'

(3) 'The text opens with a topicalised structure and four hierarchically subordinated clauses, which not even native speakers of Italian often do. It shows that the L2 writer is highly proficient with respect to syntax.'

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with SLA research not only use a different terminology ('topicalised structure', 'hierarchically subordinated clauses'), but may also consider L2 performance from a different angle ('... which not even native speakers of Italian do'; 'the L2 writer is highly proficient with respect to syntax').

## Discussion and conclusion

Summarising the findings of the study, we noticed, first of all, that teachers of L2-Dutch and L2-Italian highly agree in their judgements of syntactic complexity, as demonstrated by the high intra-class correlations.

Concerning the linguistic domains that teachers address in their comments, their main focus appears to be on accuracy and on comprehensibility, that is to say, on control rather than on the complexity of syntactic structures, even though they were explicitly instructed to concentrate on syntactic complexity during the training sessions. This focus on accuracy may have partly been triggered by the descriptors of the rating scale for syntactic complexity that was adopted in the study, based on the CEFR (which refers specifically to the occurrence of syntactic errors and 'control' of syntactic structures; see Appendix 2).

When evaluating syntactic complexity, the two groups of teachers tend to concentrate on the employment of simple versus complex sentences and on particular features of the verb phrase (i.e. subject-verb agreement and conjugation). They differ, however, in their attention to specific structures of the two target languages; for example, infinitive clauses, use of modal verbs, and word order in Dutch, as opposed to the use of gerund, subjunctive, and number and gender agreement in the noun group in Italian. With respect to the feedback teachers give to the students for improving their writing, a comparable picture emerges: both groups focus on systematic and frequently recurring errors, particularly errors in sentence complexity. Similarly, whereas teachers of L2-Dutch devote most attention to word order, teachers of L2-Italian insist on complexity and number and gender agreement within the noun phrase. Since these are precisely the areas in which Dutch and Italian structurally differ, this different focus may be due to particular typological features and syntactic preferences of a Germanic language like Dutch, versus a Romance language like Italian.

In line with the results of our earlier study (Kuiken and Vedder 2014), interesting differences in syntactic (and stylistic) preferences, which possibly are to be ascribed to variation in educational background and training, were also found between the two groups. Dutch language teachers, who generally have a communicative studies-oriented background, tend to emphasise the importance of using clear, short and simple sentences, in

order not to 'lose track'. In contrast, Italian language teachers, stemming often from a classical-literary tradition, insist more on syntactic variation, avoidance of repetition and use of 'prefabricated' chunks and routines.

An important finding of the study is that when considering syntactic complexity, teachers concentrate on subordination (relative clauses, conjunctions and relative pronouns) and much less on co-ordinate structures. Phrasal complexity, by means of clausal subordination and complexification of the noun group (Biber and Gray 2011; Biber, Gray and Poonpon 2011; Norris and Ortega 2009), is rarely considered: in the data, no examples for Dutch were found and only a few cases for Italian (especially by teachers who were more familiar with the SLA literature and employed the SLA terminology more often). The study thus demonstrates that teachers' reflections on syntactic complexity are only partly related to the developmental path of syntactic complexification (first co-ordination, then subordination, followed by phrasal elaboration) that has been described in the SLA literature. This outcome is in clear contrast to the results of Révész and Gurzynski-Weiss (2016), who found that L2 teachers' perceptions – while assessing and modifying task difficulty – reflected current theoretical views about criteria for task grading and sequencing included in the Limited Capacity Model (Skehan 1998), the Triadic Componential Framework (Robinson 2001, 2011) and/or Ellis' (2003) task framework.

What do our findings imply for the practice of language teaching? Firstly, the study shows the benefit of putting together a group of teachers, in order to compare and discuss criteria of syntactic complexity, syntactic development and text quality in L2, giving way to an interesting exchange of perspectives and making teachers reflect on their teaching practice. Secondly, we found that both groups of teachers tend to focus on accuracy; namely, on what learners do wrong, instead of what is already going well. As has been pointed out in many studies on L2 interlanguage development (e.g. Pallotti 2017), mistakes often demonstrate a next step in the acquisition process, indicating that learners are progressing to a subsequent stage. We observed in our study that some of the teachers of Italian who were familiar with the main findings of SLA research considered L2 output from a different angle, focusing more on development and complexity and less on accuracy. It thus seems crucial to point out the importance of a 'positive' attitude towards errors during teacher training sessions: that is to say, to remind teachers how important it is to compliment learners on what they have already achieved, instead of focusing on their shortcomings (Pallotti 2017).

Another result of the study was that teachers hardly commented on syntactic co-ordination and referred even less to phrasal complexity: this

happened only occasionally for Italian and not at all for Dutch. Teachers, apparently, are not sufficiently aware of how, and in which order, syntactic complexity in L2 develops and how learners can complexify their texts. Biber and Gray (2011) and Biber, Gray and Poonpon (2011) have, among others, pointed out that academic language, particularly written academic prose (e.g. textbooks, scientific articles, reports), is characterised by the occurrence of both co-ordinate clauses and subordinate clauses (often relative clauses; cf. Lambert and Kormos 2014). Employment of complex noun phrases, moreover, appears to be typical of written academic texts.

For these reasons, in teacher training courses, especially in the academic context, it is important to pay attention to this development of syntactic complexity in three stages, from co-ordination via subordination to phrasal complexity. Finally, more attention should be devoted in teacher training not only to syntactic and lexical characteristics of oral and written academic language, but more generally to the acquisition of academic language skills of students and to the development of their 'academic literacy'.

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## Note

- 1 Given the difficulty of computing teachers' comments for two different target languages, it was decided not to provide frequency counts or percentages.

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## Appendix 1: Example texts for L2-Dutch and L2-Italian

### L2-Dutch

Terug naar de Natuur (original text)

Volgens mij moet de universiteit dit jaar de vereniging Terug naar de Natuur steunen. Als de naam van de vereniging ook aangeeft, is dit een vereniging die zich bezighoudt met de bescherming van allerlei natuurgebieden. Ze streven naar de weinige natuurlijke plekken die er nog in Nederland zijn, te beschermen en te uitbreiden. Tegenwoordig zijn er veel factoren die de natuur slecht beïnvloeden, zoals industrie, het verkeer, groot landbouw enzovoort en daarom is het nodig om sterke natuurorganisaties te hebben. Het is ook mijn mening dat wetenschappelijke instituties, zoals de universiteit, moeten koplopers zijn in het vecht voor de bewaren van de natuur. Ten slotte is er zo weinig natuur in Nederland vandaag. Overal zie je steden, dijken, ponden en landbouwen, terwijl de echte natuur bijna weg is als gevolg van de uitbreiding van het civilisatie. Het is op tijd dat we iets Terug naar de Natuur geven.

Back to Nature (translation into English)

In my opinion, this year the university should support the association 'Back to Nature'. As the name of the association indicates, this is an association which deals with the protection of all kinds of nature reserves. They strive to protect and extend the few natural places which still exist in the Netherlands. Nowadays, there are many factors that negatively influence nature, such as industry, traffic, big agriculture et cetera, and therefore it is necessary to have strong nature organisations. It is also my opinion that scientific institutions, such as the university, should be front runners in the fight to save nature. Finally, there is so little nature in the Netherlands nowadays. Everywhere you see towns, dikes, *ponden* [?] and agriculture, while real nature is almost gone as a consequence of the expansion of civilisation. It is time that we give something Back to Nature.

### L2-Italian

Ritorno alla Natura (original text)

Dobbiamo spendere i soldi all'organizzazione numero uno, 'Ritorno alla natura'. C'è molto importante per rimasta intatta la natura. Per adesso, ma anche per il futuro della terra. Pensiamo all futuro dei nostri bambini. Meno natura ha anche un effetto negativo all clima. Dobbiamo aiutare la organizzazione, perche c'è molto importante per tutti genti.

### Back to Nature (translation into English)

We have to spend the money on the number one organisation, 'Back to Nature'. It is very important for nature to remain intact. For now, but also for the future of the earth. Let's think about the future of our children. Less nature also has a negative effect on the climate. We must help the organisation, because it is very important for all people.

## Appendix 2: Rating scale for syntactic complexity

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1	Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences. Limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns. Errors may lead to misunderstandings.
2	Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors ( <i>and, but, because</i> ). Use of simple grammatical structures is correct, but systematic, basic errors make comprehension difficult.
3	Can write a straightforward connected text. Occasionally makes errors that the reader usually can interpret correctly on the basis of the context.
4	Can write a clear text with a relatively high degree of control. Uses occasionally less appropriate expressions, but errors do not lead to misunderstandings.
5	Can write a clear, well-structured text including complex constructions with a high degree of grammatical accuracy. Good control of connectors.
6	Can write a clear, highly accurate and smoothly flowing complex text. Use of a wide range of connectors. Good control of even the most complex language forms.

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## Appendix 3: Scores for syntactic complexity by teachers of L2-Dutch

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Text	Rater (1-11)											Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
A	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2.27	0.44
B	4	4	6	5	3.5	4	5	6	5	5	5	4.77	0.78
C	3	5	5	4	4	3	3	6	4	4	4	4.09	0.91
D	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	2	2	2.18	0.57
E	3	1	2	5	2.5	2	3	3	3	2	3	2.68	1.01
F	2	3	3	5	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2.63	0.92

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## Appendix 4: Scores for syntactic complexity by teachers of L2-Italian

Text	Rater (1–16)																Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16		
A	3	4	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2.5	2	1	3	2.47	0.69
B	5	6	5	5	5	5	5	5.5	6	5	5	5	6	5	4	5	5.16	0.49
C	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.5	3	1	2	3	2	3	2	3	2.72	0.61
D	4	5	4	4	3	3	4	4.5	4	4.5	4	3	4	3	4	2.5	3.78	0.66
E	1	2	1	1	2	1.5	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1.41	0.47
F	3	4	3	4	3	3.5	3.5	4	3	4.5	3	3.5	3.5	4	2	3	3.41	0.62